

One Wild True Moment

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

First of all, sleeping with Chloe was a coincidence. I'd known her since my freshman year at Lakeside School in Seattle. But we were just friends, and I hadn't seen her in years. By the time I was hired to work for Cyber-Shield, Chloe 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.

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, or even arrested, that was just part of the game as well. Sometimes when hackers got out of jail 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. I didn't get arrested, but when I hacked into Cyber-Shield's corporate executives' passwords they immediately offered me a job for more money than even I thought reasonable.

Anyway, on this particular 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 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 high school."

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

"The ass with a wig."

"Exactly! I forgot we used to call him that!"

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 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 your CEO?"

"Jay Jensen? I saw him once at a conference and he waved at me, I think. . . . But why are *you* here?"

"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 *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 in 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 my shoulders towards her until we were facing 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, apparently to shield herself from the wind.

Instead of going to lunch she drove me to her private gym. Her father had bought the place for her and her mom before the divorce.

After our workout she was dripping with sweat but when she came close to me she still smelled fresh and clean. I have no idea how.

She invited me to take a sauna and stripped down to her skimpy underclothes. 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 year or two but I'll take your word for it."

She laid back on the 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, but I 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.

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. When he saw she wasn't wearing the ring he said he'd settle for just being engaged. She told him she would think about it. I guess spending time with me in the sauna was one 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 was smitten in a creeped-out kind of way. She was so beautiful, lying back on the hot wooden bench with her eyes

closed. 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, 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 to 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 try 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 to find a girlfriend in Seattle after I graduated high school.

Then, by chance, I met Scarlet at a music concert. We went there to see a local grunge band that came up with the unique idea of trying to sound just like Nirvana. But they didn't. Amidst the deafening cacophony our eyes met.

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).

That 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 in the alphabet. The numbers came from counting separate groupings of very small freckles on Scarlet's back and

shoulders. Her back was as beautiful as her face. I mean that as a compliment.

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

The funny part was, 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 shoulder. That's how she literally became the face of the band. She always had this blazing cold sexy look in her eyes when we made flyers. In real life though, she wasn't cold, or blazing.

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 everyone had found better things to do, including Scarlet. Her better thing 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 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 for at least a billion leaves, when someone like Chloe comes along and says you can abandon your shift at work and just

go tripping off with her without being fired, it feels kind of stupid to say no and go back to counting leaves.

Chloe, on the other hand, had her own reasons to take me away from the Cyber-Fair. And becoming my friend, or girlfriend, had very little to do with it.

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?* Now I go tell my dad."

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

"Tell him that I'm not marrying that creep he introduced me to 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 a 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. I felt like I was going to pass out. Given the choice between being the fake father of Scarlet's baby, or the fake father of Chloe's baby I would have chosen Scarlet's baby in a heartbeat.

"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 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, obviously for peeps who claim to be pro-life -- I mean, I'm a life too! But besides that, I actually want the baby. I just don't want Jonathan to be the father."

"It's a little late for that, don't you think?"

"Not necessarily."

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

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

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 -- greed, lust, fear, imagination, morals in general. I mean, the barriers to logic are endless. In fact, you could build a case that what humans experience isn't really *consciousness* at all.

Monkeys have some measurable amount of 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 we do all this stuff for them. 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.

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 give the dog a pat once in a while, that dog would get extremely attached and give double the love back to that guy every day.

Let's even say other people fed the dog, and walked the dog, and the only thing this guy did was play with the dog

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

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 intrepid 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 the world.

Someday maybe we'll figure out how to code love itself. Maybe we'll be able to absorb the code into our brain by using electrodes as a conduit, or maybe we'll become half human, half computer. And if we do, I think I know who the better half will be.

Anyway, Chloe told me 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, she thought the odds were very high that 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 wanted him to react. Besides he wasn't the vindictive type. He was a pushover. Probably wouldn't even ask for his ring back.

His name was Jonathan Peanuckle, LOL.

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

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, "Right after our steamy little sauna I had your DNA taken from my underclothes, and from, well, what's underneath my underclothes. So we're good!"

"We're good?"

"Well, colloquially speaking, we're good. And after I speak to my dad you'll be *great*. He might even give you a promotion."

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 broken into her private world and impregnated her, I was summoned to his office.

Obviously this was not a coincidence. 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 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 to intimidate people, and in my case it was certainly having the intended effect.

"Cody Masterson." He said my name, but 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 afford it.

