

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 her was a coincidence. I'd known her since my freshman year of high school -- Lakeside High in Seattle. But back then we were just friends. I hadn't seen her in years. By the time I was hired to work for Cyber-Shield, she was a distant memory.

I liked my job as a coder. Hacking cyber-security software had become the new challenge for younger hackers like me. We loved practicing our skills by breaking into supposedly unhackable systems. We were mostly gamers at heart. Gamers love to play.

Hacking security systems was like a game inside a game. It was all in good fun as far as we were concerned. And if we were discovered, that was just part of the game as well. Sometimes when hackers got discovered they would be offered a high-level job with the same security firm they hacked. After all, trust was just a game too. And that's exactly what happened to me. When I hacked into Cyber-Shield's corporate executives' passwords they immediately offered me a job for more money than I even thought was reasonable.

Anyway, on this particular fateful day I was standing behind a booth at the Seattle Cyber-Fair showing IT officers from other companies our patented *threat-management* software. They all had a desperate look in their eyes. The security software they currently had wasn't even keeping

out middle-school hackers, who were then posting their successes to each other on Instagram.

A fairly gorgeous woman about my age came up to the booth and stared at me. She looked vaguely familiar.

"Cody?"

"Yes." I stared back at her.

She put her hands on her hips and held the pose.

"Wait -- Chloe?"

She started laughing. "Wow, Cody, this is crazy. You work for Cyber-Shield?"

"I sure hope so," I said. "I wouldn't want to be standing here and not getting paid."

"How do you like it?"

"It's okay. I mean, it's definitely better than being in high school."

"Very true! Oh my God, remember Mr. Bergen? What an ass."

"The ass that wore a wig."

"Exactly! That would be a good title for a book."

Why didn't I have the courage to get to know her better back then? She seemed so easy to talk to now. I was such a nerd.

She looked closely at the Cyber-Shield sign and scrunched up her nose. "They could have hired an actual sign-maker. This whole set-up is pretty lame."

"I didn't really notice. I mean, I just showed up for my shift and then all these people started crowding around..."

"Ever met the CEO?"

"Jay Jensen? I saw him once at a conference and he waved at me, I think.... You know how famous people kind of fake like they know who they're waving to?"

"I do! It used to happen at home, with my dad when he came home from work."

"But, why are *you* here Chloe?"

"I own the place."

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

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

"Well, my shift ends in a few hours, but then I'm free."

"No, *now*. Wait here."

"But I can't, really."

Chloe 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, Mr. Psychic."

"Oh yeah."

"My last name starts with a J."

"Okay."

"As in *Jensen*. It's Chloe Jensen."

"*What?*"

"I lived with my mom and step-dad my last few years of high school, so you wouldn't have connected the dots. But your boss is my father."

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

"We'll talk about it. Wait right here. I'll get someone to take over your shift."

Imagine a relatively carefree wanderer in the desert suddenly being kidnapped into a mercenary army. That was kind of like the situation I got sucked into. I say this because, to be perfectly frank, Chloe had a dark side. Overtly she was bubbly, with a welcoming smile and twinkly eyes. But covertly she was, well, not her face.

We started walking to her car, but then she stopped and turned towards me until we were staring at each other. I have a small birthmark on my neck just under my right ear. It looks like a little star. Most people don't notice it. But she remembered I had it for some reason.

She pulled back my long hair until my ear was exposed and put her finger on my neck where the star was. "I always wanted to touch it. It's a beautiful star."

Her touch felt nice, but it was kind of weird. No one ever talked about my star birthmark. In fact, most of the time I forgot it even existed.

A half block later she took my arm and pulled me closer to her. She mumbled something about me shielding her from the wind. Although there wasn't much of a breeze that day as I recall.

Instead of going to lunch she drove me to her private gym. Her father had bought the place for her and her mom years 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. I took off my shirt.

"You've gotten cuter since high school," she smiled.

"Really?"

"Yes! I mean, don't you see how cute you've gotten when you look in the mirror?"

"Well, I haven't looked in the mirror in the last few years, but I'll take your word for it. That's good to know."

She laid back on the sauna bench and started to hum.

"I don't just work for Cyber-Shield, by the way," I blurted out. "I'm coding a new kind of game. I'm not officially a hacker anymore. I just play games all the time, and the one I'm creating is really exciting. It's got lots of levels. I mean at some point it gets hard to distinguish between game reality and virtual reality, if that makes sense."

"No, it doesn't."

She touched my leg with her foot.

"Oh, so you're not into games?"

"Not other people's games," she laughed.

I laughed back. But it was kind of involuntary. Like a sneeze. She was making me nervous.

Then she started talking about her boyfriend. She said he wanted to marry her. He bought her a ring, which she put in her vanity drawer. Then when he saw she wasn't wearing the ring, he asked why, and she said because she needed to think about it. So he asked her to think about it. Spending time with me in the sauna was a very unique way to think about it.

I started wondering if I would get fired just for being here with her like this. What if her father found out? She read my mind. "If you don't take off your clothes right this

second and kiss me I'm going to tell my dad where you were today."

I laughed but no sound escaped from my mouth. I was smitten, in a creeped-out kind of way. She was so beautiful, lying back on the hot wooden bench in her skimpy underwear with her eyes closed. I didn't care about the job anymore. I was young and relatively smart. I knew how to code. I could find work somewhere else if I had to, or maybe sell the game I was creating for a lot of money someday.

In fact, life was a lot like the game I was creating -- you have to play and win and get to the next level. And even though you know the next level is going to be a lot more complicated, and way harder to win, you want to get there anyway.

In order to explain why I was so willing to be seduced by Chloe, I need to tell you about Scarlet.

But first, here's an interesting fact you can verify online. 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 might take for me to find a girlfriend in Seattle. Because I was a hermit. I stayed inside twenty-three hours a day. If I wasn't running out of food, twenty-four.

Then, by chance, I met Scarlet online, and we went to a music concert. It was a local grunge band that came up with the unique idea of trying to sound just like Nirvana. They didn't. They couldn't. But failing led them to their own sound so they started to draw crowds.

Amidst the deafening cacophony our eyes met. And that felt even better than what we were texting each other in between songs.

Well, that's the poetic version. It was actually a lot drunker than that.

Anyway, a few months later, we were quasi-living together - we would sleep at each other's apartments on alternating weekends.

In the spring we started our own grunge rock band called, Qnqkst. Everyone in the band had their own

pronunciation. I pronounced it, "Kwongst." Our drummer, Hank, insisted it was, "Kingst."

The genesis of the word came from matching the numbers 17-14-17-11-19-20 to their correlating letters of the alphabet. The numbers came to me in a waking dream one stoned boring evening. I started with the number 17 - the year I created my first game. Then I subtracted 3, added 3, subtracted 6, added 8 and added 1.... 3-3-6-8 in the alphabet was CCFH. Which stood for Can Cody Find Her. I just reversed engineered it and got 17-14-17-11-19-20, which then translated into Qnqkst.

