



What can you say about Fate?

Innocence Betrayed

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What can you say about fate? Or about the seemingly trivial, when at the time unimportant events that lead up to, consume and completely transfuse you into another realm of reality? Surrealism entirely beyond your control: some dare call it *destiny*! Fate arrives unannounced, a chance encounter; a knowing look; perchance a smile. A time where life itself slows down to meaningful moments to be cherished for the rest of your life, yet on reflection more often a mere blur of daily activities swept along and lost among the sands of time. When at that moment, like so many other instances in our life when a defining moment in our life becomes obscured by the demands of daily living—the hectic existence that so often defines our times—happenstance? Perhaps. That moment for me, so innocent in its inception completely turned my life upside down.

A nondescript, self-published poet can be allowed such wistfulness. Used to living an ethereal, surrealistic state-of-mind existence, one can hardly blame me a touch of poetic license. But then when destiny crosses the path of one's life, in a moment when all time is absent—all is gained, and sadly, too often such as in my case all is lost. Nothing, no nothing remains the same in life, except the passage of time and one's fading long-lost memories.



JON

My pager weakly vibrated on my belt, yet another reminder that I needed to replace the battery soon; that and the fact that my pager no longer kept accurate time. Which, since I didn't wear a watch I depended on my pager for the time of day, especially for appointments with my clients. It didn't cost me anything to get batteries replaced. All I had to do was requisition one from Roberá but I hated to throw something away that

still had some use. It was the German heritage coursing through the blood in my veins. You'd have thought that I lived during the depression or something; which my parents did and imparted to me that sense of parsimony. I still used the older, digital pager while all of the other technicians from the Help Desk carried the newer alpha-numeric pagers. I could have; I resisted getting the newer pager out of a sense of being difficult and not wanting to rush forward with the crowd, so to speak. I made a mental note to pick up a replacement battery—soon.

It turns out that Bonnie was paging me. I recognized her number on my pager. She was my favorite Help Desk agent. If she paged me directly I could count on the situation being a challenge instead of the run-of-the-mill, simple usual user error: something generally lost between the eyes and the fingers typing on the personal computer keyboard. Something like the 'Caps Lock' key engaged when trying to type a password that needed to be all in lowercase. Instead of calling I simply walked over to the Help Desk area since I was at my desk on the third floor of BEB—Bohrs Engineering Building—a mere fifty or so steps away from her.

As I walked into the Help Desk area, I greeted them by name as I was wont to do. There was Randall, who was relatively new and learning the ropes. Then there was Taryn, the old pro of the group who had been there the longest. And Lorayne who was not very technical but exceedingly personable; and it didn't hurt that she was a tall, good looking Scandinavian blonde. Always smiling and laughing, in good humor with clients who called in. I don't think I've ever seen her down or depressed. I often wondered how anybody can be *that* happy. Kolleen, whose intrigue kept the entire Help Desk in constant turmoil, flashed her Irish baby blues in my direction. There was Darrel, Flora and Mitzie. I flirted with all the girls on my way back to Bonnie's desk. She was standing, talking on the phone and held up her hand to keep me from leaving. Who could miss her long, flaming red hair or the flash of her fiery emerald eyes? While I waited I thought of my past four years of working at Bohrs Manufacturing Group, BMG, or simply Bohrs as the veterans called it.

I came to BMG more or less as a favor for a friend who had a computer service company in the mid 90's. Although I was trained and certified as a network engineer, and was coming off my recent assignment at the offices of the EPA in downtown Springdale, he wanted me to go to Maryville and work as a desktop support person so his company could gain a presence at BMG—that and more contract money. BMG happened to be the largest employer in the metropolitan area and anybody and everybody jostled for position to gain a foothold into their small IT contract labor pool. I told Gary I would work out there for six months—no longer—but then I wanted to be back in network support which meant more money for me. Now, more than four years later I was still doing desktop support and had practically forgotten everything I ever knew about networking and oddly enough, I loved every minute of it. I had found my niche in the world of *Information Technology*. The people at BMG were great to work with, the tech support was interesting and challenging and what can I say, at fifty-one I wasn't exactly on fire to conquer the world. Plus, I dare say, I was good at it. At the end of the day I could go home and not worry about a call in the middle of the night, a call that a network server was down and I needed to drop everything I was doing and drive across town ASAP and more often than not, work through the night. I did not miss that part of the life of a network engineer.

