

The Amazing Maze

-- 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. When I got hired at Cyber-Shield I had no clue she was the CEO's daughter. And she had no idea I worked there until we saw each other at the Seattle Cyber-Fair.

I was standing behind a booth showing IT officers from other companies how our 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 embedded cyber-security software had become the new rage with the younger hackers, who 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.

"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."
"What?"
"Chloe Jensen. Daughter of Steve Jensen."
"Oh my God."
"I lived with my mom 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. 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 you see, she was playing me. 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 thoughts. "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 sometimes like an old video game -- you have to play to get to the next level.

So I jumped right into the fire.

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 about 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 had met at a coffee house in downtown Seattle and a few months later we started a band called Qnqkst. Everyone in the band had their own pronunciation. I pronounced it "Kwongst." Our drummer 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. They 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, with a 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 to take care of my sick grandmother,

and 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. 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 Scarlet told me she was pregnant.

The ten-second sequence that befell me, as I recall, went from almost feeling 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 Lipton tea and driving her to doctors, drummer boy was moving in. In every way. I found his jacket in my closet.

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

Just before the birth, the drummer and Scarlet were married in a simple private ceremony.

The baby was born days later. She turned out to be a really nice girl.

When Chloe and I emerged from the sauna we took separate showers and put our clothes back on. I was ecstatic, thinking Chloe was the one I had 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 an awful idea.

"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."

"Wait a minute. Are you actually pregnant?"

"Bing."

"Excuse me, but this is kind of *deja vu* for me in reverse." I felt hot, like I was going to faint.

"I'll give you some good news, okay? I kind of like you, and I picked you over the idiot fiancé that my dad set me up with, and a hundred other guys at the convention hall I

could have seduced here. So if you want to see me again, I'm open for a second date."

"Seriously, you're pregnant?"

"Now *I'm* having *deja vu*. Asked and answered, as my dad's lawyers would say."

"Does your boyfriend know?"

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

"Does your dad know?"

"He's going to. . . tonight. 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 just think of it this way, Cody -- this last memorable hour of your life just got a whole lot more memorable."

Ever since I was a kid I always 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 innately 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.

In fact, human consciousness seems to be the biggest barrier to logic and kindness.

Monkeys have some measurable amount of what we call consciousness. They recognize us and use sign language to ask us for food, or ask to watch their favorite TV show. Dogs might not be quite as measurably conscious as monkeys, but a dog's consciousness is truly amazing.

Think about it. 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 a computer, and give the dog a pat once in a while, that dog would get extremely attached to the guy.

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. Guess what would happen the minute that guy walked through the door after work? 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.

This dog "loves" this guy in a way very few humans love anything!

Even though the guy probably didn't do anything to deserve it. 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. There's no real loyalty in human love. Love is there to serve us. Let's admit that upfront. And if it doesn't give us what we want then at some point we run away. Or sleep with the drummer. Or try to wiggle out of the relationship when you get pregnant by setting up some dumb guy like me.

Someday I think we'll figure out how to code love. And when that day comes I'm pretty sure that love, or even the kind of love that a dog feels, 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 cast 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 into that game. Because I wasn't lonely anymore. She entertained me. She was beautiful. She was funny. She was quirky. She was mysterious and confusing. She liked having sex with me, a lot. It was a huge challenge for me to keep up with her true intentions. But hackers love challenges. I mean, that plus the fact that Chloe was the CEO's daughter, made it a pretty interesting game.

I didn't even mind going into work anymore, and putting up with all the little 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 trying 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 the size of Port Townsend.

"Cody Masterson." He said my name but didn't reach out to shake my hand. That was fine. I had just eaten a sticky bun for lunch.

"I'm 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."

"How many daughters do you. . ."

"Just one."

"Ah."

"Chloe."

I nodded.

"You do know Chloe, don't you?"

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

That silenced him momentarily, so I added, "Nice suite, by the way. Nicely decorated."

"You like the insides of nice things?"

"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."

"You have no idea."

I looked at Jonathan again. He was turning red. He was quite tall with very big feet stuffed into very shiny long black shoes. They kind of looked like miniature black blimps

without the Goodyear sign. 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 flattering.

"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."

I thought to myself, that's not the only thing he's been multiplying. If they only knew. I also thought it odd 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. . ."

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

"Sir, I deserve to be fired, I 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 and that you remain on our insurance plan."

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

"Fuck you," Jonathan said.

Poor Jonathan was extremely confused about all things carnal.