In the band, Scarlet was the bass player. I thought her bass playing was excellent. She was always able to lock in solidly with our drummer, Hank, in a way that made the rhythm pulse and come alive.

She couldn't sing very well, 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 5-string bass strapped around her shoulders. That's how she literally became the face of the band. She always had this blazing cold sexy look in her eyes in the posters and flyers we made. In real life though, she wasn't cold, or blazing. She was actually really nice. Until I went to Krupp.

After a year and thirteen days the band broke up because I had to leave town to take care of my sick grandmother, in Krupp, a small town about two hundred miles east of Seattle.

By the time I came back from Krupp everyone had found better things to do, including Scarlet. Her better thing

to do was becoming Hank the drummer's new girlfriend, and then soon thereafter finding out she was pregnant.

Just before the birth of Scarlet's child, Hank the drummer, and Scarlet my first and only girlfriend, were married in a simple private ceremony.

The baby, a girl, was born at Kindred Hospital two weeks after the wedding.

After thinking about Scarlet, and how much I loved her, when someone like Chloe comes along next and says you can abandon your shift at work and just go tripping off without being fired, it feels kind of stupid to say no. Anything to make me want to feel alive again was a giant evolution from my current state of mind.

Chloe, on the other hand, had her own reasons to steal me away from the Cyber-Fair. The game she was creating had far more levels to it than the new game I had been working on. She was a reality shifter. I had unknowingly been kidnapped out of my game and into hers.

After Chloe and I emerged from the sauna we took showers and got dressed.

"So, what now?" I smiled. "Wanna get some coffee?"

She was forcing her heels back on.

"*What now?*" she laughed. "Like, now I go tell my dad."

"Tell him... *what exactly? About this?*" Suddenly coffee sounded like a bad idea.

"Tell him that I'm not marrying that creep he introduced me to, the creep he hand-picked for me, because you and I have been going out together and I'm pregnant with your child."

"Very funny."

"Not really."

"Hey, *what?*"

"It can just be our little secret between friends, okay?"

"Are you actually *seriously* pregnant?"

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

"This is kind of Deja vu for me in reverse," I said.

"Cody look, I'll give you some good news, okay? I like you. I decided to seduce you out of the hundred other guys at the convention hall I could have seduced because I always thought you were a nice guy, and well, you really have gotten a lot cuter since high school. So look at the bright side. If you want to see me again, I'm open for a second date!"

"You want to date me, and you're pregnant?"

"If you want to."

"Does your boyfriend know you're pregnant?"

"*Of course not!*"

"Does your dad know?"

"He's going to. Want to join us for dinner?"

"*No!* Are you crazy?"

"Look, my mom and dad would kill me if I had an abortion -- which is ironic. They're pro life liberals. But I mean, I'm a life too! Don't they want to be pro *my* life? Actually, I wouldn't mind having the baby. I just don't want Jonathan to be the father. One fucking Jonathan in the world is one too many."

"It's a little late for that, don't you think? I mean fucking Jonathan is what happened."

"Not necessarily."

"I don't want to be a part of this, Chloe."

"You're already a part of this. A very big part of this. But think of it this way, Cody -- that wild and memorable time we just had in the sauna... I promise you, you'll never *ever* forget it."

Before I tell you why I went ahead and let Chloe pretend I was the father of her boyfriend's child, I want to talk about logic.

Human consciousness seems to be the biggest barrier to logic. There are too many other things going on that get in the way -- the senses, greed, lust, fear, imagination, morals created out of convenience, jealousy. I mean, the barriers to logic are endless. In fact, you could build a case that what humans actually experience isn't really *consciousness* at all. It's a lack of it.

Monkeys have some measurable amount of what I'd call true consciousness. Pragmatic consciousness. They can be trained to recognize us, and use sign language to ask for food, or ask to change the channel so they can watch their favorite TV show. We unwittingly become the monkeys' slaves, in fact, because human consciousness is trying to understand *their* consciousness so badly we'll pretty much do anything they ask us to do just to see what will happen. Which makes human consciousness susceptible to the trickery of monkeys.

Dogs might not be quite as tricky and conscious as monkeys, but when you think about it, a dog's consciousness is far superior to ours, *or* ninety-nine percent of all monkeys'.

I'm not trying to insult 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 gave the dog a pat once in a while, that dog

would get extremely attached to the guy and give double the love back to that guy every day.

Let's even say the guy paid other people to walk and feed the dog, and the only thing this guy did was play with the dog and pet the dog after a long day at 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 the dog thought might have been dead like, dog years ago. Even though this guy has nothing to do with the dog's survival needs, all he did was come back home after work.

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

The guy doesn't even have to be a stellar human. A hero. A Nobel prize winner. The father of quantum computing. Or the scientific interpreter of dog dreams. 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*.

And until that changes, I don't hold out much hope for humans in general. Someday, maybe we'll figure out how to code love itself. Maybe we'll be able to absorb the code into our brains by using electrodes, or maybe we'll become half human, half computer. And if we do, I think I know who the better half of us will be.

Anyway, Chloe led me to believe that after she carefully and kindly explained to her dad that I got her pregnant, while also reminding him that we'd known each other since high school, and that I'd gotten a *lot* cuter since then, that the odds were very high he would want to meet

me in person, tell me all was good, and maybe even give me a raise.

She assured me the real father of the baby wasn't anyone I had to worry about. He was a nerd, a milquetoast, overly loyal to her father, and would react any way her father damn well wanted him to react. Besides, her boyfriend wasn't the vindictive type. He was a pushover. He probably wouldn't even ask for his ring back.

The boyfriend's name was Jonathan Peanuckle, LOL.

The LOL was stuck on the end of his name by his friends and co-workers the way some people had Jr. or Sr. or the III, stuck on the end of their name.

I asked Chloe how she would prove it was my baby, or at least not have him claim that it could be his? She said, "We're good!"

"We're good? How about the DNA of the baby? Won't he check?"

"That's a hard no. He's not the suspicious type. Besides, jealousy rules over suspicion. He'll be so pissed off that I slept with you he won't want me as his little wife anymore. He won't want it to be his baby. He'll be relieved to find out it isn't."

"So you think that equates to, 'We're good?'"

"Well, colloquially speaking, we're good. And after I speak to my dad, you'll be *great*. You'll be his potential son-in-law. He might even give you a big promotion. I mean, after all, even if you don't want to marry me -- which after this day I know you won't want to -- we'll have a kid to raise."

"We?" I became hysterical.