The Bohrs Manufacturing Group originally started out as simply, Bohrs Manufacturing founded by the original Mr. Siegfried Bohrs, a Bavarian immigrant at the turn of the twentieth century. He began his business by supplying Mr. Ford auto parts starting with the first windshield wiper motor. After that his business grew as he continued to expand his product line until today, the Bohrs Manufacturing Group supplies over five hundred auto parts to not only the auto manufacturers but to the lucrative automobile after-market as well.

From a simple tool and die shop founded in a converted livery stable, today the Bohrs manufacturing complex spreads over five miles throughout the valley along Crystal Creek in Maryville and encompasses several buildings in addition to the manufacturing plant and employs several thousand people. It's like a small city unto itself. The business is run by the founder's grandson, Siegfried Bohrs III who rules the board of directors with an iron fist—and an iron will to match.

I never tired of the work mainly because I traveled back and forth among the many buildings, working with so many different people with so many different service issues and demands, plus desktop support never got stale or monotonous with the ever-ongoing challenges of hardware and software upgrades and keeping up with the latest Microsoft certifications which was a requirement for my job as a contractor.

My reverie was soon broken by Bonnie's urgent pleas. "Sorry, I was daydreaming a bit." I replied.

"I just got a call from International, 5th floor SOB, as we affectionately called the South Office Building. There is a new programmer there who cannot log onto the network. Even though I know this is not your area and it's almost four-thirty, could you please, please go help her out? Here's the username I had Larry down in IT Security create for her and password and directions to her desk."

What can I say? Bonnie was right, the International Group was outside of my area of responsibility and it was time to go home since I'd been at work since seven that morning. My responsibility entailed primarily supporting the senior staff including Siegfried Bohrs III, manufacturing, the legal department and I also filled in at times in the sales and marketing divisions. Occasionally, I've been known to work in the Human Resources division as well. I worked 3rd level support which meant that if the Help Desk couldn't solve the problem and a help desk technician couldn't solve the problem, I along with Charlie as 3rd level support inherited it. As Harry Truman once said, "The buck stops here." And *here* was in my lap or in Charlie's lap. Charlie and I worked great together and between the two of us we were able to work out a solution or get a solution from one of our many IT industry contacts around the country.

Technically, it's time for me to go home so once again I'll be working off the clock. How can a *knight errant* ignore a damsel in distress?

"Sure," I said, "what's her name and how can I find her?"



AMARA

Absently, Angela laid the novel she was reading on her lap and stared off into the nothingness of space before her; stared through red, swollen, bloodshot eyes and softly sobbed again a stream of endless tears. She couldn't recall a single thing she had been reading. Three years, eight months, two weeks and four days was not enough time, but then, how much time does it take to heal so great a grief? To lose your husband was one thing, to lose your husband and your child at the same time was more than she could bear. In her heart she knew her life was over.

Though she tried hard not to think of him, she couldn't; not for long anyway. A flood of memories swept over her. Angela met Stuart during her last year at Purdue University. She was finishing up her computer science master's degree and he was a graduate student in English Literature working on his doctorate when she ran into him at the library—literally. Theirs was a storybook romance and they were married the following summer after a whirlwind courtship.

Life was good for Angela and Stuart. He took an associate professor position at Roosevelt University in Chicago teaching American Literature and Angela started her meteoric computer science consulting career at ESS. Word was that Stuart was hand-picked for the English Literature chair and was being groomed by Professor Foxworthy himself, which was astonishing in and of itself since it was an open secret that the aging professor was sinking further and further into the fog of Alzheimer's disease and the attending paranoia it engendered. Still, he was likeable and he and Stuart hit it off from the start. Then, everybody hit it off with Stuart. He possessed that magical people touch—that certain something some call charisma.

Angela worked long hours at Electronic Support Systems, ESS building her career, first as a programmer and rising steadily in the ranks to become one of the most sought after system administrators and troubleshooters in the organization. Often, she was required to fly all over the country on short notice and her reputation as a hired gun grew in stature year after year. Stuart didn't seem to mind as his duties at the college and his writings and publishing on the side kept him busy.

In his second year at Roosevelt, Stuart published a critical analysis of Emily Dickenson's poetry which earned him widespread acclaim in academic circles. Angela was more than happy to help him in some of the editing and her depth and understanding of literature was a source of pride to Stuart.

During their third year of marriage Angela became pregnant and they purchased a cozy, Victorian style home two blocks from the newly opened campus in Schaumburg, Illinois. Life in the suburbs suited them both well. They named their son, Jonathon, in honor of professor Foxworthy and the aging educator openly wept tears of joy upon hearing the news of his namesake and future godson.

