

One Wild True Moment

by
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I was fired for the wrong reason. I mean, I should have been fired, no doubt about it. But not for impregnating the CEO's daughter. At least not literally.

First of all, sleeping with Chloe was a coincidence. I'd known her since my freshman year at Lakeside School in Seattle. But I hadn't seen her in years.

By the time I was hired to work for Cyber-Shield, Chloe was a distant memory -- although *distant* is relative when you're in your early twenties.

I was standing behind a booth at the Seattle Cyber-Fair showing IT officers from other companies how our patented *threat-management software* worked. They all had a desperate look in their eyes. The security software they currently had in place wasn't cutting it.

Hacking cyber-security software had become the new rage with the younger hackers. They loved practicing their skills by hacking into supposedly unhackable systems. They were mostly gamers at heart. Hacking security was a game inside a game. It was all in good fun as far as they were concerned. And if they were discovered, or even arrested, that was just part of the game as well. Maybe when they got out of jail they would be offered a high-level job with the same security firm they'd hacked. Why not? After all, trust was a game too.

Anyway, Chloe recognized me because of a small mark I have under my right ear. It looks like a star. Most people don't notice it. But she used to tease me about it.

"Cody?"

"Yes." I stared at her. She put her hands on her hips and held the pose.

"Wait, is that you -- Chloe?"

She started laughing and gave me a friendly hug.

"Wow, Cody, this is crazy. Do you work for Cyber-Shield?"

"I sure hope so. I wouldn't want to be standing here for eight hours for free."

"How do you like it?"

"It's okay."

"Ever meet the CEO?"

"I saw Steve walk by once at a conference. It was cool. He's like a rock star. He waved at me, I think. But why are *you* here?"

"I own the place."

I laughed. I'd always liked her strange sense of humor. I also liked her wide welcoming smile. She hadn't changed much, except for her clothes. She was wearing a business skirt and heels. Not much makeup though, so she still had that fresh just-got-out-of-the-bath look.

"I have to take you to lunch," she said.

"Well, my shift ends in a few hours."

"No, now. Wait here."

"But I can't, really!"

She came closer to me. "What's my last name?"

"I don't remember, honestly. I think it starts with a C?"

"The C is for Chloe. My last name is *Jensen*. . . Chloe Jensen. Daughter of Steve Jensen."

"Oh my God."

"I lived with my mom and step-dad in high school so you wouldn't have connected the dots. But yeah, he's my birth dad."

"I guess that's. . . good?"

"I'll get someone to take over your shift. Come on!"

She grabbed my hand and swept me out of the building onto the crowded street.

Chloe had a dark side. Overtly she was bubbly, with that wide welcoming smile, and a twinkle in her eye. But covertly she was, well, not *just* her face.

She touched the star under my right ear when we left the conference center and said, "I remember that."

That sent a shock through me. No one ever talked about my star. In fact I couldn't see it very well in the mirror so most of the time even I would forget it was there.

A half block later she took my arm and pulled me closer to her, apparently to shield herself from the wind.

Instead of going to lunch we took an Uber to her private gym. Her father had bought the place for her and her mom before the divorce.

After our workout she was dripping with sweat but when she came close to me she still smelled fresh and clean. I have no idea how. She invited me to take a sauna and stripped down to her skimpy underclothes. Then she laid back on the bench and started to hum.

But as you can see, she was playing me. Obviously. She was hacking my senses. Her pure smile and twinkly eyes belied what was really going on.

As I moved closer she told me she had a boyfriend. He wanted to marry her. He bought her a ring, which she wasn't wearing. She told him she would think about it.

I guess spending time with me was one way she decided to think about it -- I was reduced to a thought, apparently.

I started wondering if I would get fired just for being here with her. What if her father found out? She read my mind. "If you don't take off your clothes right this second I'm going to tell my dad where you were."

I was smitten in a creeped out way. She was so beautiful, lying back on the hot wooden bench with her eyes closed, arms outstretched, awaiting me. I didn't care about the job anymore. I was young. I knew how to code. I could find work somewhere else if I had to. Plus, the world is like a video game -- you have to play to get to the next level.

There are about ten quintillion leaves in the world. It would take about eight billion years to count them all at one leaf per second.

Eight billion years is almost twice the age of the earth itself. That's about how long I thought it would take until I finally found another girlfriend.

It had been a long dry spell. The only other girl I'd been with was Scarlet.

Scarlet and I met at a coffee house in downtown Seattle. A few months later we started a band called Qnqkst. Everyone in the band had their own pronunciation. I pronounced it "Kwongst." Our drummer, Hank, insisted it was "Kinigst."

The genesis of the word came from matching the numbers 17-14-17-11-19-20 to their correlating letters in the alphabet. The numbers came from counting separate groupings of very small freckles on Scarlet's shoulders and back. Shoulder freckles were one of my favorite parts of her.

Scarlet was the bass player. But whenever we took a band photo we always put her out front, singing into an unplugged microphone as a prop. She was the cute punky blonde girl with the sepia-colored Tobias bass strapped around her shoulder. She was the face of the band. She always had this blazing cold sexy look in her eyes. Visually she would have made a great lead singer. Audially, not so much.

After a year and seventeen days the band broke up because I had to leave town to take care of my sick

grandmother. By the time I came back everyone had found better things to do.

Besides, during the last few weeks of the band's existence things got kind of weird. Hank the drummer tried to steal Scarlet away from me. He ridiculed my guitar playing because I couldn't play lead. Scarlet defended me, telling him I was a great rhythm player. He understood the innuendo.

A month after I got back from grandma's house Scarlet told me she was pregnant.

The ten-second sequence that befell me, as I recall, went from feeling one level beyond shock to getting used to the idea, and then actually liking it.

Then she happened to mention that she was pretty sure she wasn't pregnant because of me. While I was making Grandma endless cups of Lipton tea and driving her to doctors, Hank the drummer boy was moving in. In every sense of the word. I found his jacket in my closet.