Sure enough, the day after Chloe told the great and mysterious billionaire Jay Jensen, CEO of Cyber-Shield, the nationwide leader in cyber-security, and father of my lying sauna girlfriend, that I'd impregnated her, I was summoned to his office.

I'd never been in his office. I wasn't even sure he knew what division I worked in.

The office was actually a series of connecting suites. It looked to be about half the size of Krupp, the small town where my grandma still lived.

Mr. Jensen was standing at the side of his desk wearing a very expensive midnight black suit with an equally expensive-looking red silk tie. I believe he dressed that way to intimidate people, and it worked. I was never going to look that expensive, I knew that rather immediately.

"Cody Masterson." He said my name, but not as a question, and he didn't reach out to shake my hand. That was fine. I was never much into handshakes.

"Jay Jensen," I replied, but my voice cracked. I should have warmed it up before I walked in.

He pushed his round glasses up against the bridge of his nose. I thought to myself, his eyesight must be awful, otherwise he would have had LASIK surgery years ago. He could certainly afford it. He must be blind as a bat.

"I'd like to introduce you to the head of marketing, Jonathan Peanuckle."

When I looked at Peanuckle, he folded his arms and glared.

"Jonathan is... also my daughter's fiancé."

"Oh, uh, great. But like, how many daughters do you have, sir?"

"Just one," he frowned, "and I believe you know her. You do *know* Chloe, don't you?"

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

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

"You like the insides of beautiful, very expensive things, I presume?"

"Sometimes?" I actually stated it as a question. I didn't know if he had created a double meaning on purpose.

"Did you know Chloe is pregnant?"

"Well, that's what she told me when we..."

"Were you shocked?"

"I was indeed shocked, sir. Believe me, that would be a severe understatement."

I looked at Jonathan again. He was turning red. He was tall, with very big feet stuffed into a long pair of expensive shiny black shoes. They kind of looked like miniature blimps painted the color of a moonless night.

His suit matched the color of his socks, gray. Definitely a nice choice of socks. But a red face in a gray suit doesn't exactly exude alpha dog. It doesn't say, "I'm celebrating success by getting stinking drunk in the middle of the afternoon," like a *black* suit and a red face might.

"And it's your child," Jensen continued, gritting his teeth, "so that puts me in a very odd situation... *Cody*."

"But..."

"Because, Jonathan is a good man, a loyal employee, and an important part of my team. Sales have been multiplying exponentially since he came here."

I thought to myself, that's not the only thing he's been multiplying exponentially.

For some reason I also realized the word *lied* is in multiplied. Multiple lies seemed to be the theme here.

"I understand, sir. Chloe told me Mr. Peanuckle has been around since the inception... of the company."

"Yes, he has." Jensen lightly touched his tie with his right hand. Chloe told me if he touched his tie with his right hand it meant a decision had been made about something important. I was getting excited. I thought I was making a fairly good first impression, given the circumstances.

"The problem is, Jonathan wants me to fire you immediately. And frankly, I want to fire you immediately. But Chloe insists that I not."

"Well sir, can I just say, I very much appreciate that...."

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

I thought perhaps he was just testing my reaction. After all, good things often happen to calm people.

"Sir, that decision would make sense *if*... I mean, I guess I deserve to be fired just for being with, but not..." I started to not care. It was a defense mechanism. I just wanted to go home and play my game.

"Then there's nothing more to say. I need to catch a flight. When I return, *be gone*. Understand? I'll make sure you get two month's severance pay. That should somewhat appease Chloe. But that's the end of my patience."

"That's very generous of you, sir, *but, actually can I please explain...*"

"Fuck you," Jonathan hissed. He took a step toward me. He seemed ready to punch me in the face.

I took that as my cue to leave.

The truth was, after Chloe told her father that I was the progenitor of her child she got the clear and immediate sense he would fire me. But she didn't have the heart to tell me. Or didn't care.

After the meeting, when I confirmed her clear and immediate sense, and meekly addressed her potential capacity for apathy, she said that as long as I didn't spill the beans, she'd owe me big-time -- money, fancy dinners, more saunas, help me find a new job. *All this could be mine*, if I didn't reveal what was behind door number three.

Honestly, I wanted all of those things she offered me. And she wasn't opposed to spending time with a guy she could trust to keep a secret.

So, as fate would have it, our relationship suddenly found itself in a perfect state of equipoise.

Symbiosis created by two neophyte parasites feeding off of each other.

And, from that awkward synergy we found a modicum of peace and happiness together.

Until the murder.

So, no, I didn't kill anyone. At least not directly. Not literally. 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 shiny yellow American Eagle gold coins, his Rolex watch, his Bitcoins (which turned out to be fake), his iPhone 11 and 12, his MacBook Pro, Pad, and Air 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 either suicide or someone who knew Jonathan and held a grudge. Now who could that be?

The police detectives soon found out I'd been fired, of course, and why I was fired, and that Jonathan insisted Jay Jensen fire me or he would resign. Who else had a better motive to kill him? All this was revealed to the police voluntarily by Jay Jensen himself.

I knew one person who may have had a motive to kill him, but of course, I wasn't going to rat on her -- until or unless I had to. When the police hauled me in for questioning I guess I still saw it as a game. I figured sooner or later they would realize it wasn't me.

After I was interrogated, however, I found out both Jay *and* Chloe Jensen agreed with the police detective's suspicion

that I was the killer. My 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 that night."

"Then I guess I was home. Maybe I was working on my game."

"Your game?"

"I'm coding a new game."

"Can any friends substantiate you were home that night?"

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

"What do you mean?"

"Never mind, sir. It's a coder joke."

"Do you think this is a game, or some kind of joke?"

"No, sir."

"Because the only accused murderers I know that would make jokes about murdering someone are psychopaths. Have you ever been to a psychiatrist?"

"No, sir."

"Well, maybe you need one."

"Okay, well, coming from an expert like you I'll certainly take that into consideration."

"*Shut up!*"

"Yes, sir. No problem, 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 don't even know where he lives -- or lived."

"Did Chloe know where he lived?"

"I'm sure she did."

"She said she remembers telling you his address. Because you asked her for it."

"*That's... not... true.*"

"Did you want Mr. Peanuckle dead?"

"Not really."

"Not really?"

"I mean, definitely... *not*. I completely didn't care."

"Do you have a criminal record?"

"I mean, I got caught with an ounce of pot when I was seventeen, but everyone who's seventeen..."

"And...."

"And once overnight for breaking into Cyber Shield's executives' emails, but that was for fun. And I didn't go to jail for it. In fact..."

"Were Peanuckle's emails some of the emails you hacked into?"

"Maybe. But that would have been way before I ever heard of him."

"Then why would you have hacked into his emails."

"For fun."

"For *fun*."

"At that time...."