Yes, life was good for the Allenby family living the American dream in the Midwest when tragedy swiftly struck Stuart and Jonathon down in a terrible hit-and-run accident while Angela was on assignment in New York. She never forgave herself for being out of town. Worse, when Stuart called shortly before the accident happened she was leading a team meeting strategizing on how to recover their client's email server and couldn't take

Stuart's call at the moment, thinking to call him back right after the meeting. Which she did, but by then it was too late. She called his cell phone several times and got no answer. She called the home phone and again, nobody answered. Later that evening when authorities tracked her down to tell her the bad news, she broke down in hysteria and no amount of consoling could assuage her grief. She not only blamed herself but also ESS for not being there for her husband and son. It didn't matter that in reality there was nothing she could have done to change the circumstances of their accident regardless of whether she was in New York, Illinois or for that matter, Timbuktu.

Angela subsequently sold her beautiful home for literally, pennies on the dollar, resigned her lucrative, six-figure income position at ESS, and moved back to her home town of Rochester, Indiana. She did some freelance computer consulting work but mostly she hid in her small apartment and grieved. The dark, grotesque cloud of grief haunted her mind and darkened her every thought. Her family worried about her health. She lost weight. Her once bright, shiny auburn hair lost its luster and took on more of a dull chestnut look. Her once sparkling azure blue eyes were now mostly bloodshot from a wellspring of endless tears. She had no social life and buried herself in a continual stream of fiction from the library. She attempted to escape from her life through the make-believe lives of others in a book: a strategy that only worked poorly at best.

The jangling ringing of the telephone blasted through Angela's consciousness, interrupting her reverie. She stared at the telephone trying to decide whether or not to answer it. She looked over at the clock on the wall, seven-thirty five in the evening. No one ever calls her at night she thought. And then the ringing stopped as abruptly as it started. A moment later the telephone started ringing again. Out of a dull sense of curiosity, Angela reached over and picked up the phone. "Hello," she hoarsely whispered.

"Hey, double-A, is that you? It's Charlie from Chicago."

Angela winced. God, she hated that moniker. About as much as she hated Charlie at that moment for interrupting her silent soliloquy.

"Double-A, don't hang up. I've got something I want to talk to you about, something I think you're going to want to hear."

Reluctantly, Angela stayed on the line. "Don't call me, double-A Charlie, you know how much I hate that. My name is Angela. Please call me Angela. At least do me that courtesy."

"Sure. Look Angela, I'm on Highway 30 a couple of miles outside of Plymouth, about a half an hour away. Where can we meet? Do you want me to come over to your apartment?" He must be calling her from one of those Motorola car phones.

Angela made no response. The deadly silence hung in the air like the terrible pause just before a thunderclap after a flash of lightening. Thoughts raced through her mind, memories of all the underhanded, devious deeds that she heard about Charlie; all the whispered stories that blackened Charlie's reputation at ESS. Though she was never personally involved, well, sort of never personally involved, the murkiness of evidence against him was hard to ignore by upper management—but ignore they did because

Charlie had a reputation of getting results. And as anyone well knows, *results* are all that matters in corporate America.

“I don’t want any part of it Charlie, whatever you’re up to this time.”

“Look, I’m less than thirty minutes away from your apartment. Angela, we can make this worth your while.”

That made her even more suspicious. “Charlie, I don’t want any part of what you’ve cooked up, please don’t come by. I won’t be here. I won’t answer the door.” By then she was talking to herself for Charlie had already hung up.

Angela cursed Charlie; silently at first, then loudly to no one in particular. Then she cursed ESS for keeping her away from her beloved Stuart. Then she cursed Charlie again for so rudely interrupting her pity party. Then she cursed herself because she knew that when Charlie came calling as usual she couldn’t or wouldn’t say no. And what made it even worse is that she knew that Charlie knew she wouldn’t say no.

Angela worked with Charlie at ESS for a little over a year before he left to go on his own, private consulting gig. He always seemed to have a lot of money and he always seemed to be up to his proverbial eyeballs in hot water. She helped him out of a couple of jams and was well rewarded for her efforts. “I’ll say one thing for Charlie,” she thought to herself, “he takes care if his friends.”