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

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

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

"Oh, uh, great. How many daughters do you. . ."

"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.

"Did you know Chloe is pregnant?"

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

"Were you shocked?"

"I was indeed shocked, sir. 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 shiny black shoes. They kind of looked like miniature black blimps.

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 the alpha dog look. It doesn't say, "I'm celebrating success by getting stinking drunk," 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 multiplied.

For some reason I also realized the word *lied* is in multiplied.

I tried to agree with Mr. Jensen's assessment, "I understand, sir. Chloe told me Mr. Peanuckle has been around since the inception. . . of the company." Everything I said was coming out wrong.

"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.

"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 and honest people.

"Sir, that decision would make sense *if*. . . I mean, I guess I deserve to be fired just for being with. . ."

"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 extra month's pay. That should somewhat appease Chloe. But that's the end of my patience."

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

"Fuck you," Jonathan hissed.

I took that as my cue to slink out of the office. But before I left I muttered, "Nice to meet you, LOL."

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.

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

Honestly, I wanted all of those things. And she didn't mind spending time with a guy she could trust to keep a secret.

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

A symbiosis created by two neophyte parasites.

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

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 shiny yellow American Eagle gold coins, his Rolex watch, his Bitcoins, his iPhone 11, and his MacBook Pro, were all untouched. No fingerprints were on the body, or on the door handles of his apartment. Nothing was disturbed. There was no sign of forced entry, so the police immediately assumed it was someone who knew Jonathan and held a grudge.

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

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

When the police hauled me in for questioning at Jay Jensen's request, I guess 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 Jay and Chloe Jensen agreed with the police detective's suspicion that I was the killer. The interrogation went something like this:

"Where were you the night of the murder?"

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

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

"Then I guess I was at home. 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, 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, I maybe you need one."

"Okay, well, coming from an expert like you. . ."

"*Shut up, kid!*"

"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 didn't even know where he lived!"

"Did Chloe know where he lived?"

"Yes, 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 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. . ."

"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."

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 talks about.

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, "We'll be right back."

When no one came right back Chloe offered to try to get me out of detention. She also said I shouldn't have done it. Was it jealousy? Was I jealous that Jonathan had slept with her before me, and that it was really his child? Or was I angry about losing my job? She couldn't understand how I could actually *poison* someone.

"*Are you serious?* You're the one who set me up! 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 were home working on your stupid game, remember? You said you were coding the next level up, but then you got frustrated and played a Kurt Cobain song on your guitar. You said you honestly believed he could have ripped off the chorus from a song your friend Scarlet wrote for your stupid band! Remember?"

"And as far as Jonathan's address, Cody, you knew he lived in the Harbor Steps apartments because when we happened to drive by it the day before the murder 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 still owed me big-time and promised to get me out as soon as she could.

But the next morning I was literally charged with the murder of Jonathan Peanuckle, and prison was now my new temporary home.

Days past. I sat for hours in the corner of my cell trying to figure out who actually 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. She didn't want him to even touch her, with those long thin geeky fingers of his. The only thing they were good for, she said, was picking up pieces of sushi and playing Chopsticks on the piano.

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 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 Cafe. 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 slobbering around on my guitar for an hour, ended up getting stoned and watching old Netflix episodes of *Supergirl*.

I remembered 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 she was, at the very least, framing me. I had been hacked again by a master hacker. She was hacking into a game I didn't even know I was playing before now.

The game was called Deathtrap.

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." She was "without child."

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

Really? A miscarriage? Or did she go to Planned Parenthood because the new plan was not to be a parent?

The puzzle pieces were falling together for her.

She was now free of motherhood.

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

And free of the possibility of someone like Jonathan 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, she *could* have done that.

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" -- news that I'd be very very happy about. She was half right.

The happy news came on a glorious 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 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, or legally 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.

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

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, not unlike most Seattle evenings. 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 some more news to me. The "trustable source," the "new friend of hers," was her 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 love me.

Or, maybe she said that 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 looked at her one last time, and said, "Yeah, you too."

The day after I walked out of her apartment I turned twenty-six years old. Since weed had been legalized in the state of Washington I got very high. In fact, even if it was illegal I would have gotten very high. I mean, it's not like anything had really changed. I sang myself happy birthday a few times while looking in the mirror naked and realized I couldn't have been the lead singer for Qnqkst either. Suddenly I wondered how Scarlet and her baby were doing.