"What would you say if I told you there were people, *multiple* people, who think you're the one who killed Peanuckle?"

"I would say multiple people are lying, or don't know me. Especially if one of those people is Jay Jensen."

"You're calling Jay Jensen *a liar*?"

"Not specifically, but I think he's been duped...."

"By whom?"

"I have a pretty good idea by whom, but I don't want to say at the moment."

"Saying it could clear you, if you're telling the truth."

"Not if everyone but me is willing to lie about the truth. Not if they're both willing to set me up."

The interrogator threw his hands up in the air and left the room cursing. I sat there alone for a few minutes, wondering which wall was the secret window everyone might be watching me from.

Then a policeman came in, and I was immediately put behind bars. "Detained," was what the official term was.

His final snarky words as the iron door locked behind me with an echoey clang, was, "Uh, we'll be right back."

When no one came right back, Chloe offered to try to get me out. I told you, she's very complicated. She came to visit me in jail. She whispered to me, "You shouldn't have done it. Was it jealousy?"

"Was I jealous that Jonathan had slept with you before me, and that it was really his child? Or, was I jealous about him getting me fired when soon after that you end up paying for anything I want while I sit home working on my game? The word jealous doesn't really come to mind, Chloe."

"I just can't understand how you could actually *poison* someone."

"You set me up, Chloe! You *know* I didn't do it! In fact, I think *you* did it!"

"What are you talking about?"

"You told the police I wasn't with you that night, and that you gave me Jonathan's address!"

"You *weren't* with me that night. You said you were coding the next level up, but then you got frustrated and played a Kurt Cobain song on your guitar. You played it for me over the phone. Remember? It sucked, by the way.... And then you said you honestly believed he could have ripped off the chorus from a song your friend, Scarlet, wrote for your stupid band! *Remember saying that?*"

"Oh yeah."

"Then a few hours after I told you that you couldn't sing worth shit, Jonathan was dead."

"Maybe my singing poisoned him from all the way across town. But you also told them I know his address!"

"Cody, you knew he lived in the Harbor Steps apartments because when we happened to drive by it the day before, I said, 'Wow, this place is sure familiar.' You asked why, and I told you that Jonathan lived there."

"Oh, yeah."

"*'Oh yeah?' Is that all you have to say?'*"

Chloe started crying. "You're accusing me of murder because you can't remember *shit!* Do you even remember whether or not you killed him? Or does someone have to jog your memory about that too?"

I told her I was innocent and begged her to believe me.

Before she left she said she thought I was telling her the truth, and she still owed me big-time, and promised to get me out as soon as she could.

But the next morning, I was officially charged with the murder of Jonathan Peanuckle, and prison was now the new normal.

Days past. I sat for hours in the corner of my cell trying to figure out who did kill Peanuckle, and why.

The only logical suspect, after deep consideration, was still Chloe herself. She didn't want him finding out it was his baby through some genetic test of the new born child. She didn't want him to even touch her, apparently, with those long thin geeky fingers of his. The only thing his fingers were good for, she said, was picking up pieces of sushi, and playing a song he learned on the piano, palms up.

She said his slightly crooked teeth made her skin crawl.

She said his aggressive marketing campaign was downright embarrassing. She couldn't believe her father approved it.

Cyber-Shield was portrayed as a raincoat. 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? I mean it's trying to stop hackers that are trying to fuck with them. *Market that!*"

But did she actually have the capacity to kill the guy? Knowing her as well as I did, I'd say no... *ish*.

Plus, she said the night that Jonathan was poisoned with a mixture of bromide and strychnine, she had an alibi. She was eating dinner with her girlfriend at the Zig Zag Café. She had a witness, and the witness wouldn't waiver.

I, on the other hand, after getting nowhere working on coding the next level of my game that night, and then screwing around on my guitar for an hour, ended up getting stoned and watching old Netflix episodes of *Supergirl*. She is so hot. I want a Supergirl one day. And maybe a Superdog as well.

I began to remember everything so clearly now.

It's amazing what a few days in a dank cell will do for your ability to recall minutia.

Meanwhile, here I was rotting away. And the more time that went by without Chloe bailing me out the more I began to suspect that she was, at the very least, framing me. I had been hacked by a master hacker, again. She was hacking into a game I didn't even know I was in until now.

The game was called, Believer's Maze.

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 Chloe was 'back to normal.' When I urged him to quantify the word, normal, he said, "Quantitatively the number would be one.... As in, without child."

"That's why she hadn't been in touch with you, or bailed you out," he said. "She had a miscarriage."

"A miscarriage? Qualitatively, define miscarriage. Was it a vast biological coincidence? Or did she go to Planned Parenthood because the new plan was not to be a parent?"

"From what I heard, she wanted the baby."

"From what you heard? And who did you hear it from?"

"Well, Chloe."

"With hearing like that qualitatively you might be defined as deaf."

I thanked him for relaying the message and said goodbye. But now it was time for me to try to decode everything he relayed.

After a few minutes of computational meditation the puzzle pieces started to come together. First, the convenient facts:

She was free of motherhood.

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

And free of the possibility of an alive Jonathan Peanuckle demanding a DNA test of the child after it was born.

But speaking to her later, she again insisted she intended to have the baby all along, otherwise she could have planned an abortion long before anyone even knew she was pregnant.

The fact is, was... she *could* have done that.

I failed to take that into consideration.

The mystery continued.

The next time I heard from Chloe she said she had some news from a "trustable source -- a new friend of hers." She swore it was news I'd be very happy about. She was half right.

The happy news came on a glorious rare sunny Seattle day, when unexpectedly, I was set free.

I found out later that the chief detective, known in police circles as the Senior Investigating Officer, had rendered an official opinion: Jonathan Peanuckle's death was indeed 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 then very quickly got her pregnant. Like *really* quickly.

So in the end, even though I did not directly, literally, kill Jonathan Peanuckle, I felt like I played a part in killing him. Demons continued to haunt him right until the end. One of those demons was me. But the master demon was still running around out there, no longer pregnant.

After I was let out of jail, Chloe invited me to her gorgeous apartment on West Highland Drive, overlooking the Space Needle. It had become my home away from home, pre-prison.

It was a drizzly evening, which in Seattle is just called evening. I was glad to get out of the rain.

After a delicious meal delivered by special courier from a fancy downtown restaurant, she decided it was time to break the other half of the happy news to me -- the "trustable source," the "new friend of hers," was her hot new boyfriend. She was in love.

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

One nice thing she said to me as I was putting on my raincoat was that she would always remember me fondly.

She even gave me a take out bag for the road. I enjoyed the leftovers. In my mind I call it the last supper.

The game was still being played

The day after I walked out of her apartment I turned twenty-six years old.

I woke up and looked in the mirror. I tried to see the star birthmark behind my ear but it wasn't a good angle.