Angela got up from the sofa, laid her book on the coffee table and went to the bathroom to freshen up. The reflection in the mirror horrified her. The eyes looking back at her were puffy, red and swollen. Her face had an ashen appearance, that chalky pallor that death confers upon a corpse and her hair had the look of an unkempt rat’s nest. She splashed cool water on her face which immediately raised her spirits. She dragged a comb, and then a brush through her hair trying to make herself look presentable. She changed into a light, pullover sweater and fresh pair of jeans and returned to the sink to splash more cool water over her hot, swollen face. As she stared into the mirror debating the merits of applying makeup, the ringing of the doorbell startled her back into reality and made the decision for her. Makeup would just have to wait.

Could Charlie be here so soon, she wondered? “Has it really been a half an hour?” Speaking to no one in particular since no one was in the room.

Reluctantly, Angela pulled herself away from the sink, dried her face and went across the bedroom and then living room to answer the front door.

“Double-A!” Charlie exclaimed, as he reached in and grabbed Angela, hugging her and kissing her before she could object. “God, you look great!” Charlie carried a bottle of Dom Perignon, 1985 Champagne into the kitchen where he proceeded to uncork and pour two glasses of bubbly wine. Holding one to Angela, raising his to hers and clinking them together, he toasted, “Today is the first day of the rest of your life, and today, my love, is a day you shall remember for all your life—and you’ll thank me for it in the end.” Raising his glass, he proceeded to drain it and refill it and top off her glass as well.

“What’s this all about, Charlie?” Angela replied, not too unkindly.



The South Office Building, nicknamed, SOB, or SNOB Hill as many non-resident employees of BMG liked to refer to it, was located across Crystal Creek ironically on the north side of the western edge BMG property far away from the manufacturing plant and on the edge of the town limits of Maryville. It was built to house the administrative staff, sales, marketing, legal and human resources employees. Even though it was only a short five-to-ten-minute walk from the plant, I often wondered if some of the people who worked in SOB even knew we worked for a manufacturing company: that we actually made something, something as ordinary as a windshield washer motor for example. It was a whole different world there. While the manufacturing plant was all blue-collar, the hustle and bustle of a manufacturing facility swollen with the noise of large machinery, conveyor belts, and steam engines associated with such an enterprise, the coming and going of delivery trucks and semi-tractor trailers, SOB was strictly an office environment, replete with office politics and intrigue. If I spent very much time at SOB I often found myself with a need to walk over to the manufacturing plant just to mingle with the working class people who actually had hands-on, daily contact with the manufacturing processes—the real backbone of BMG. It just seemed more real, more down to earth to me, raised as I was in rural America.

Armed with the information from Bonnie, I drove the mile and a half from BEB to SOB, parked across the street and headed over to the front door of SOB and rode the elevator up to the 5th floor. Actually, I did very little work with the International team. As I said, most of my work was supporting the senior staff, working at the plant, legal, some sales, marketing and human resources. It was more than enough work for one person, but like I said, I enjoyed the challenges and I enjoyed being busy—unlike some folks who only engaged in *busy* work.

Exiting off the elevator on the 5th floor, I began to weave my way through the maze of cubicles. Bonnie's notes directed me to the south side of the building, midway down the aisle, inside from the copier, just east of the clock on the south wall. I got to the copier, turned left, then left again and froze in my tracks. She was sitting at her desk working on her Dell laptop and for a moment she was unaware that I was standing there staring at her. Speechless. Soon she must have realized that someone was gawking at her (you know how you can feel when someone is gazing at you?) for she turned to look at me, flashed a smile, stood and introduced herself, "Hi, my name is Amara." Me, I just dumbly stared at her like some forlorn teenager standing around at his first dance, or more likely as it turned out, a deer caught in someone's headlights about to get run over.

She stood about five foot ten, had shoulder-length, light auburn hair the color of a rarely-circulated shiny penny and beautiful, clear azure blue eyes. She wore a simple summer turquoise dress which you would expect someone to wear on an unseasonably warm day in May. It's not that she was beautiful that took my breath away, or for that matter, that she was especially stunningly good looking. Not in the way you think of. Not like some air-brushed model on the cover of a magazine. I've seen a lot of beautiful women working at BMG. Purportedly, there were even a couple of models working as administrative assistants—and I believed them, they were gorgeous. I thought Amara was beyond good looking; an innate beauty of the soul. But that isn't what froze me in

place. There was a chemistry—a physical force that immobilized me. I was anchored to the floor, unable to move. There was an unseen, powerful energy that rendered me completely speechless and incapable of movement. I just stood there for seemingly an eternity; stood there staring into those blue azure eyes—that were staring back at me penetrating into my soul. And immediately I knew that she knew the secrets of my soul: who I was what I was, in reality. I felt that at that moment she knew everything about me. I was completely mesmerized. I stood there spiritually naked before her piercing azure eyes. Don't get me wrong. I was married, happily married for almost twenty years and I had never even dreamed of doing anything to jeopardize our relationship. How can I describe what was taking place? It wasn't necessarily a sexual attraction, but there was indeed sexual tension in the air. It was more spiritual in nature. The shock of my soul bared in an instant to a complete stranger without warning overwhelmed me. There was a sense of nakedness, nakedness of spirit; and I knew at that moment how Adam and Eve felt in the presence of Yahweh when they clumsily covered themselves with fig leaves. At that moment I would have covered myself with more than just fig leaves—had they been available.