I moved to the west side after finding work coding for Cyber-Shield.

Just before the birth, Hank the drummer and Scarlet were married in a simple private ceremony. The baby, a girl, was born at Kindred Hospital two days later.

When Chloe and I ecstatically emerged from our sauna we took separate showers and put our clothes back on. I was psyched, thinking Chloe might be the one I'd been looking for since I first started metaphorically counting leaves.

I did the calculations in my head. I figured if the odds of me finding a real girlfriend was once every eight billion years, then this day had a one in two quadrillion nine hundred twenty trillion chance of happening. So clearly, it was my lucky day.

"So now what?" I smiled. I was thinking coffee might be nice.

She was forcing her heels back on.

"So now I tell my dad."

"Tell him what?" Suddenly coffee sounded like a bad idea.

"Tell him that I'm not marrying that creep he introduced me to last year because you and I have been going out together and I'm pregnant with your child."

"*What?*"

"So can this just be a little secret between friends? Otherwise, I'll need to get a DNA test to prove we were together just now."

"Wait. Are you actually pregnant?"

"Bing."

"Excuse me, but this is kind of Deja vu for me in reverse." I felt like I was going to pass out. Maybe the sauna got to me.

"Deja vu of what?"

"Cody look, I'll give you some good news, okay? I like you, and I picked you over the idiot fiancé that my dad set me up with, and over a hundred other guys at the convention hall I could have seduced. So look at the bright side, if you want to see me again, I'm open for a second date."

"Seriously, you're pregnant?"

"Now *I'm* having Deja vu," she said.

"No, seriously!"

"'Asked and answered,' as my dad's lawyers would say."

"Does your boyfriend know you're pregnant?"

"Of course not! Why would I encourage him?"

"Does your dad know?"

"He's going to. . . tonight, in fact. Want to join us for dinner?"

"*My God! No!* I don't want to be a part of this, Chloe."

"You're already a part of this. But think of it this way Cody -- that memorable time we had in the sauna, it just got a whole lot more memorable."

Ever since I was a kid I secretly hoped for a path to immortality. But now that scientists are closing in on the possibility -- we may be only a few decades away from being able to live for an indefinite amount of time -- I wonder why anyone would want to experience more of this kind of thing?

My conclusion about people and math is that math is a lot kinder, more consistent, more wise. You can always know why it does what it does. It never lies. Even math's secrets beg to be discovered if you're willing to spend the time and stay logical.

Romance is the opposite. The more time you spend trying to love someone the more illogical it gets.

Human consciousness seems to be the biggest barrier to logic.

Monkeys have some measurable amount of consciousness. They can be trained to recognize us, and use sign language to ask for food, or ask to watch their favorite TV show.

Dogs might not be quite as measurably conscious as monkeys, but when you think about it a dog's consciousness is truly amazing.

I'm not trying to put down monkeys or humans, but if a guy had a dog and all he did was play with the dog for fifteen minutes a night after work, maybe just throw it a ball, or let it sit on the couch with him while he's working on his computer, and give the dog a pat once in a while, that dog would get extremely attached and give love back every day.

Let's even say other people fed the dog and walked the dog and the only thing this guy did was play with the dog and pet the dog at night after work. Guess what would happen the minute that guy walked through the door each night? Guess who would be wagging its tail and jumping all over this guy like a long lost friend -- even though this guy has nothing to do with the dog's survival needs? All he did was come back home.

The dog "loves" this guy in a way very few humans love *anyone!*

He doesn't have to be a stellar human. A hero. A Nobel prize winner. He's just a regular guy with a job.

But guess why the guy *doesn't* deserve it? Because human consciousness doesn't really understand love in its purest form -- dog love.

Someday I think we'll figure out how to code love itself. And when that day comes I'm pretty sure that love is going to turn out to be better than anything we can currently imagine.

I was thinking about all this on Valentine's Day morning. Of course, I gave Chloe a card and flowers that night. She had succeeded in casting her spell over me. I was like the dog. She was the person with a job.

Actually, I was more like a hacker -- I didn't care what kind of game she was playing as long as I was able to hack my way in. Because I wasn't lonely anymore. I didn't need anything anymore. She entertained me. She was beautiful. She was funny. She was quirky. She was mysterious and confusing. She liked having sex with me.

It was a huge challenge to make my way through the firewalls and keep up with her true intentions. But hackers love challenges.

I didn't mind going to work anymore, putting up with all the human minions willing to place themselves in a room for eight hours a day to get money in their pockets to go to a bar on the weekend to try to find someone like Chloe sitting there with an empty bar stool beside her and a wide smile on her face.

I already had that. I was kind of wandering around in a dream.

But the day *after* Valentine's Day, I was unexpectedly called into Steve Jensen's office.

His office was actually a suite. It looked to be about half the size of Port Townsend. He wore a very expensive midnight black suit with an equally expensive red silk tie. I believe he dressed to intimidate people, and in my case it worked.

"Cody Masterson." He said my name but didn't reach out to shake my hand. That was fine. I was never much into handshakes.

"Steven Jensen."

"I know, sir."

"I'm sure you do."

"And this is Jonathan Peanuckle."

I almost laughed aloud at his last name. When I looked at him he folded his arms and glared.

"Jonathan is my daughter's fiancé."

"Oh, uh, how many daughters do you. . ."

"Just one."

"Ah."

"Chloe."

I nodded.

"You do know Chloe?"

"Sir, I have a feeling you know I know her."

That silenced him momentarily, so I added, "Nice suite, by the way." I looked around at a bunch of African art on the walls that I didn't much care for.

"You like the insides of nice things, I presume?"

"Sometimes. I mean, *my* particular office could use an upgrade."

"Did you know Chloe is pregnant?"

"Uh, well that's what I heard, but. . ."

"Sounds like you're shocked."

"I was shocked, sir."

I looked at Jonathan again. He was turning red. He was quite tall with very big feet stuffed into shiny long round shoes. They kind of looked like miniature black blimps. His suit was the color of his socks, gray. Definitely a nice choice of socks, but a red face in a gray suit is not particularly color coordinated.