I tried to remember myself as a child, but I had to resort to looking at some online photos my mom had uploaded before she died.

Since weed had been legalized in the state of Washington, I decided to get very high. Very high.

Then I sang myself happy birthday a few times. Chloe was right -- I could never have been the lead singer for Qnqkst.

Suddenly I wondered how Scarlet and her baby were doing.

A hard rain streamed down outside my window. It reminded me of the sound of headphone static. It made me feel a bit claustrophobic. Actually, the claustrophobia was not from the rain, or realizing how small my apartment was -- about the size of a prison cell. No. The claustrophobia was from my heart being closed.

Heartlessness was closing in all around me.

It was as if I was back in jail, right here in my apartment. It was suddenly hard to accept that this was what my life had turned out to be. Twenty-six wasted years.

Maybe it was PTSD.

Or OCD from the THC.

Or binge watching PBS.

Or realizing I was not going to meet my Supergirl.

Life suddenly felt very short, going by way too quickly.
Meanwhile, I was trapped inside a game of abbreviations.
Now trying to go AWOL --trying to escape... me.

Then came the improvised alliterations that I began to
mumble out loud:

Fun without a future.
Consciousness without a conscience.
Mangled by a maniacal manipulator.
Sauna seduction succeeds; fate framed.
Humans suck -- hide! Screwed.
Help! Avalanche. Heart apnea.
Someday saved by Saint Bernard.

Suddenly I decided I wanted a dog.
That thought turned into a decisive determination.
I put on my raincoat, stoned out of my mind, and
walked several blocks in a downpour to Wally's -- a pet shop
on Wallingford Avenue.

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

Each dog looked desperate. Kind of like me. Their eyes
killed me. Just like my eyes killed me looking at myself in
the mirror this morning on my birthday.

I asked the cashier how much it would cost to take care
of one of the free dogs. 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 angry and calling me cheap. Or

selfish. I was too high to translate the woofs accurately. Or maybe I was too paranoid to feel the love they were barking at me as I left near tears.

On my way home I noticed a poster, soaking wet in the rain. It was stapled onto the temporary black plastic 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. None had been taken.

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 voicemail.

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

I could hear Mazey barking in the background during the message. The woman's voice, drowned out by the barking, sounded warm, honest. Mazey also sounded warm and honest, barking in a friendly unaggressive kind of way. I really liked Mazey, I suddenly decided.

A few minutes later my phone rang. Was it her? Them?

I was slightly disappointed to hear the voice of 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 Chloe's Facebook page. She's hoping you have a great day. I think she and I are 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 important 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 but he said you can't tell anyone else about it. It's apparently some secret work these guys are doing. Maybe it's something they're trying to patent. They need someone they can trust. And they only want one guy. And a serious commitment. Sounds like a movie script, right? Not exactly sure what they would pay. But I heard it could be six figures..."

"Six?"

"Want the number, or are you good just chillin' at home?"

"Sure. Text it to me."

"No. Just write it down. Call right away. Mention my friend's name, Buck Dover."

"Buck Dover?"

"Yep. Here's the number...."

Still very stoned, I nonetheless followed Tim's advice and called right away. It was my birthday, and I kept thinking something lucky and good was bound to happen.

"Hello, Black Knight, Adrienne speaking."

"Yo Adrienne, Buck 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 obvious name for a coder, I won't. But bring I.D."

"Well before I interview, what is this job about?"

"Where were you last employed?"

"Cyber-Shield."

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

"Yes."

"Coding?"

"Yes. That's what I do."

"Why aren't you still working there?"

"If I answer that question you won't hire me."

That was met with an eerie silence.

"Do you feel any loyalty to them?"

"Honestly, no."

"Can you come for an interview at 8 o'clock tonight?"

"Tonight? Well... fine, I guess. But what is...?"

"Don't guess. Yes or no."

"Yes."

"One last thing. Do you hate dogs?"

"Do I, uh, no, I don't hate dogs. In fact..."

"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?"

"No, but..."

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 picked up my guitar, then immediately put it down. I repeated this a few times. Then I took a nap.

At 7 o'clock, 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 front windows.

I walked up the stairs to the front door, rang the round black buzzer and waited. I saw someone approaching through the opaque window.

When the door opened I was a little unnerved. 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.

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

"Uh, no...."

"Good."

He furled his eyebrows, which, loosely translated, meant I was making a bad first impression. Then I followed him up a long dark flight of stairs.

When I was a kid I used to read books about programming, and play games like Guitar Hero. I also learned to play actual guitar by signing up with an online instructor for ten dollars a month. But I would never play for anyone until I met Scarlet and we started Qnqkst.

Spending any time outside in the real world was a non-starter. I would communicate with friends -- most of whom I didn't know very well -- through group texts, Snapchat and Instagram. Facebook was also still a thing back then.

One night, I accompanied Scarlet to a recording studio that had a Pro Tools rig. A few hours into the session I tried to help the engineer fix a glitch. Scarlet sat there with her bass, waiting for us to figure out what was wrong, but we failed to find the problem. When the session got cancelled Scarlet and I decided to go out to dinner.

After sharing a mediocre meal nowhere near worth the money, we were walking together down University Avenue and I happened to mention that during my twenty years of life on earth I had yet to actually feel any 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 had been walking a few feet behind us and overheard me. For some reason, what I said bothered him.

We were waiting for a light to change when he tapped me on the shoulder, "So 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 from ten feet back?"

He was very tattooed. Shaved head. He had an accent that I thought sounded like he might have been from Boston.

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 from across the street. They grabbed both of his arms. One of them screamed, "Hey, you stupid A-Hole, whaddaya doin', huh? You're gonna get us so *fucked up*."

He was still staring at me with laser-like hate, not backing down. All he wanted to do was punch me in the face. But they surrounded him and started to drag him away. His feet were sliding and scraping against the ground as he tried to escape their grasp.

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 screamed, "I'm coming after you." He began running towards me. He broke through the wall of peers trying to hold him back.

But just at that moment 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 screamed, freaked out, and scattered into the shadows, fearing they might somehow be blamed if the police showed up. No amount of explaining would do. The car backed up and then sped away.

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, out of breath.

I looked back behind me. "Yeah. Like I was saying, 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."

"Maybe you're a reverse cyborg," she said seriously.

"It's like, you don't have any powers yourself, but you have this invisible protection that keeps making everything work out for you."

She was serious.

Then she kissed me. It was the most passionate kiss of my entire life. I let down my invisible protection shield and kissed her back. And nothing bad happened -- even when my shield was down. That's when I fell in love with her.

When I woke up next to her the following morning there was no rain falling; birds were chirping out her apartment window.

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 anyone before or since.

"Scarlet?"