“Are you all right, Jon?”

There was a slight twinkle in her eyes. The spell was broken. She had a certain playfulness about her. “Yes, ah, I'm... how did you know my name?”

She silently pointed to my name ID tag that we were required to wear and smiled mischievously. “Besides, Bonnie called back from the Help Desk and said not to go anywhere because you were on your way.”

“I, ah, yes; Amara?” I stammered.



“Come Angela, let's sit down and talk,” Charlie answered as he walked over to the couch and sat down with his wine glass and bottle of champagne. Picking up her book he continued, “Ah, Anita Shreve, *The Pilot's Wife*, most excellent, and every bit as good as her forthcoming, *Fortune's Rocks*. You always had such good taste in reading, was this before you met Stuart, or was this one of the many wonderful influences he had on your life?”

Sometimes, Charlie's insensitivity knew no bounds, Angela thought to herself as she fought back her tears, but then, he seemed so genuinely interested—disarming her at once with his boyish charm.

“So tell me, Charles, what's on your mind?”

“Oh, so now all of a sudden we're all formal-like, are we? Here, you need a refresher,” he said as he leaned over to fill her glass again. Sitting back, with a twinkle in his eye, Charlie continued. “Let me come straight to the point. A group of people who I know want some information and they are willing to pay a lot of money to get it. That's where you come in. You get the information they want and you get paid a handsome sum. What could be simpler than that?”

“Charlie, if it were all that simple you wouldn’t be talking to me now, would you?”

After a lengthy silence, he continued, “You’re right you know, and very perceptive Angela. If I could do it myself I would and keep all of the money. But the truth is: I can’t do it myself. I have neither the expertise nor the savvy to pull it off. Angela, you have the talent, the expertise and the moxie it takes to pull this off. I know you; I’ve worked with you; and I trust you. It’s going to take a lot more than just expertise to pull this off; it’s going to require élan; a boldness; courage and nerve.”

After a few minutes Angela said, “You’re talking about corporate espionage, aren’t you?”

“See what I mean!” Charlie cried out as he jumped to his feet. He began pacing around the living room. “See how perceptive you are. God, Angela, you’re good, very good. The best!”

“So tell me about it,” she barely whispered.



“I don’t mean to be rude,” Amara continued, “but I don’t have a lot of time. I need to pick up my daughter, Fay from KinderCare before six, and it’s going to take me forty-five minutes to drive to Pineview.”

The spell might have been broken but the shock was far from wearing off. I was still staring into those azure windows to her soul; in fact, into my reflected soul. It was unnerving to say the least. She had that kind of effect on me. Her seemingly nonchalance only fueled the fire beginning to rage within my spirit. I was dimly aware that a battle had begun for my soul: love, lust or lucidity. In that moment I was being transformed and I both silently cursed and exalted the moment. In that moment I also realized that I had lost the battle. The cool demeanor I assumed while working slipped away. Again, I experienced the spiritual nakedness of the moment. My soul was exposed before her and there was nothing I could do to mask myself—to hide myself. She saw it all. If she had asked, I would have done anything for her and not known why, other than that I wanted to do it for her. Little did I know...



“Last year Bohrs Manufacturing Group paid way too much money for an obscure, nickel-dime manufacturing facility down in one of the border towns in Mexico,” Charlie began. “They did it because the Mexican government is expanding tax credits to attract American manufacturing to Mexico under the terms of the recently passed NAFTA act—the exceedingly unpopular North American Free Trade Agreement. This manufacturing plant gives Bohrs an inside track to a huge potential market, not only here in the states, but throughout Latin America. They hired a plant manager out of Oregon and they are currently working on a secret GPS application, that’s Global Positioning Satellite, to

compete with OnStar. There is an interested group of investors who own a large block of General Motors stock, who also happens to own a sizable chunk of OnStar, who are very interested in knowing what is going on in Tecate, Mexico. They're also very interested in learning what the marketing strategy is for Bohrs' new GPS application so they can counter with one of their own. To date they have been able to keep the Bohrs' people tied up in red tape with the Mexican government but recently the Bohrs' management people have since hired a very good local, shall we say, mechanic who is proving himself to be very adroit at getting things done, greasing the way so to speak, especially with the local government in Baja, Mexico. Here's the bottom line Angela, if you can acquire a copy of the marketing plan and any other relevant information that pertains to their plans in Mexico and do it in less than 30 days they are willing to pay you a lot of money for that information."