"And it's your child," Jensen said with gritted teeth, "so that puts me in a very odd situation. . . Cody. Because, Jonathan is important to this company. I need him, he's been very good for sales. He's been here since the inception of the company. And sales have been multiplying exponentially since he came."

I thought to myself, that's not the only thing he's been multiplying. If they only knew. For some reason I also realized that the word *lying* is in multiplying.

I said, "Since the inception. Wow."

"The oddness of the situation, of course, is that Jonathan wants me to fire you, and I want to fire you, but Chloe insists that I not, since you're the father of her child. My grandchild."

"Well, but can I just say sir. . ."

"But I'm going to fire you anyway. . . . You're fired."

"Sir, I deserve to be fired, I really do, but. . ."

"Then there's nothing more to say. I need to catch a flight. When I return, *be gone*. I'll make sure you get two extra month's pay."

"That's very generous of you, sir, but. . ."

"Fuck you," Jonathan said.

Poor Jonathan was extremely confused about all things carnal. And his taste in suits was also pathetic, truth be told.

Chloe was in a tough spot. We were both twenty-five. If she opted not to have the baby her mother would have freaked out and insisted that her ex-husband, Steve Jensen, disown her on the spot. In other words, cut her off from her only source of current and future income.

If she told her father the truth, that it was Jonathan's baby, he would have insisted they get married.

After she told her father I was the father and I was fired as long as I didn't spill the beans she'd owe me big-time. From a purely selfish perspective that seemed like a good thing. She had a lot to offer.

Meanwhile, Chloe had gotten a DNA test proving we'd slept together. So even if I had told her father that Jonathan was the real progenitor, the fact that I slept with Chloe would be enough to piss him off or even think I was lying.

As far as the future was concerned, I liked babies, theoretically, because you could kind of program them like a new piece of software. And I didn't mind kids that were old enough to talk because they usually had some pretty odd and interesting things to say.

So doing the rough calculations in my head -- I didn't hate kids, and I liked Chloe. And to be honest I didn't want to leave her. I liked her spunk, I liked her ability to manipulate people, including me. It was kind of funny in a horrifying way. It was like she was a master hacker, hacking life, hacking her future. She was willing to sacrifice certain things to get to a higher level of the game. I knew I was on her sacrifice list, and at some point she would certainly,

guiltlessly, kick me from the game. But at twenty-five, and out of work I didn't have anything to lose. I mean, she wasn't asking me to marry her. She wasn't asking me to go around telling everyone that I was the father of her child -- in fact, I never even had to lie to her father by actually saying I was the father. I just didn't correct his assumptions. Chloe appreciated that. And she rewarded me in all sorts of ways.

So we both had things we wanted and needed from each other. I had gone from feeling dead inside and feeling like I lived in a cage of glass to feeling some incremental amount of happiness. She went from being with a guy she didn't love to a guy she didn't hate. The game was in a perfect state of equipoise. Until the murder.

I didn't kill anyone, at least not directly. Not literally. Not legally. The fact was, Jonathan was dead, but those who looked to me as a suspect were basing it on pure speculation, and Chloe's word.

Jonathan was murdered in his Harbor Steps apartment. Nothing was taken (other than his life, of course). His expensive pieces of modern art, his wallet, his money, his gold coins, his Rolex watch, his Casascius Bitcoins, his iPhone X, his MacBook Pro, were all untouched. No fingerprints were on the body or on the door handles of his apartment. Nothing was disturbed. There was no sign of forced entry. So the police immediately assumed it was someone who knew Jonathan and held a grudge.

The police detectives soon found out I'd been fired, and why I was fired, and that Jonathan insisted Steve Jensen fire me or he would resign. Who else had a motive to kill him?

I knew one person who had a motive, but of course, I wasn't going to rat on her, unless I had to.

When the police hauled me in at Steve Jensen's request I still saw it as a game. I figured sooner or later they would realize it wasn't me. I didn't need to tell them the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. Partial truth should do just fine.

After I was interrogated, however, I found out both Steve and Chloe Jensen agreed with the police detective's suspicion that I was the killer. The interrogation went something like this:

"Where were you the night of the murder?"

"I have no idea. Maybe with Chloe. Maybe at home."

"Your friend Chloe says she wasn't with you."

"Then I guess I was at home."

"Can any friends substantiate that?"

"I don't have any friends. I code."

"What?"

"Nothing sir."

"So you can't say with certainty where you were that night?"

"I guess not. Except I can tell you where I wasn't. I wasn't at Jonathan Peanuckle's apartment because I didn't know where he lived."

"Did Chloe know where he lived?"

"Yes."

"She said she remembers telling you his address."

"I don't remember that."

The detective looked at Jensen.

Jensen nodded.

"Did you want Mr. Peanuckle dead?"

"Not really."

"Not really?"

"I mean I guess definitely. . . not."

"Do you have a criminal record?"

"I mean, for pot, when I was seventeen, but everyone who's seventeen. . ."

"What would you say if I told you there were people, *multiple* people, who think you killed Jonathan Peanuckle?"

"I would say multiple people are lying or don't know what they're talking about. Especially if one of those people is him." I pointed to Steve Jensen.

I was immediately put behind bars.

Chloe came to visit and offered to get me out on bail. She also said I shouldn't have taken things so far. Was it jealousy, she asked? Was I jealous that Jonathan had slept with her before me, and that it was his child? Or was I angry about losing my job? She couldn't understand how I could actually *poison* someone.

She really thought I killed him!

Chloe was crying. She could hardly hear my denials through her tears. She promised to get me out as soon as my lawyer could convince a judge I wasn't a flight risk. She said her father would disown her if he ever knew she was spending his money for my bail, but she was determined to get me out, even if I did kill Jonathan, because, well, she cared for me.

I was touched.

Days past. Weeks past.

I would sit for hours in the corner of my cell trying to figure out who actually did kill him, and why.