Rain streamed down outside my window, reminding me of the sound of headphone static. It made me feel claustrophobic. My heart was closed tight. I was back in jail, here in my apartment. Maybe it was PTSD. Or OCD from the THC. Life suddenly felt very short, going by way too quickly while I was trapped inside a game of abbreviations. Trying to escape. Then came the improvised alliterations I began to mumble out loud:

Fun without a future.

Consciousness without conscience.

Suddenly I decided I wanted a dog.

That thought turned into 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.

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 selfish coward. I was too high to translate the woofs accurately.

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:

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

The phone number was typed on tabs hanging from the bottom of the poster like miniature walrus teeth.

I pulled a tab off and put it in my pocket.

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

"Hello, if you're calling about 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, almost sounded familiar. Warm. Honest. Mazey also sounded warm and honest in my present state of mind.

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

"Cody, dude. I'm so glad you're out of the tank. Happy birthday by the way, I saw it on Chloe's Facebook page. She's hoping you have a great day. I think we're the last two people under thirty that are still on Facebook. . . . But that's not why I'm calling. Listen, I have this weird emo friend who's an insanely talented hacker. He said he knows a company looking for a great coder for some weird project and I thought of you, since you're currently the only coder I know who's out of work. He gave me a phone number for you to call but said not to tell anyone else about it. It's apparently some secret venture these guys are into. They need someone they can trust. And they only need one guy. Sounds like a movie script, right? Not exactly sure what they would pay. But I heard it could be six figures. Want the number?"

"Sure. Mention my friend's name, Buck Dover."

"Buck Dover?"

"You got it. Here's the number. . ."

Still very stoned, I called right away. It was my birthday, and I kept thinking something lucky 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 bullshit name for a coder, I won't."

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

"Where were you last employed."

"Cyber-Shield."

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

"Yes."

"Coding?"

"Yes. 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."

"Don't guess. Yes or no."

"Yes."

"One last thing. Do you hate dogs?"

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

"Good. Bob smells hate."

"Bob?"

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

"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 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 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. 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.

"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 played 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 started Qnqkst.

Spending time outside was a non-starter unless my parents weren't home and I needed to walk to the store for food.

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, we were walking together down University Avenue and I happened to mention that during my twenty years on earth I had yet to feel any kind of physical pain. I'd never been sick or injured. I never went out and did anything dangerous. Never played sports. All I did was sit home and code. I really didn't even know what physical pain *felt* like.

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

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

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

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

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

He said, "Yeah, how private was it if I fuckin' overheard it?"

He was very tattooed. He looked like he was part of a motorcycle gang. But he had an accent that 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. They grabbed both of his arms. One of them screamed, "Hey, stupid, whaddaya doin', huh? You're gonna get us so *fucked up*."

He was still staring at me, not backing down. All he wanted to do was punch me 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, 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 into the shadows, 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 in the direction we had come from until we got back to the restaurant where we had eaten dinner.

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

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

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

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.

"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 literally, not actually.

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

Rottweilers, by the way, used to pull carts of butcher's meat through small towns 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 someone Bob loved you were pretty much dead, unless you had a gun. In which case, Bob would be dead. But he would not have gone down without a fight, even if he was full of bullets. I guess my theory about dog consciousness didn't hold true in all cases.

Adrienne and Max's initial round of questions during my interview focused on my specific knowledge of code, specifically 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, one pot arrest long ago, and a list of all my girlfriends, a total of two -- Scarlet, and then Chloe Jensen. When Max saw Chloe's name he said, "Wait a minute. Seriously?" He began laughing. Bob barked nervously, having never seen Max laugh 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."

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

"Yes."

"Why?"

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

"Why?"

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

"*Really?*"

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

"Which company would be paying you?"

"We can't tell you that. But we would pay you on a contingency fee basis. In other words, if you find anything that's helpful to us we'll pay you a lot of money on the spot, ten thousand dollars for each completed task. Up to two-hundred-thousand dollars. We will detail out the twenty things we need you to find before you start."

"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.

Max, whose subtle limp, slit-shaped eyes, and curly dark hair reminded me of a 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'll get paid, *in cash*."

Bob barked at the word *cash*. It 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."

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. But we can't say anything more about it."

I squinted at them. "Then why work in a dungeon, undercover?"

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

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

That made sense.

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

I started to love the idea, 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, 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 turn on a red light, I'd be considered a true patriot for showing them how vulnerable they are without doing any harm.