"And how much is a lot of money, Charlie?"

"To be honest, Angela, I'd say, *Name your price.*"

"Why me?"

"That's easy. Simply because you're the very best for what they need. BMG is transitioning over their entire IT department to ESS beginning this summer. Once that's complete nobody is going to be able to touch a thing from the outside. Before that happens, we believe that we have a small window with which we can access some of the information that we need from their email server and possibly from one of their data servers as well. Let's face it Angela, you're the best and if anyone can breach the pitiful security that they have in place right now, and access the email server, you can."

"I need a way in and a cover story. How can that be done in less than thirty days?"

Charlie smiled that Cheshire-cat grin of his. "Actually, and you're going to like this Angela, that's the easy part. They're hiring consultants right now to put together a website for their domestic and international distributors to be able to conduct business with the corporate home office. One of the International Directors is going to be abroad for three weeks in Korea. You simply waltz right in there, pretend to be one of the new consultants working for the director who is out of country and once you get a username and password, *ta-da* you're in," Charlie said snapping his fingers for emphasis.

"But what about security?" Angela wanted to know.

"It's a joke. They have none. You walk right in, find an empty desk on the 5th floor of their South Office Building and call the help desk for a network user account and password."

"You're kidding me?"

"I swear to God, it's that simple. But you're going to have to use some moxie to pull it off."

Angela thought for a very long time while Charlie sat back down and poured himself a fresh glass of champagne. Presently, she got up and went over to her laptop computer, turned it on and said over her shoulder, "Give me a couple of minutes."

"Sure," he replied, "Take your time."

While she was busy at her laptop, Charlie got up and walked around surveying her sparsely furnished apartment. He thought back to a time not long ago when she lived in a very upscale Victorian home in one of Chicago's finest suburbs. It was *the* place to be for young professionals. The contrast was painful. The word that came to mind to describe her current situation was *utilitarian*, and that's putting it mildly. The furnishings looked like they could have come from Kmart, IKEA or worse, Goodwill. He drank the last of his champagne and went to her kitchen and started browsing around in the refrigerator. There were a few Hansen sodas, some wilting vegetables, a couple of bottles of juice, several bottles of water, no leftovers, no meat in the meat drawer, some lunch meat and cheese and a few condiments. Resigned to his fate, he found a glass in one of the upper cabinets and poured some white grape and strawberry juice on ice and retreated back to the living room.

Several minutes later the printer attached to Angela's laptop began humming and printed out a couple of pages. Angela glanced at the papers and with a nod of satisfaction, stood and came back into the living room where Charlie was sitting leafing through one of Angela's *Vanity Fair* magazines. She handed him the papers and said, "I'll take a deed to this house, free and clear of course, whose address is 120 27th Avenue in Sea Cliff, San Francisco and one million dollars deposited in this bank account at LaSalle bank in Chicago." Angela sat down, looked at Charlie, "Up front, no questions asked."

Charlie let out a soft whistle, "Two point five million dollars up front." He gave Angela a long thoughtful look.

"Additionally, I'll need twenty thousand dollars expense money to tide me over for the next thirty days until this job is completed."

Charlie whistled again.

"Up front."

"Naturally."

After several minutes Charlie said, "Ok, here's the situation." Looking at his watch, "It's now Wednesday night; unless you hear differently from me, meet me at my office in Chicago on Saturday morning at ten o'clock. Here's my business card with the address and my contact information. We'll go over the final details at that time of exactly what we need." Looking deeply into her eyes, he added, "I've got faith in you Double-A, you can do it."

Angela cringed again at the Charlie's use of his pet nickname for her and checked the business card. She recognized the address and said, "Deal."



Even though I had a trouble ticket with a description of the problem and service I needed to perform, I always ask the person in question to explain and show me what their trouble was. In doing so, you could often pick up some clues and save yourself

hours of troubleshooting. So I asked Amara to explain and show me the problem she was having with her laptop computer.