The only logical suspect after deep consideration. . . was Chloe.

She didn't want him finding out it was his baby.

She didn't want him to even touch her, with those long thin geeky fingers.

His slightly crooked teeth made her skin crawl.

His aggressive marketing campaign was downright embarrassing to her. She couldn't believe her father approved it. Cyber-Shield was portrayed as a rain coat. In another ad it was portrayed as an umbrella.

She laughed at his ideas. One day she said to him, "Actually, Cyber-Shield is more like a condom than a raincoat or an umbrella, don't you think? *Market that!*"

Did she have the capacity to kill him though?

Knowing her as well as I did, I'd say no. . . . ish.

Plus, she said the night Jonathan was poisoned with a mixture of bromide and strychnine, she was eating dinner with her girlfriend at the Zig Zag Cafe. She had a witness.

I, on the other hand, was probably at home serially watching Netflix episodes of *Supergirl*.

Now I was rotting away in jail. And the more time that went by without Chloe bailing me out the more I began to suspect she was framing me. I had been hacked again. This time the game was called, Deathtrap.

As it turned out, Chloe wasn't exactly framing me. Not literally. Not directly. Actually she was too many steps ahead of the game board for me to guess what she was really up to.

My ex-co-worker-friend and fellow coder, Tim Toliver, broke the news to me while I was still in jail. He said he wanted me to know that I wasn't going to be a dad after was that Chloe took an ungodly amount of Misoprostol and Mifepristone to make everything "get back to normal."

The puzzle pieces were falling together.

By inducing a miscarriage she was free of motherhood at the young and care-free age of twenty-five *without* facing her mother's anger about have an actual abortion.

Free of having to deal with me as the claimed father.

Free of anyone ever finding out Jonathan was the father.

And free of me someday proving Jonathan was the father by having a DNA test of the child.

But, she later claimed, with tears in her eyes, no, the miscarriage was not something she intended. Tim Toliver heard a rumor that wasn't true. She was actually hoping we could become a family, the three of us.

I shook my head and laughed maniacally. "So you're saying you would live happily ever after with the person who murdered your child's father?" I laughed again and shook my head. "Or did the child's killer kill the father first?"

"Wait a minute Cody, do you think *I* killed Jonathan?"

I didn't respond. But my face was unshaven and my eyes had become quite dulled from sitting in a dark cell for

so long. So she knew what my silence and intense glare meant.

"I swear, Cody, I didn't kill him. I thought *you* did! And I admit it, I was just saying the thing about the three of us living together because I'm scared of you, scared what you would do if I didn't say that."

"I bet."

"Wait, are *you* trying to frame *me*?"

"Chloe I didn't kill anyone! Not a man, *or* a child for that matter. Why would *I*? Do I seem like the kind of person who would kill *anything*?"

"Well, *do I*?"

"What would be my motive, Chloe? Why the hell would I give a shit about him?"

"Why would I? I didn't care if he was dead or alive. And if he helped my father make money because of his marketing why wouldn't I be happy about it? It's not like he was stalking me, or begging me to change my mind."

"Well then, who's the killer?"

"I don't know. But I guess I need to get you out of here. I can tell you're innocent. I'm sure of it. I'm going to spend as much of my father's money as I have to until we find out who did it and why."

I found out later Steve Jensen pulled the plug on Chloe's bank account when he found out what she was up to.

He was glad I was in jail. He hoped I stayed there. As far as he was concerned, whatever emotional influence I seemed to have over his precious daughter had to end with me being convicted of the murder of Jonathan Peanuckle and spending the rest of my life in prison.

The happy day came -- the glorious sunny day came -- so very unexpectedly, and being given no reason why. . . . I was set free.

I found out later that the chief detective had rendered his official opinion -- Jonathan Peanuckle's death was a suicide. He had poisoned himself. The case was now closed.

If I put myself in his extremely large-sized shiny blimp-like shoes, I could understand the man's angst. I mean, I'd stolen his girl, and, to his knowledge, I then very quickly got her pregnant. Like *really* quickly.

So in the end, even though I did not directly, literally, or legally kill Jonathan Peanuckle, I played a part in killing him. Demons continued to haunt him right until the end. One of those demons was me.

Plus, having a last name like Peanuckle couldn't have helped.

Chloe greeted me with flowers outside the prison gate, just like in the movies. We went back to her very gorgeous apartment on West Highland Drive overlooking the Space Needle and rolled around in her bed for a few hours.

After a delicious meal delivered from a fancy restaurant downtown she decided it was time to break the news to me. She had found a boyfriend. She was in love.

I asked her if that meant we couldn't see each other anymore. She said probably.

I wiped the food off my chin with a very expensive linen napkin that she had graciously put out for the occasion, and got up to leave.

One nice thing she said as I was putting on my raincoat was that she would always love me. Or, maybe she said she would always remember me. I can't remember which one.

As I walked out the door she said, "Please don't kill yourself."

I turned back to look at her one last time, and said, "Yeah, you too."

The next day I turned twenty-six. Since weed is legal in the state of Washington I got very high. In fact, even if it was illegal I would have gotten very high. I sang myself happy birthday a few times naked while looking in the mirror and realized I couldn't have been the lead singer for Qnqkst either. I wondered how Scarlet and her baby were doing.

The rain streamed down reminding me of the sound of headphone static. I closed my window. Suddenly I felt claustrophobic. My heart was closed tight, isolated. Back in jail here in my apartment. Maybe it was PTSD. Or the THC. Life was suddenly turning into a series of improvised alliterations .

Fun without a future.

Consciousness without conscience.

I decided I wanted a dog.

That thought turned into decisive determination.

I put on my raincoat and walked several blocks in a downpour to Wally's -- a pet shop on Wallingford Avenue.

Once inside I took my raincoat off and started to look around in all the cages.

Each dog looked desperate. Kind of like me.

Their eyes killed me.