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

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

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

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

Rottweilers, by the way, used to pull carts of butcher's meat through small towns in nineteenth century 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 someone Bob loved, you were pretty much dead, unless you had a gun. But he would not have gone down without a fight, even if he was full of bullets.

I guess my theory about dog consciousness didn't hold true in all cases.

Adrienne and Max's initial round of questions focused on my specific knowledge -- did I know any of the master codes 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, arrested for hacking, and one pot arrest long ago, plus they found 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 before.

Max shook his head and looked at Adrienne. "I think we've found the perfect candidate."

Realizing I had just passed the interview and was possibly being offered a high paying job, 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."

"Why?"

"We want you to alter the code and add a back door."

"Why?"

"Look, we're white-hat hackers man, 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 well from a competitor of theirs. But it will also force Cyber-Shield to fix hackable code. Right? They will thank us for it in the end. They think no one can do it, but we think we can, with just a little help, hopefully from you."

I hesitated.

"It's not all about the money either."

"*Really?*"

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

"Who would be paying me? And who would be paying you? And how much?"

"We'd be paying you. We can't tell you any more than that. But, here's the catch. We can only pay you on a contingency basis. If you find anything that's helpful to us we'll pay you twenty-thousand dollars for each missing piece of information you find. Up to three-hundred-

thousand dollars for as many as fifteen missing pieces. That's all we need. Fifteen pieces."

"We're talking about a *lot* of money," Adrienne emphasized. Her raven hair and skinny frame caused me no immediate concern. But her raven eyes gave me pause. They were sunken and brooding. I wondered if she'd eaten anything at all in the past month.

Max, whose subtle limp, slit-shaped eyes, and curly dark hair reminded me of a very bad comedian I once saw at Laughs Comedy Club a few years back, added, "And to be honest with you, if you don't succeed, you will get nothing, because we will get nothing. But if you help us, you get paid on the spot, *in cash*."

Bob barked at the word *cash*. His bark sounded like someone screaming *cash* without the c, in an echo chamber.

"*And*," Max added, with his long blue shirt noticeably missing a top button, "any time you want to quit, you can quit. We'll find what we need eventually, with or without you."

Adrienne then opened up a safe and pulled out wads of hundreds. A lot more bills were left behind in the safe. This was legit. They had the money.

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

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

I squinted at them again. "Then why work in a dungeon, going undercover like this?"

Something felt a little off, but I was stoned and out of work.

"We haven't been paid yet, that's why! That money isn't for us. It's for you, or someone who can help us. We get paid later. If we succeed. Plus, we'd rather spend the advanced money given to us on computers, like these," he pointed to six laptops glowing with various screen savers scattered around the room. Adrienne said, "Why rent some apartment in Green Lake just so we can piss in a renovated marble bathroom? We'd rather spend the money on all this." Her hand swept across the landscape of colored lights coming from the PCs.

This all 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 show anyone code, or the job will quickly end. Understood?"

I started to love this idea, the challenge of it, like 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, Jay Jensen would have a whole lot more to worry about than embarrassment, 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 understood, they loved offense, but didn't focus nearly as much on defense. Maybe winning this game would prove to them how vulnerable they really are, and I'd be considered a true patriot for showing them the flaws in their code without doing any real harm.

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

A loud knocking suddenly came from downstairs. Max and Adrienne looked at each other with concern.

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

Bob barked once in a muffled tone.

Suddenly the door exploded open. A dozen men, with guns drawn ascended 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 mid-bark as Bob fell sideways to the floor, legs straight out, ears pinned back. He never had time to break his fall.

It was just like bark, bark, bark. . . *BARK! BARK!, BA. . .* 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 corporate espionage and possible treason.

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.

Less specifically, not many people could put anything past Jay Jensen. He had eyes and ears everywhere. He was tipped off to the Black Knight conspiracy months ahead of time. He alerted the F.B.I., and they were simply waiting for the right time to move in.

Another fun fact was, the ever-clever Jay Jensen, with tons of money to burn, but without the desire to buy a private island or a sports team as a pleasant distraction -- and *still* pissed off thinking that I'd gotten Chloe pregnant -- paid Tim Toliver a hundred thousand dollars in cash to set me up the night of the F.B.I. raid as a co-conspirator. He loved the idea of hacking the hacker, beating me at my own game.

Of course, I did realize all of this was my fault. I was the one who said I would agree to try to hack into Cyber-Shield. Our conversation had been caught on tape by the F.B.I., who easily broke into the apartment a few hours before I got there, when Max and Adrienne and Bob had

walked to Burger King for dinner. They bugged the place in less than fifteen minutes, and didn't even disturb the paper napkin Max had crumpled up and thrown off his desk after eating an Egg McMuffin breakfast.

When Jay Jensen heard the recording of what I said about him, and what I intended to do to help them screw Cyber-Shield over, 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 father's company, her future nest egg, so I was now *persona non grata* in the Jensen family.

I started out that day, my twenty-sixth birthday, just wanting a dog.

But no dog on the planet, including a heavily tranquilized Bob, would bother giving a rat's ass about my current fate now.

I mean, I walked out of Wally's Pet Shop without a dog simply because it would have cost me too much money to keep it alive. How heartless was that?

Plus, the woman selling the "A Mazing Dog, Mazey" never called me back. Maybe she'd run a background check on me and decided I wasn't worthy of her dog.

All in all, this was the crappiest birthday of my entire life. . . . Or so I thought.

As it turned out, Jonathan Peanuckle did *not* commit suicide.

Someone had poisoned Peanuckle in his penthouse at the very pinnacle of his pathetic career.

To understand who, how, and why, we must go back to the intrepid chief detective, the Senior Investigating Officer of the case -- who was subsequently secretly hired by Jay Jensen for an ungodly amount of money, and was now Chloe's new boyfriend. His name was Ronald Bowie.

Why am I getting into the weeds about all this Peanuckle crap? Wasn't I off the hook and merrily screwing up my life in a totally different way? Well, not quite.

It turns out Bowie began to suspect that Peanuckle may have been murdered even before he declared it a suicide. He also had an idea who was behind it. Yet he decided not to reveal it to anyone, because he would be snitching on one of the most powerful men in the state of Washington.

Why would billionaire Jay Jensen murder his chief marketing strategist and hand-picked suitor for his crazy spoiled manipulative daughter?

Because he found out that Jonathan Peanuckle was a corporate spy. In fact, Peanuckle was the man behind Black Knight.

Peanuckle's motive 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 found out about Peanuckle's intention, he decided to exact revenge.

This is where my bad luck once again turned to good luck.

Because it was Detective Bowie -- the same detective who released me from being a suspect in the Peanuckle investigation by declaring it a suicide -- who convinced Jay Jensen not to prosecute me in the Black Knight case.

Why? Two reasons.