Chloe was in a tough spot. We were twenty-five. If she opted not to have the baby her mother would have freaked out and insisted her ex-husband disown her. 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 got fired as long as I didn't spill the beans she'd owe me big-time.

But I was still trying to hack the Chloe game, and she had certainly hacked into mine, so I felt compelled to have the beans remain in their vacuum-sealed can.

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 for him to 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 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 fun. 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, code me

out of 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 went 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 at least 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, 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. 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. 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 liked 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 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. Cyber-Shield was portrayed as a rain coat. In another ad it was like 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? Knowing her as well as I did, I'd say no.

Plus, 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 home alone serially watching Netflix episodes of *Supergirl*, fantasizing about being her proud, constantly endangered husband -- with no witnesses to corroborate any of my super-hero erotic fantasies.

Now I was rotting away in jail. And the more time went by without Chloe bailing me out the more I began to suspect she was framing me, for reasons that may not be as linear and logical as I assumed.

As it turned out, Chloe wasn't exactly framing me. Not literally. Not directly. Chloe was too smart for that. 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 all. He was so sorry. The rumor he heard specifically accused Chloe of taking an ungodly amount of Misoprostol and Mifepristone to make it happen.

I got it. 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. "Yet another move on the board. It's not just about the miscarriage."

She read my suspicion. "Wait a minute Cody, do you think that *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! Unless, you did, but now you're 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 could kill *anything*?"

"Well, do I?"

"Well, what would be my motive, Chloe? Why the hell would I care 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? It's not like he was stalking me, begging me to change my mind."

"Well then, who was the killer?"

"I don't know. But I guess I need to get you out of here. You're innocent. I'm sure of it now. 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, 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 closed.

If I put myself in his extremely large-sized shiny black 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.

So in the end, even though I did not directly, literally, or legally kill Jonathan Peanuckle, I played a part in it. Demons continued to haunt him.

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

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, yes, she didn't think it would be a good idea.

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 THC. Or CBD.

Fun without a future.

Consciousness without conscience.

I decided I wanted a dog.

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 dripping 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 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 only dry pocket.

Once home I dried off, 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 like Scarlet's. This is where my mind regressed to. 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. Listen, happy birthday. I saw it on Facebook. And by the way, I think we're the last two people under thirty that are still on Facebook. But that's not why I'm calling. I have this weird kind of dark emo friend who's an insanely talented hacker. He said he knows this 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 secretive venture these guys are into. Sounds like a movie script, right? No idea of the pay. Want the number?"

"Of course."

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

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

Tim said goodbye, and, still very stoned, I called the number. 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. I'm a good coder but I have free time to. . ."

"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' 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."

"How about 8 o'clock tonight?"

"Tonight? Fine, I guess."

"Don't guess. Yes or no."

"Yes."

"One last thing. Do you hate dogs?"

"Do I, uh, no!"

"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?" 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 steps, rang the round black buzzer and waited. I saw someone descend the stairs. He was a giant of a man in a dark blue untucked button-down shirt. "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!*

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

"No!"

"Good."

He furled his eyebrows, which translated as -- *you're making a bad first impression* -- and 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. Why go out when everything was accessible online?

Hiking was too weird. Everyone had to have big brown hiking shoes from L.L. Bean to be part of that strange crowd.

So 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 high school.

I went to coding school directly after high school. 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. She asked me out when I succeeded so we met a few hours later.

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 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 says, "Yeah, how private was it if I fuckin' heard 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 his fist at my jaw.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw three guys running towards him. They grabbed both of his arms before he could land his punch. 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. They dragged him away, with his feet sliding and scraping on the ground behind him until they pushed him into the street. He straightened himself up, pulled the bottom of his tangled shirt down below his beltline, then pointed at me, "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'd eaten.

"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 they even existed. 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, "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 -- Bob (his real name).

"Hi Bob!" I said. I was trying to make Bob happy enough to not 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 go down without a fight. 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 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 then 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?" and began laughing. Bob

barked nervously, having not seen Max ever 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?"

"If we do, we get paid, obviously, very very well. Because it will force Cyber-Shield to get better. Right? They think no one can do it but we think we can, with a little more help, hopefully from you. It's all about the money, as long as we're trying to help the good guys."

"Who would be paying you?"

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

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

"Honestly, if you don't succeed, you get nothing, because we get nothing. But if you help us you will get paid, in cash."

Bob barked at the word cash.