I asked the cashier how much it would cost to maintain a dog. She said probably a thousand dollars a year. I was like, oh my God, seriously? She was like, yeah, plus shots. I put my raincoat back on and all the dogs started barking. I think they were calling me cheap. Or maybe a loser. I was too high to translate the woofs accurately.

On my way home I noticed a poster soaking wet from the rain. It was stapled onto the temporary wall of a construction site. It said:

"A Mazing Dog, Mazey. Must give away. :(
Will supply a few months of FREE canned dog food."

The phone number was typed on tabs hanging from the bottom of the poster like miniature walrus teeth. I pulled a tab off and put it in my pocket.

Once home I dried off with a towel, smoked some more weed, and called the number. It went to voice mail.

"Hello, if you're calling about taking Mazey please text me your number and someone will get back to you."

I could hear Mazey barking in the background. She sounded nice. The woman's voice, drowned out by the barking, sounded a little familiar. But I couldn't place it. I tried to shake off the ghosts.

A few minutes later my phone rang. I was slightly disappointed to hear the voice of someone from my past -- my ex-co-worker-friend and fellow coder, Tim Toliver.

"Cody, dude. I'm so glad you're out of the tank. Happy birthday by the way, I saw it on Facebook. I think we're the last two people under thirty that are still on Facebook. But that's not why I'm calling. Listen, I have this weird emo friend who's an insanely talented hacker. He said he knows a company looking for a great coder for some weird project and I thought of you, since you're currently the only coder I know who's out of work. He gave me a phone number for you to call but said not to tell anyone else about it. It's apparently some secret venture these guys are into. They need someone they can trust. Sounds like a movie script, right? No idea what they pay. But want the number?"

"Of course."

"It's 711-1920. Mention my friend's name, Don Dover."

The sequence of numbers was familiar too, but I couldn't place them. . . ."

Tim said goodbye, and, still very stoned, I called. It was my birthday and I kept thinking something lucky was bound to happen.

"Black Knight, Adrienne speaking."

"Yo Adrienne, Don Dover referred me. My name is Cody Masterson and I'm calling about the job."

"I usually hang up on people that say 'Yo Adrienne,' but since you have such a stupid bullshit name I won't."

"Wow, thanks. I really mean that. So what is this job offer about?"

"Where were you last employed."

"Cyber-Shield."

"*Cyber-Shield? You worked there?*"

"Yes."

"Coding?"

"Yes."

"Why aren't you still working there?"

"If I answer that question I won't need to say 'Yo Adrienne' again for you to hang up on me. You'll have plenty of other reasons"

That was met with an eerie silence.

"Do you like Cyber-Shield? Do you feel any loyalty to them?"

"Honestly, no and no."

"When can you come for an interview?"

"As soon as my clothes are dry."

"What? Never mind. How about 8 o'clock tonight?"

"Tonight? Well. . . fine, I guess."

"Don't guess. Yes or no."

"Yes."

"One last thing. Do you hate dogs?"

"Do I, uh, no I don't hate dogs!"

"Good. Bob smells hate."

"Bob?"

"I have your cell number on my phone. I'll text you the address. Don't tell anyone you're coming or we can't hire you. Understand?"

"Maybe."

She hung up.

Before I had a chance to wonder if this was some sort of hoax she texted me an address in a very bad part of town. I smoked another joint since it was my birthday and played PC games for a few hours to pass the time, just like in the olden days.

I caught a bus to South Park. I walked in the rain to what looked like an abandoned building. No lights were on in any of the windows. I walked up the stairs to the front door, rang the round black buzzer and waited. I saw someone through the opaque window. He was a giant of a man in a dark blue untucked button-down shirt. "You Cody?"

"Yes."

"Entre vous."

I knew French well enough to know that *entre vous* had a double meaning. *Come in*, is what most Americans think it means. The French, however, translate it as: *Today's main dish: You!* (I'm not kidding.)

Being still quite stoned I became paranoid. "Are you . . . French?" I asked.

"No!"

"Good."

He furled his eyebrows, which loosely translated as -- *you're making a bad first impression* -- and then motioned me to follow him up the long flight of stairs.

When I was a kid all I did in my free time (when I wasn't sleepwalking through school), was customize and combine every open source software that I could find, read books about programming, and play console games like Guitar Hero. I also learned to play real guitar by signing up with an online instructor for ten dollars a month. But I never played for anyone. It was a secret alternative universe I would go to when I got bored. Until I met Scarlet and started Qnqkst.

Spending time outside was a non-starter unless my parents weren't home and I needed food. The grocery store was a necessary interruption. Until Instacart.

I would communicate all day with friends -- most of whom I didn't know very well if at all -- through group texts, Snapchat and Instagram. Facebook was also still big back then -- back then meaning my high school years.

I went to coding school directly after high school. College was unnecessary.

Then I met Scarlet while visiting a recording engineer who had a Pro Tools set up in his garage. I was trying to help him fix a glitch. She was there with her bass, waiting for me to fix whatever was wrong. I couldn't. When the session was cancelled I asked her out.

After a late dinner we were walking down University Avenue at midnight and I happened to mention that in my twenty years on earth I had yet to feel any kind of physical pain. I'd never been sick or injured. I never went out and did anything dangerous. Never played sports. All I did was sit

home and code. I really didn't even know what physical pain felt like.

A very sketchy guy walking behind us overheard me. For some reason it bothered him.

We were waiting for a light to change when he tapped me on the shoulder, "So like, you've never felt any physical pain -- ever? *Really?*"

"Uh, that's what I. . ."

"Well, lemme help you with that. How about if I punch you in the fucking face?"

Scarlet said, "Just stop, okay? This was a private conversation."

He said, "Yeah, how private was it if I fuckin' overheard it?" He was very tattooed. He looked like he was part of a motorcycle gang. But he had an accent that sounded like he was from Boston or something.

The light changed. Scarlet grabbed my hand and tried to pull me across the street just as he cocked his arm back, apparently aiming at my jaw.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw three guys running towards him. They grabbed both of his arms. One of them screamed, "Hey, stupid, whaddaya doin', huh? You're gonna get us so fucked up."