The first reason was that his paramour, Chloe, told him that even though she was pissed at me, I was just a harmless nerd stumbling around in a game I had no idea how to play, not to mention win. She was done with me. My part in the game was over. Let him be.

But the main reason Bowie suggested my release was far more strategic. He sat Jensen down one day and told him that it would not be wise to get me involved in the Vulture Security trial, because I would inevitably be asked about Jonathan Peanuckle, and what happened. And I might say, I don't know, but I *don't* think it was a suicide. And if a jury became convinced that I had nothing to do with it, the question would be, if Peanuckle *was* murdered, and it wasn't the kid, who did it?

Jensen said, "So?"

"So, that could become a Pandora's Box, for you."

Jensen stiffened.

"Excuse me?"

"Jay, (Bowie suddenly felt free to call Jensen by his first name, because a shift in power was now occurring) do you want me to spell it out? Peanuckle's case was determined to

be a suicide. By me. For you.... I don't think you want to risk accidentally hanging yourself while you're trying to hang someone else. Understand?"

The word *hang* hung in the air like car exhaust on a windless day. Because Jensen now *knew* that Bowie knew that Peanuckle was actually murdered. And that Jensen was involved.

This put their relationship on a whole new level. It was suddenly in a state of perfect equipoise.

The end result of this suddenly equal relationship was two-fold:

Bowie would quit the police force, and make a fortune as Jensen's private security guard, and also get to have Chole as a bonus.

While Jensen would suddenly be too afraid to have Bowie cross him in any way, because it could end in Steve Jensen's murder conviction.

So in the end, I was declared innocent of hacking Cyber-Shield and the U.S. government, and set free.

After my release, I decided I needed to start a new life in a new place.

My plan was to move south, to California. My simple dream was to find a good job, a girlfriend who could teach me how to surf, and find some semblance of peace. I didn't need a Supergirl. I would have been happy settling for a girl that didn't see me as a chess piece in her game.

But a week before I planned to take a bus to Palo Alto to look for a job, Chloe called crying, begging me to come to her apartment. It was urgent.

Apparently, ex-Senior Investigative Officer Ronald Bowie had cheated on her, and when she found out, she hit him in the face with a very expensive Greek vase from the Minoan Era.

He needed stitches in three places -- cheek, chin, and forehead -- but it left the priceless ancient vase in irreparable condition. This would have made the Minoans very sad. And Chloe's father was not going to be particularly thrilled about it either, since the cost of the vase was about the same price as he paid for his new Maserati. And trying to keep Bowie from snitching after being stitched up might even cost him more.

I tried to comfort Chloe by literally and figuratively trying to pick up the pieces. Always one to be overly grateful for small acts of kindness, she suggested that maybe we should get back together. A brand new start! But I was in no mood to take over where Bowie had left off. I told her I

needed to think about it. In fact, first and foremost, my face needed to think about it.

What I didn't say aloud was that both me and my face were a hard no.

I heeded the signs the Minoan gods were giving me, past and present, and agreed with them that it would be best if Chloe became a fleeting memory, erased from my consciousness to the fullest extent possible, even before the final comma was inserted in my very long, and critically important thought-sentence.

The gods rewarded me for my abiding faith in them, despite my questionable literary skills:

As soon as I arrived home, I received a phone call from the only person on earth I would ever care to see again.

She said she needed to meet with me right away. It was urgent.

So I agreed to rendezvous with her at a café downtown.

Scarlet walked into the café looking as beautiful as ever. There's something haunting, devastatingly gorgeous, and excruciatingly heart-wrenching about an ex-girlfriend that comes to meet you wearing an old flannel shirt you forgot to take back when you broke up.

Beneath my flannel shirt, she wore a white T-shirt that said, Nirvana, in script.

Was this flannel outerwear supposed to be a subliminal message meant to give me hope of some kind of *rapprochement*? Or was it a shirt she was about to give back to me because it was seldom worn, and taking up room in the far end of her closet? Did Hank see it and get jealous? What meaning did the shirt underneath it have, if not to imply that she had a far sexier sleeveless shirt to wear once she returned mine? Chloe had made me quite wary, weary and cynical, and had me overthinking everything. Even old flannel shirts could end up having negative consequences.

She sat down next to me and took the menu out of my hand. She seemed distressed. "We need to talk."

I said, "Okay, but can I order first? I haven't eaten all day."

"No."

"No?"

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

"Qnqkst got a record deal, but I've been kicked out of the band."

She shook her head. "You haven't changed."

"How would you know that?" I tried to take back the menu, but she moved it further away and put it face down.

"Cody, I miscalculated," she said.

"About what?"

"About the baby."

"*Your* baby?"

"Yes, what other baby could I possibly be talking about?"

"That's a long story you don't need to hear."

"*My* baby, of course! But Cody, it's also *our* baby. *Your* baby. You were the one who got me pregnant, not Hank."

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

"Her name is Isabelle. She's three."

"But Hank and you..."

"Of course, I thought Hank was the father. We got married while I was still pregnant with her because I thought he was the father. And, *because* I was pregnant. But then, a year ago, he told me he wanted to have another child. He hoped it would save our marriage, because, well, things were not going well. We both knew it. Anyway, I was hesitant, but I agreed for Isabelle's sake, that we needed to stay together. She could have a sibling. So we tried, but we couldn't. So we went to a doctor and found out he was infertile, and had *always* been. Some genetic thing. He got so upset when he realized Isabelle wasn't his daughter, that he left me."

"He left you because of *that?*"

She nodded. "Mostly."

"But he knew you were with me before him. It's not like you cheated on him."

"Right. That's true. But I did cheat. I cheated on the guy I loved first. And for that I will never forgive myself."

I put my hands over my eyes. Was it possible she was telling the truth? If this was Chloe talking, she would be lying. There would be some catch.

Her voice lowered, "Actually, I'm not being completely truthful."

I braced myself. I realized I was holding my breath. Here it comes....

"Because, long before Hank was even tested, I realized you were the father. I just didn't have the heart to tell him."

"How could you have known that?"

"I could tell. Look Cody, Isabelle deserves to meet her real father. She's a really wonderful little girl. You'd love her. And she'd love you, I know she would. Because she would have loved the you I knew three years ago, and I can see you haven't changed."

Haven't changed? Not true. I mistrusted everyone and everything now. Even her. For instance, maybe Hank left her for some other reason, so she came up with this new plan -- to tell me I was the father, so that her daughter would still think she *had* a father, and Scarlet wouldn't have to raise her alone.

If this was Chloe sitting here, this would just seem like normal problem solving to her. An easy solution. She had trained me to look for trap doors.

"At least consider meeting her," she whispered, becoming teary-eyed.

"I will. I will consider it. I will consider all of this in great detail, but I need to think."