Deftly, with experience born of practice, she closed her open applications, pulled up her Microsoft Outlook client and explained that she was trying to configure it so that she could use it at home with her NetZero account and also at work with her Bohrs' network account. It's funny, I thought, how even experienced programmers could stumble on the simplest of configurations. That and it shows how much we take for granted the things we regularly do without thought of the complexity of our own competency. Too often we take for granted what we do in our jobs, rarely giving ourselves the credit we deserve. Once I was sitting at her laptop, it took me no more than a few minutes to configure and test her Outlook email client. Then I configured her NetZero to access her Bohrs' email account. I also showed her how to use and access either email account at anytime from anywhere. A little trick I had only recently learned myself.

"What do you do for Bohrs," I asked as I made some notes in my logbook. As far as I knew, I was the only technician who kept a journal of when and where I was and what I was doing at all times while at BMG. Such a journal was invaluable to me because it allowed me to go back over situations and review what worked and what didn't work in solving desktop computer related issues. It also bailed me out of a couple of jams because I was able to document my whereabouts at all times. Out of habit I also took the liberty of copying down Amara's BMG phone number and her email addresses.

"I am a contract programmer working on a website so that international and domestic distributors and sales people can log on and track their sales and deliveries online themselves so that they can bypass calling into Maryville whenever they are trying to track their product orders. Two problems. First of all, just the idea of calling in and waiting on the phone to get some answers can be very aggravating and time consuming, not to mention time wasting. Then there is the problem of the different time zones. So you see if they could access this information online 24/7 it would save a lot of time and increase the company's customer/distributor service commitment."

I let out a soft whistle. "That's a tall order. Half the salespeople and distributors out there are novice computer users at best."

"Yeah, I know and I sometimes wonder about the other half. Kineco and Schuler already have their systems working which means Bohrs is behind the curve, so to speak. Some of the distributors who sell both Schuler and Bohrs products are complaining about BMG's antiquated sales processes. So we are on fast track to develop, test and implement the website as quickly as possible."

"I'd like to stay and talk to you some more, but like I said, I really do need to drive up to Pineview and pick up my daughter before six. Perhaps we can chat another day?"

I couldn't think of anything to say to keep her any longer, besides, like she said, she did need to pick up her daughter. So I just stood there while she packed up her things and offered to walk her to her car. She gave me an odd sort of look but ultimately, agreed after no more than a moment's hesitation.



As she sat aboard the United flight taxiing down the runway of O'Hare bound for the International airport in Springdale, Angela kept tossing ideas around in her head—in between thoughts of dread of what she's gotten herself into.

She went over the scenario again in her mind. Charlie had a friend who was moving from Pineview back to Chicago and offered to let Angela use his house and two kids as cover. She would pose as a divorced mother of two, part time student at Springdale University and part time programmer consultant at Bohrs. She would spend a week getting the lay of the land and checking out the South Office Building as well as the Springdale corporate campus. Then she estimated that it would take her a week to pull it off and skip town. That left her a little less than a week cushion for unexpected surprises. She read again Charlie's instructions about which files they needed. There was the usual marketing plan and proposals. To cover her tracks and as a decoy, she was to copy a file from one of the international attorneys regarding some under the table negotiations with an international conglomerate holding company which she didn't recognize. Charlie was also able to provide her with a copy of OnStar's distributor website that she could use as a template which was handy, given the short notice she was working under.

On the flight over to Springdale, she read through the thick file Charlie had given her which contained pictures and background information on Bohrs Manufacturing Group, the IT structure, the email server configuration, the network configuration and the security that was in place. How he was able to acquire all of this corporate intelligence amazed Angela, even though she had fist hand experience of his prowess. Security, she smiled to herself. Charlie was right, IT security was a joke at BMG which made all this possible. There was also a list of IT personnel, and short bios on the help desk and desktop technicians. By the time she got to Springdale she felt as if she knew all of them well. Charlie had also supplied floor plans of the South Office Building and a plat layout of the Bohrs Manufacturing Group complex that stretched along the valley formed by Chrystal Creek. There was a map of Bohrs valley in Maryville, a map of Springdale and vicinity and a map of the Front Range and Pineview. Finally, there was a BMG security badge with her alias, Amara Phillips. She recalled how Charlie chuckled almost to himself when he told her the meaning of Amara, '*bitter*.' Obviously, it was an inside joke on someone she thought, since she was unable to grasp the significance of the play on words. Charlie covered all the bases. *I wonder what's in it for Charlie*, she thought to herself.