He was still staring at me, not backing down. All he wanted to do was punch me. But they surrounded him and dragged him away, with his feet sliding and scraping on the ground behind him. They pushed him into the street and started screaming at him again. He straightened himself up, pulled the bottom of his tangled shirt down below his beltline, then pointed at me and creamed, "I'm gonna get you, you God-. . ."

But just as he was about to say the second syllable a car screeched around the corner and hit him head-on. He disappeared under the fender like he'd been eaten by a shark.

His friends scattered, realizing they would be blamed if the police showed up. No amount of explaining would do.

Scarlet grabbed my hand and we ran down University Avenue until we got back to the restaurant where we had eaten dinner.

"Are you okay?" Scarlet asked, still breathing hard.

I looked back behind me. "Yeah. Like I was saying, I've never experienced any physical pain. It's like I'm coded to be in a game where something bad almost happens, but then I get saved at the last minute. It's kind of fun."

When I woke up next to her in the morning birds were chirping out her apartment window. *Birds!* Wow, I almost forgot there were birds. But I *heard* them now.

I sat with her as she was taking her morning bath and said what was, without a doubt, the closest thing to "I love you" I'd ever said to a girl.

"Scarlet?"

She looked up at me with a few white bubbles clinging to her face.

"I feel like I was coded to meet you."

Let me start off by saying, I did not plan, or carry out, a cyber-attack on the United States government. Not literally, not actually.

Adrienne (not her real name) and Max (not his real name) had a dog that stood guard -- a big black Rottweiler named Bob (his real name).

"Hi Bob!" I said. I was trying to make Bob happy enough not to eat me.

Rottweilers, by the way, used to pull carts of butcher's meat through town back in Germany. They smell fear, and Bob was trained to attack on command. That's why loving dogs was a must for any trainee. Love was met with love. Fear with anger. If you turned on the ones Bob loved you were pretty much dead, unless you had a gun. In which case, Bob would be dead. But he would not have gone down without a fight, even if he was full of bullets. I guess my theory about dog consciousness did not hold true in all cases.

Adrienne and Max's initial round of questions during my interview focused on my specific knowledge of code, especially the master code used at Cyber-Shield. I was honest and told them my knowledge was limited but not zero.

Then they grilled me over my political beliefs. They went online and looked up information about my police record, being held for murder, one pot arrest long ago, and a list of all my girlfriends, a total of two -- Scarlet, and then Chloe Jensen. When Max saw Chloe's name he said, "Wait a

minute. Seriously?" He began laughing. Bob barked nervously, having never seen Max laugh about anything.

Max shook his head and looked at Adrienne. "We may have found our candidate."

Realizing I had just passed the interview and was possibly being offered a job on the spot, I said, "What would this work entail, exactly?"

"Well, to get right to the point, we want you to help us break into the Cyber-Shield source code."

"You want to be able to change the code and add a back door?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Look, we're white hat hackers. So don't worry. We're just trying to prove to them that we can do it."

"Why?"

"Because if we do, we get paid, obviously, very very well from a competitor. But it will also force Cyber-Shield to fix the code. Right? They will thank us for it in the ends, believe me. They think no one can do it but we think we can, with a little help, hopefully from you. It's not all about the money."

"Really?"

"Okay, it's all about the money."

"Which company would be paying you?"

"We can't tell you that. But we would pay you on a contingency fee basis. In other words, if you find anything that's helpful to us we will pay you a lot of money on the spot, ten thousand dollars for each completed task."

"A lot of money," Adrienne repeated to emphasize.

"And honestly, if you don't succeed, you will get nothing,

because we get nothing. But if you help us you get paid in cash."

Bob barked at the word cash.

"*And,*" Max added, with his long blue shirt noticeably missing a top button, "any time you want to quit you can quit."

Adrienne leaned in close to me, "None of us really have anything to lose but time and effort."

I squinted at them, "Cyber-Shield has government contracts. Did you know that?"

"Of course, and the government is well aware of what we're trying to do. But I can't say anything more about that."

I squinted at them. "Then why work in a dungeon, undercover?" Something felt a little off, but I was stoned and out of work.

"We haven't been paid yet, that's why. Plus we'd rather spend our initial money on computers like these," he pointed to six laptops glowing with various screen savers scattered around the room. "Why rent some apartment in Green Lake just so we can piss in some renovated marble bathroom?"

That made sense.

Max added, "You can work from home if you live by yourself. You don't need to be here with us all the time. But you can't tell anyone what you're doing or the job will quickly end. Understood?"

I loved the idea of it, the challenge of it, and having a new game to play. If worse came to worse, and we did eventually hack all the way into the government computers Cyber-Shield was supposed to be protecting, Steve Jensen would have a whole lot more to worry about than egg on his

face, because Cyber-Shield would become known as Cyber-Sieve. That thought almost made me laugh out loud.

Maybe it would also force the government to take security more seriously. Right now from what I heard they loved offense, but didn't focus nearly as much on defense. Maybe winning this game would turn on a red light for them and I'd be considered a true patriot. In the end, they would understand the favor I did them.

"Okay. I'll do it," I said. "I wouldn't mind embarrassing Jensen for what he did to me. And if I can help the government develop a stronger defense. . ."

A loud knocking came from downstairs. Then the buzzer rang. Max and Adrienne looked at each other with concern.

"Don't answer it," Max said. "Just stay quiet."

The door was broken down in seconds with what sounded like a small explosion.

A dozen men, with guns drawn, ran up the stairs and told us to all get down on the ground and put our hands behind our backs.

Bob started barking like crazy and bearing his teeth, so they shot him with a tranquilizer gun.

The barking stopped just before Bob fell like a rock to the floor. He never even had time to bend his legs. It was just like bark, bark, bark, silence, kaboom.