"*And*," Max added, with his long blue shirt noticeably missing a 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 off. But I was stoned and out of work.

"Well, we haven't been paid yet. Plus we'd rather spend our front money on computers like these," he pointed to six lap tops glowing with various screen savers scattered around the room, "than rent some apartment in Green Lake so we can piss in some renovated 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. 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 underground in my profession, they loved offense, didn't focus 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 in black suits, 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 them 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 (who eventually became the boyfriend Chloe dumped me for) to work exclusively for Cyber-Shield.

The detective's job was to follow Chloe around and keep her out of trouble -- and a fine job he did of that -- 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 sports team he wanted to buy -- and still pissed off thinking that I got Chloe pregnant -- paid Tim Toliver a few 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 before I came over. They bugged the place in less than five 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.

The enormous amount of jail time was applicable, even though I also said on tape that I wanted to ultimately *help* the government, because Cyber-Shield was a government contractor. Any committed attempt to hack them could also be seen as an attempt to hack the security of the United States.

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*.

No dog on the planet, including the now tamed and 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 really crappy birthday.

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 hurt me.

I said let's talk about it, and stepped outside onto the porch to try to reason with him. He backed up suddenly and stumbled over himself, falling down our seven cement steps with no handrail. He went 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.

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.

As it turns out, 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, now Chloe's 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, and every politician in the city. He knew the courts and the judges. He knew the laws of both city and state. And he knew Jonathan Peanuckle had been murdered.

He knew all these things.

Yet, he couldn't reveal who did it 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 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).

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 country with his security software, plus paying Bowie 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 was over 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 neither held power over the other.

And 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, although incomplete. I wasn't so much leaving as escaping. I knew that. The new life I wanted would hopefully include a good job, a new girlfriend, some semblance of peace, and maybe a dog.

But this was not to be.

A week before I planned to take the 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.

I left that next morning in a state of limbo. Maybe Chloe was the one after all. Maybe all of this had happened for a reason. Everything that happened brought me here, back to her. I was looking for a sign.

But 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? When it rains it pours. And in Seattle it always rains.

Scarlet walked in looking as beautiful and quirky and steely-eyed as ever. Her blonde hair was still cut in a well-groomed bob. 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 lied."

"Again? About what this time?"

"The baby was yours. You were the one that got me pregnant. I didn't know."

"*What?*"

"Her name is Isabelle."

"I thought drummer boy was the father. . ."

"I did too! We got married. And things were okay. A year ago he told me he wanted another child. But then 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."

"So what now?"

"Well, she wants to see her real father."

"Ah."

"And I want you to know her too. Cody, you're a really great guy. And she's an amazing girl. At least consider it."

"I will, I will."

My mind began to spin. Was she lying to me *again*? Maybe drummer boy left for some other reason and she came up with a new plan -- me.

But then she 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, "Like this."

Something in me shattered. I broke through the game, to this one wild true moment, and I felt a chill run through me. Scarlet waited for me to respond.

"Well, first of all, just know, you and I aren't getting back together. I'm hanging out with a girl named Chloe. I think. Anyway, this has nothing to do with you and me."

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

I tried to read her. I looked directly into her eyes. But all I saw were memories.

"Are you still playing bass?"

"Yes. Are you still playing guitar?"

"No."

"Well, I don't care. You sucked anyway." She smiled.

"You're lying again."

"Maybe."

"Qnqkst had something. All it needed was a singer."

"Mostly."

I took a deep breath. "Okay. I'll do it. But before I meet her, tell Isabelle this for me:

"Before you were born I was told I wasn't your father. Then I was asked to say I *was* a father, when I wasn't. 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 mostly innocent. Mostly. So they set me free.

"And looking back, to be honest, the whole thing was kinda fun. I haven't really been touched by anything. It's all just unreal. Like code before it creates something.

"But that also means I escaped having to deal with any real consequences. I've never had to feel responsible for anything, or anyone, not even a dog, not even myself. It's all been one big game. Win, lose, I never quite cared one way or the other.

"But now, if you actually are my daughter, if your mom is telling the truth this time, that means you are the most legitimate thing, the most real thing that's ever happened to me. By genic code we're a part of each other! And maybe there's something to learn from that. Like, this is *not* a game.

"Maybe we can get to know each other, or even get a dog, maybe share a dog together. . ."

Saying all this made me feel emotionally clear and clean inside. It was an odd new feeling.

"We *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 dog in the world. Her name is Mazey."

The End

~ GM