"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 suddenly came from downstairs. Max and Adrienne looked at each other with concern.

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

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

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

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

The barking stopped just before Bob fell sideways to the floor, legs straight out, ears pinned back. He never even 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.

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 that the ever-clever Jay Jensen, with tons of money to burn, but without a private island or a sports team to buy 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.

Of course, I realized all of this was mostly 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 when Max and Adrienne had walked to McDonalds for dinner a few hours before I came. They bugged the place in less than fifteen minutes.

When Jay Jensen heard the recording of what I said about him in the Black Knight meeting, and what I intended to do to help them, 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.

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. 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 owner of the ad selling "An A Mazing Dog, Mazey" never called me back. Maybe she'd run a background check on me.

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 apartment at the very pinnacle of his pathetic career.

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

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, who also now happened to be both his employer, and his girlfriend's father.

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

Because he found out 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. It was Detective Bowie -- the same detective that freed me from being a suspect in the Peanuckle murder when he declared it a suicide, the same guy who was hired by Jensen for an insane amount of money, and then became Chloe's new boyfriend -- who convinced Jay Jensen not to prosecute me in the Black Knight case.

He had three reasons.

The first reason was 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 win.

The second reason was that if it was ever discovered that Jensen paid off Tim Toliver, a Cyber-Shield employee, to set me up as a co-conspirator, that would not be good optics in front of a jury. Why risk it when they already had Vulture Security and its minions in a legal bear trap?

But the main reason Bowie suggested my release was more self-serving. He sat Jensen down and told him that it would not be wise to get me involved because I would inevitably be asked about my relationship with Jonathan Peanuckle in a deposition, which would inevitably bring up the circumstances surrounding Peanuckle's untimely death.

"The Peanuckle *suicide* case, Jay," (Bowie called Jensen by his first name now!) "should remain closed. Don't you think?"

The emphasis on the word *suicide* knocked Jensen for a loop.

Because Jensen suddenly *knew* that Bowie knew Peanuckle was murdered, And that Bowie was also insinuating ever so subtly that Jensen might have somehow been involved.

It was a moment in time that put their relationship in a state of perfect equipoise.

And once again, I was free.

After my release, I decided I needed to start a new life. My plan was to move to California. My simple dream was to find a good job, a girlfriend who could teach me how to surf, and some semblance of peace.

But this was not to be.

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 heroic vase in irreparable condition. This would have made the Minoans very sad. And her father was not going to be particularly thrilled either, since the cost of the vase was about the same price as his new Maserati.

I tried to comfort her by literally and figuratively trying to pick up the pieces. Chloe, always one to be overly grateful for small acts of kindness, suggested that we get back together. 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, my entire face needed to think about it.

I left her apartment in a state of limbo, because, skeptic that I am, I was doubtful Chloe and I could or should ever trust each other again, or should ever try to love each other again (or for that matter ever see each other again) so I therefore demanded a sign from the gods to prove me

wrong, rather than concluding the obvious, which was that Chloe was just a memory before a comma in a very long and horrible sentence we had written together.

As soon as I arrived home I received a phone call from a long-lost friend -- Scarlet.

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

I agreed to meet her at a cafe downtown.

Scarlet walked into the cafe looking as beautiful as ever. There's something heart-wrenchingly haunting about an ex-girlfriend that comes to meet you wearing an old flannel shirt you forgot to take back when you broke up.

Was this a subliminal message meant to give me hope of some kind of *rapprochement*? Or a piece of outerwear she was about to give back to me because it was just taking up room in her closet?

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

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

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

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

"No! You wish!"

"Okay, I give up." I tried to take back the menu, but she moved it further away.

"I miscalculated," she said.

"About what?"

"About the baby."

"*Your* baby?"

"Yes."

"Why? Is it not. . . your baby? I mean, how could that possibly. . ."

"Of course, it's my baby, Cody! But 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."

"But Hank. . . ."

"Of course, I thought Hank was the father. We even got married while I was still pregnant, as you know. Then a year ago he told me he wanted to have another child. We tried, but we couldn't. That's when we went to a doctor and found out he was infertile, and always had been. Some genetic thing. He got so upset when he realized Isabelle wasn't his real daughter, he left us."

"He left because of *that?*"

She nodded. "Mostly."

I put my hands over my eyes. I had to think this through.

"It's been a hard couple of weeks," she added.

Could she be lying?