Rather than bore you with the details about FBI agents handcuffing me and shoving me into a big black bulletproof van with Max and Adrienne, and how they took us to an undisclosed location to be interrogated, I will instead tell you how and why, on my twenty-sixth birthday, I was charged with espionage.

Specifically I was charged under section 18 U.S. Code 1030, a law created for computer-related attacks on government-related agencies, which carried a prison sentence of up to ten years.

Not many people could put anything past Steven Jensen. He had eyes and ears everywhere. He was tipped off to the Black Knight conspiracy more than a month before I called their number and the F.B.I. had been alerted. They were simply waiting for the right time to move in.

At the same time, Jensen hired the chief detective from the Jonathan Peanuckle case to work exclusively for Cyber-Shield.

The detective's job was to follow Chloe around and keep her out of trouble -- plus, follow me around to see what I was up to.

Another fun fact was that Steve Jensen, with tons of money to burn, but without a private island or a sports team to buy -- and still pissed off thinking that I got Chloe pregnant -- paid Tim Toliver a hundred thousand dollars in cash to set me up. All he had to do was call me one time and give me the number for Black Knight and then keep his mouth shut.

Of course, I realized all of this was mostly my fault. I was the one who said I would agree to try to hack Cyber-Shield. Our conversation that night was caught on tape by the F.B.I., who easily broke into the apartment when Max and Adrienne had walked to McDonalds for dinner a few hours before I came. They bugged the place in less than fifteen minutes.

When Steve Jensen heard the tape of what I said about him in the Black Knight meeting, and what I intended to do, he was determined to see my jail sentence hit the ten year maximum, and was even asking his attorneys to look for ways to increase it to twenty.

Chloe was not happy when she found out I was trying to mess with her dad's company, her nest egg. So I was now *persona non grata*.

I started out that day just wanting a dog. But no dog on the planet, including the now tranquilized Bob, gave a rat's ass about me. I mean, I walked out of Wally's without a dog because it would have cost me too much money. How heartless was that?

And the owner of the "A Mazing Dog, Mazey" never got back to me.

Looking back, it was a pretty crappy birthday. Or so I thought.

One thing I learned early in my twenties is that people lie all the time.

My first girlfriend, Scarlet, for instance, had a boyfriend before me named Paul. He was a very handsome guy. A football quarterback in high school. Second string. I'm not going to say anything bad about him other than this: after Scarlet dumped him to be with me, he stalked her.

One night he knocked on our door, obviously drunk. He had climbed up our seven cement steps that had no handrail, which was an impressive feat relative to the amount of alcohol he'd consumed. When I opened the door to stop the obnoxious pounding he told me he was there to beat the crap out of me.

I decided to step outside onto the porch to try to reason with him. But that surprised him. He backed up suddenly and stumbled over himself, which caused him to fall down our seven cement steps with no handrail, which caused him to go unconscious.

In the hospital he was diagnosed with a severe concussion. He couldn't remember what happened. So Scarlet told him that he threw a punch at me but I ducked, counter-punched with a brutal uppercut to his jaw, and knocked him out. That was the end of Paul's stalking days.

Scarlet had a way of reorganizing the truth that impressed me at the time. Little did I know she would eventually re-organize the truth about who got her pregnant. Just like Chloe did.

But my point is, everyone reorganizes the truth. They lie. They cheat. They rearrange history and memories. But when the reorganized truth gets unscrambled back into *fact*, odd things can transpire.

For instance, Jonathan Peanuckle did not commit suicide. He was murdered after all.

Someone poisoned Jonathan Peanuckle at the pinnacle of his career.

To understand who and why I must refer back to the intrepid chief detective, who turned out to be Chloe's new boyfriend. His name was Ronald J. Bowie. (No relation to David.) But thinking about it, it was quite easy to see why Ronald and Chloe were not destined to be married -- unless Chloe kept her maiden name.

Bowie was by all accounts one of the most respected force detectives in Seattle. He knew every block, every alleyway, every policeman, every thug, and every politician in the city.

He knew the courts and the judges. He knew the laws of both city and state. And he also knew Jonathan Peanuckle had been murdered.

He knew all these things. Yet, he couldn't reveal who murdered Peanuckle to anyone, because he would be snitching on one of the most powerful men in the state, who also happened to be his current boss, and his girlfriend's father.

Why would billionaire Steve Jensen murder his chief marketing strategist and the hand-picked suitor for his daughter?

Because he found out Jonathan Peanuckle was a spy. In fact, he was the benefactor for Black Knight (having hired Mark a.k.a. Max, and Jane a.k.a. Adrienne) -- although he didn't hire the Rottweiler (Bob). Not directly. Not literally.

Peanuckle's motive for becoming a spy was all about money. A security software competitor, Vulture Security, promised him ten million dollars if he could infect Cyber-Shield's code, ruin the government's faith in their software, and allow Vulture to swoop in to fill the void.

When Jensen stumbled upon the truth he decided to blow the whole thing up by killing two birds with one stone.

First he hired a hitman (an expert with poisons) to kill Jonathan Peanuckle.

Then he tried to pin the murder on me.

But detective Bowie eventually surmised I had nothing to do with it.

So Jensen decided to hire Bowie to come work for him rather than have him continue to snoop around.

Jensen knew what he was doing, he was a master game player.

But detective Bowie was also a master game player. He read between the lines. He figured Jensen hired a hit man, but why go down that road? If a company spy was dead, and a cyber-genius billionaire was alive and helping protect the government with his security software, plus paying him

a fortune in salary, and introducing his beautiful sexy daughter to him, why kill the Golden Goose?

The plan worked.

I was set up. And Black Knight got caught by the F.B.I.

When Bowie followed me after he was hired by Jensen this is what he discovered:

I didn't really care that much about Chloe. Check.

I liked to smoke weed. Legal, so, check.

And I was basically just a harmless unlucky coder who got caught up in the Black Knight conspiracy at the last minute.

So, Bowie suggested Jensen release me from the legal claim against Black Knight.