Scarlet sensed my skepticism. "I can prove that she's your child, Cody."

"How's that?"

"She has a little birthmark. It's just below the back of her right ear. It looks like a little star."

She reached under my ear and stroked my neck with the back of her index finger, "It looks just like yours, but smaller."

I felt a sudden shiver. It was as if some internal question mark had frozen itself into an exclamation point. The timeline of when Scarlet got pregnant, and the birthmark behind the ear, I mean, who could set that kind of thing up as a trick?

She showed me photos of Isabelle on her iPhone. One photo showed Scarlet's hand pulling Isabelle's soft blonde hair back just above her ear. The birthmark was there, in the same spot mine was.

"Cody, I need to tell you something else."

"There's *more*? My God, Scarlet..."

"Yes. More. If I had known it was you who'd gotten me pregnant back then, I just want to tell you honestly, I would have been happy. Happier even than thinking it was Hank, for a lot of reasons. That might not matter to you. But I wanted you to know... even if you can't forgive me."

The video game that was always playing in my head -- the one where nothing really happened to me in real life, everything was a game, a problem presented with a hidden solution I had to discover; the game where I wouldn't really *experience* my experiences, but instead I'd just randomly, irreverently continue to move through gates and tunnels just to see what was there -- suddenly *crashed*. The screen went

dark. The plug was pulled. And I found myself here - real. My mind stopped thinking for a long second, my world froze. And then the electricity flashed back on.

I looked around, and all I knew was that half a billion leaves ago I kind of checked out, on purpose, to save myself, and I started playing this game in my head. And I didn't stop, because the game never stopped.

But the game was over now. It just... ended. Just like that. There were no more levels to reach. In the end, I just lost a bunch of precious time. I hadn't won anything.... Or had I?

I warned myself not to get trapped and tricked again. I knew my guard was down now. I had no powers on this level, not with her here.

I looked at Scarlet's face and I started to remember all the things I'd hidden from myself, about us. I hadn't wanted the memories to weaken me, haunt me.... All those times we spent together when I felt invincible, connected, open to everything.

"Well, actually, there is this girl," I said.

"Oh."

"Yeah. She's actually Jay Jensen's daughter. Her name is Chloe."

"Wow, Jay Jensen's daughter! I see."

"And, in every imaginable way..."

Scarlet nodded, as if she knew what was coming.

"... she... can't even get to the first level of you, Scarlet. On any dimension. In any universe."

"Really?" Her eyes brightened and she leaned forward.

"And, honestly, I kind of hate her."

"Um, okay?" Scarlet laughed. I laughed too.

It was the first full laugh I'd laughed in a long very time. It was a laugh unburdened, unimprisoned, by what might happen next.

Scarlet touched my hand, then gave me the menu. "Are you still hungry?" she asked quietly.

I looked at her, at this simple act of kindness, and felt a thin wall of psychogenic glass, as thin as a computer screen, melt down into pure mist. This was real. The café was real. Scarlet was real. And Isabelle...

Scarlet opened the menu for me. My cheeks became flushed. I wasn't used to reasonless acts of caring.

I looked at the photo of Isabelle's birthmark again. One last wave of fear came over me. "You didn't photoshop this, right?"

She laughed, "No! I only photoshop myself. Compared to the photo I have wrinkles under my eyes now... see? The proof will be obvious when you meet her, Cody. Come whenever you want."

I knew what I had to do next.

"Scarlet, I want you to tell Isabelle something for me before I meet her. Even if she doesn't understand a word of it, at least *you* will. But I want you both to know... the truth. But it's a long story, and it's complicated."

"Wait," Scarlet said. She turned on the voice message app, then put her phone down in front of me. It was such a perfectly nerdy thing to do.

"Okay, so, Isabelle, hi.... My name is Cody. A long time ago, a few months before you were born, I assumed I wasn't your father. Years later, I was asked to say I *was* a father, but it was someone else's child. And I knew the truth back then, but I agreed to go along with it. Which was really stupid of me. But I guess the truth is, I agreed because I didn't care.

"Since then, I've been lied to. I've been fired. I've been put in jail for murder. I've been accused of espionage and treason. But all that time I still had one thing going for me -- I was innocent. Maybe too innocent. But somehow, I kept escaping any real danger, kind of like magic. Things have just always worked out okay, for reasons I don't totally understand. I've been really lucky that way, for as long as I can remember. Ask your Mom, she knows. She'll tell you that very strange story someday.

"But here's the thing, even after I was set free from all that craziness, and went back to my old life, I couldn't find any real connection to the outside world. I felt like a piece of code searching for some virtual universe where I would somehow be indispensable. Or at least part of something bigger. But I never felt that. I really never have.

"But now, if you truly are my daughter, Isabelle, that means you are the most connected, indispensable thing that's ever happened to me. By genetic code, we're literally a game called 'us....' The game is very very real. It will be hard sometimes."

I stopped. I didn't know what else to say.

Scarlet moved closer to me and touched my arm. "Keep going," she whispered.

"Okay, so, I guess if we're an *us*, Isabelle, we should start to hang out together sometime, if you want to. I can visit you. And I can teach you how to code someday if you want. And play guitar. Maybe some weekends you could stay with me. Maybe we could even get a dog together, if you like dogs. I really like dogs. Would you want to do that?"

I couldn't say another word. Because for one wild true moment, something uncontrollable happened to me. I experienced the emotional truth. No games.

Scarlet turned off the voice message and began scrolling through her photos again until she found the picture she was searching for --

"We already have a dog, Cody. See?"

I looked at a big friendly dog sitting on Isabelle's lap. She was protecting her, but at the same time almost knocking her over.

She said, "I thought I'd have to give her away after Hank left, because I didn't think I could afford to keep her anymore. But Isabelle cried and cried and begged me to let her stay, so we stopped answering the ads I'd put up around town. She's the sweetest, most amazing dog in the world. Her name is Mazey."

Coincidences exist.

Messages from the gods also exist.

They are both part of the video game I eventually finished, then sold to a big gaming company for much more money than I even thought was reasonable.

But I'm also playing a new game now. It started about thirty-million leaves ago. It's a game where life offers you multiple chances to get things right. And love becomes a shape-shifter of time.

It's like this cyborg with all these incredible powers. Sometimes it informs us. Sometimes it forms us. Sometimes it steals from us everything we thought we had, or wanted. And, sometimes even that is a good thing. You never know until the game ends, at the end of everything.

The thing is, when you reach the highest levels, if you get lucky, there's this *feeling* you get. That's all. It's just a feeling. There's no golden key. No computer-generated song that plays. No one gives you anything for winning. But the feeling is amazing.

It's a feeling I hope you get to experience often, Isabelle. You'll want to remember it for the rest of your life.

The End
~ GM