Her voice lowered, "But actually, long before he was even tested, I realized you were the father. I just didn't have the heart to tell him. I mean, we'd already gotten married."

"How could you have known that?"

"Look Cody, all I'm saying is, she deserves to meet her real father. And I want you to know her too. She's a wonderful little girl. And, well, you're a pretty wonderful guy."

She thought I was *wonderful* now?

Skepticism once again reared its ugly head.

"At least consider it," 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 for a minute."

My mind began to spin. Maybe Hank left her for some other reason, and she had come up with a new plan -- to tell me I was the father so that the little girl would still think she *had* a father, and so that Scarlet wouldn't have to raise her alone.

After my time with Chloe this would seem like normal problem solving, if Scarlet was equally as devious.

I concluded this was most likely just another trick in a very long-running real-life video game I no longer wanted to play.

But then Scarlet said, "I know she's yours because she has a little birthmark just below 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 a lot like this."

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

She showed me a photo on her phone. It was Isabelle smiling. The next photo showed Scarlet's hand pulling her soft blonde hair back just above her ear. The birthmark was there, in the same spot mine was.

I felt a thin wall of psychogenic glass, as thin as a computer screen, shatter around me. Everything suddenly looked so clear, real, interwoven. I felt a chill pass through me.

Scarlet was waiting for me to respond. My cheeks became flushed. I looked at the last photo again.

"You didn't photoshop this, right?"

She laughed, "No! I only photoshop myself. I have wrinkles under my eyes now. . . see?"

I thought about what to say next. And then it came to me.

"Okay listen, before I meet. . . Isabelle, I want you to tell her something for me. Even if she doesn't understand a word of it, at least you will.

"You need to tell her this:"

"Before you were born, I was told I wasn't your father. Then I was asked to say I *was* a father, but it was actually someone else's child.

"I've been tricked, I've been used, I've been fired, I've been put in jail for murder, and jailed again for corporate espionage and possible treason. But I had one thing going for me every time -- I was innocent.

"But even after I was set free from all of that madness, I didn't feel connected *to* anything. I was like a piece of code searching for a virtual world where I would somehow become indispensable, interlocked.

"But now, I mean, if you truly are my daughter, that means you are the most connected thing that's ever happened to me. By genetic code we're literally 'us.'"

Scarlet moved a bit closer to me and touched my arm.

"So then okay, Isabelle, if we're really an us, then we need to get to know each other. Maybe you can come stay with me on weekends, or longer sometimes. Maybe we can even get a dog together someday."

Saying all this made me feel emotionally clear, but a bit shaky at the same time. It was a new kind of feeling -- one wild true moment I was fully present for.

Scarlet scrolled through the photos on her phone again until she found the one she wanted, "We already have a dog, see? I decided to give her away after Hank left because I didn't think I could afford to keep her. But Isabelle cried and begged me to let her stay, so we stopped answering the ads I put up around town. She's the sweetest most amazing dog in the world. Her name is Mazey."

We left the cafe and I followed Scarlet back to her apartment to meet Isabelle and the apparently amazing Mazey.

It was a short walk in a light rain, a typical Seattle-gray day. A light mist coated the air. I was walking rather slowly, feeling a bit bewildered. At one point, Scarlet reached out and took my hand.

Isabelle did indeed have a little birthmark behind her ear that looked just like mine. Other than that, she was nothing like me. She had a brightness about her. Her eyes twinkled with joy almost all the time. They drew me into a dimension I didn't even know existed.

I called Chloe the next day and told her that the broken vase and Bowie's broken face were problems she'd have to maneuver through without me. I had escaped into the real world and there was no turning back.

The story ends like this:

I stayed in Seattle instead of moving to California. I found a new job at an up-and-coming high-tech firm but refused to work more than an eight-hour day. Other than the time I spent continuing to create the code for my game, I spent all my free time with Scarlet and Isabelle. Six months later we found a house to rent and moved in together.

Mazey turned out to be as amazing as advertised. She gave us nothing but love all the time. She taught us well.

Love takes so many forms. Sometimes it informs us. Sometimes it forms us. Sometimes it steals from us everything we thought we wanted; and sometimes that's a good thing.

What I'm left with these days are occasional moments that shine through brighter than the others and make me feel more alive than the way I felt before -- always, of course, preceded and postceded by the rest of life, for which I have no logical explanation. There is no existing code; there's virtually no end to the calculations. . . . It's just a feeling.

The End
~ GM