When Jensen balked, Bowie said, "If he's part of the case, at some point the Jonathan Peanuckle suicide is going to get brought up again. I don't think you want that case reopened."

Jensen was confused. Was Bowie saying this because he knew Jensen was part of the murder? Or because he thought the Jonathan Peanuckle case would give the defense something to use as a distraction, hoping for a mistrial?

Bowie stared at Jensen. Jensen stared back. Neither of them gave anything away in their expressions.

A see-saw of lies and paranoia found a state of equipoise.

For that one moment in time neither held power over the other.

The result of which was -- I was set free. Again.

I decided I would try to start a new life in a new town. My life in Seattle was over. The new life I wanted would hopefully include a good job, a new girlfriend, and some semblance of peace.

But this was not to be.

A week before I planned to take a bus to California Chloe called crying, begging me to come to her apartment.

Apparently Detective Ronald Bowie had cheated on her and she kicked him out. She insisted I spend the night so I did. Because, why not?

I left that next morning in a state of limbo. Sceptic that I am I was looking for a sign -- was I really meant to be with Chloe, or was this yet another comma in a very long and horrible sentence we had written together?

When I got home I received a phone call from a long-lost friend. Scarlet. She said she needed to see me right away. It was urgent. So I agreed to meet her at a cafe downtown.

What were the odds of Chloe and Scarlet intersecting my life like this?

Scarlet walked in looking as beautiful and quirky as ever. It had been more than three years since we'd seen each other.

"I'm going to get right to the point. Cody, I have something to tell you, and it's not going to be easy to hear."

"Qnqkst got a record deal and you want to cut me out of the band?"

"No! You wish!"

"Okay, I give up."

"I miscalculated."

"About what?"

"The baby. . . my baby. . . was yours. You were the one who got me pregnant."

"Well but, *what?* That's not possible!"

"Her name is Isabelle."

"But you told me. . . ."

"I thought Hank, our not so amazing drummer, *was* the father Cody! We even got married, and things were okay actually. But then a year ago he told me he wanted to have another child. That's when we found out he was infertile. The doctors said he always had been. Some genetic thing. He got so upset when he realized Isabelle wasn't his real daughter he left."

"He left you because of *that?*"

She nodded. "Mostly."

I put my hands over my eyes. I had to think this through. Could she be lying?

She said, "So then I realized it had to be you. And well, she deserves to meet her real father."

"Ah."

"And I want you to know her too, Cody. She's a wonderful little girl. At least consider it."

"I will, I will consider it."

My mind began to spin. Maybe Hank the drummer left for some other reason and she came up with a new plan -- to tell me I was the father, so the little girl would still think she had a father, and so Scarlet wouldn't have to raise her alone. After my time with Chloe this would seem like normal problem solving.

But then Scarlet said, "She has a little birthmark just below her right ear, it looks like a little star."

She reached under my ear and stroked it with the back of her index finger, "It looks a lot like this."

My brain started to calculate and recalculate -- the timing of when Scarlet got pregnant, and the mark behind the ear, I mean who could set that kind of thing up?

Suddenly something in me shattered. Something broke through the game of everyone trying to hack life, and time landed me here, right in this one wild true moment, and I felt a chill run through me.

Scarlet waited for me to respond. My face felt hot. My cheeks became flushed.

"Well, first of all, just know, you and I aren't necessarily getting back together. I mean I'm hanging out with a girl named Chloe. . . again. I think."

"That's not why I wanted to see you."

I nodded. This couldn't just be another trick.

Finally I said, "Okay. I'll do it. But before I meet Isabelle, I want you to tell her this for me. Even if she doesn't understand a word of it, at least you will:

"Before you were born I was told I wasn't your father. Then I was asked to say I *was* a father with someone else when I wasn't. I've been tricked. I've been hated. I've been fired. I've been put in jail for murder, and jailed again for espionage. But I was lucky, because each time I was innocent. So they set me free.

"Looking back, to be honest, the whole thing was kinda fun while also feeling a little unreal. Because I wasn't connected to anything truly important. I was like code before it actually creates something. I was like random numbers floating around out there.

"And I've never had to be responsible for anything, or anyone, not even a dog, not even myself. It's all been like one big game. Win, lose, it was fine either way.

"But now, if you actually are my daughter, if your mom is telling me the truth, that means you are the most real thing, the most connected thing that's ever happened to me. By genetic code we're literally *each other*. And that means you're *not* just a game.

"So, okay, yes, maybe we'll get to know each other over time, maybe you can even come stay with me on weekends or whatever, or maybe if we get closer someday we can even get a dog."

Saying all this made me feel emotionally clearheaded and clean inside, but shaky at the same time. It was an odd new feeling.

"We already *have* a dog," Scarlet said excitedly. "I was going to give it away after her fake father left. But Isabelle

cried and begged me not to, so we kept her. She's the sweetest most amazing dog in the world. Her name is Mazey."

Sometimes when you're coding there's a magic moment. A moment when you see clearly that everything else is going to fall together. Meeting Scarlet at the cafe and hearing that I actually did have a child -- not a fake child, not a child created from a lie -- was one of those magic moments. It felt like the sign I was looking for. How could it not have been?

So I followed Scarlet back to her apartment from the cafe. It was a short walk in a light rain on a typical Seattle-gray day. At one point she reached out and held my hand.

As it turned out, Mazey was as amazing as advertised. She immediately welcomed me and treated me like her best friend.

And Isabelle was unquestionably beautiful. She also did have a little mark behind her ear that looked like mine. Other than that she was nothing like me. She had a brightness about her. Her eyes twinkled with joy almost all the time. They drew me into a place inside myself I didn't know existed.

So I moved in with Scarlet and Isabelle and Mazey a few months later. Chloe was happy for me and wished me well. And life has been pretty good since. Pretty amazing sometimes.

What I'm left with these days are occasional wild true moments; moments that shine and make me feel more alive and freer than the way I felt before -- always, of course, preceded and postceded by the rest of time, for which I have no good explanation.

The End

~ GM