Angela had a return flight ticket to Chicago and a non-stop airline ticket from Chicago to San Francisco, her new home when all of this was over.

When she got to Springdale, Angela rented a white Toyota 4Runner SUV and drove out to Maryville to have her first look around at the Bohrs' manufacturing complex. But when she got to Maryville she discovered that her hunger was getting the best of her and stopped at the Maryville Hotel, checked in under another alias provided by Charlie and decided to eat in their restaurant, the Bridgewater Grill. She ordered a Turkey Waldorf sandwich and a glass of Chardonnay. After she finished eating, Angela decided to drive over to the South Office Building for a quick look around and go through a dry run.

She parked in a lot north of the building and walked across the street to the entrance. As luck would have it, there were several people going into the building and she fell in behind them and followed them right into the building. No one said a word to her: of course, wearing her security identification badge made it easy. She got on the elevator and went up to the 5th floor. She knew from Charlie's notes that the International team was located mainly on the south side of the floor so she casually walked over to that area. As she walked down the inside hallway, she noticed several empty desks. She entered a cubicle area and sat down at an empty desk. There was a phone on the desk and nothing else. She picked up the phone and listened for the dial tone. Good, she thought, the phone is working. She dialed nine to get an outside line and then the number of Charlie's friend in Pineview. On the third ring he answered.

"Hello, Nathan? This is Amara." It was time to start thinking in terms of her alias. After getting final driving directions to Nathan's house in Pineview, Angela took a quick inspection of her surroundings and made her way to the elevator. Back in her car, she drove around the back side of the South Office Building, surveyed the main entrance to the manufacturing facility and drove off to Maryville, over to Highway 6 and then to State Highway 740 then to Highway 1 up the foothills to Pineview. She drove slowly, admiring the surroundings. The mixture of rock outcroppings and pine trees and undergrowth was stunning. Pineview was a typical mountain town nestled in small valley nearly hidden by pine covered mountains. *I could easily live here*, she thought.

Angela stopped at a local store and bought some groceries and sundries to tide her over and headed up to Nathan's house which she found with little trouble. Nathan met her at the door and as they went inside introduced her to his two children. "Paul, this is Amara, Amara, Paul and my daughter, Fay." Angela shook their hands and disarmed them with her smile. "Hi Paul and Fay, I'm so glad to meet you."

"I've already explained to them that you are going to be here for a week or so and to complete your assignment, we are going to play a little game and they are going to pretend that they are your kids. Today is Monday the 14th. The movers will be here on Thursday morning, the 24th to pack up everything for Chicago. Will that give you enough time?"

"That should be fine. If all goes well, I should only need one night, I'm thinking next Monday night to use your house. Everything else can be done in Maryville."

"Good, let me show you around." Nathan gave Angela a tour of the house and showed her a room she could use.

"That's ok, I think I'm going to stay at the Maryville Hotel, it's close to Bohrs and I can get more work done there and stay out of your way."

"That's fine. Did you want to stay here tonight, or were you planning on driving back to Maryville?"

"I think I'm going to drive back to Maryville where I can do some thinking and plan how I am to proceed. Thank you very much for showing me around and thank you so much for letting me use your house and family for our little game of charades."



On the way to the parking lot I found out Amara had just moved from Minnesota, was taking classes at Springdale University to get her MBA and had a degree in computer science; she had an eighteen-year old son who just graduated from high school and a five year old daughter. She was recently divorced and had moved here for a change of scenery and to get a fresh start; moved because her sister lived in Albion and it seemed like a good idea at the time. She told me she worked mostly from home and only came to Maryville three days a week when she had class, like today, or when she had to attend a meeting at Bohrs. She learned nothing of me—nor did she even ask. Conversely, I was completely enchanted by her. After she drove away, I stood there staring off into the space she vacated for a long time.

By the time I got back to BEB to close out the paperwork, most everybody had gone home. I sat at my desk for quite a spell thinking of Amara, wondering what it all meant. I was completely captivated by her and I didn't know why.

On the other hand, I did know why and it sent a chilling sensation up my spine.



The next morning Angela slept until nine, got up and ready and was at the Bridgewater Grill by quarter after ten. She decided on some fruit, a muffin, and a glass of juice and cup of tea while she skimmed the two morning newspapers. She smiled to herself over the media obsession with the local NFL team even though it was the middle of May. Afterwards, she re-read the background information on the help desk staff and desktop support technicians for what seemed like the umpteenth time paying particular attention to Jon's information. Then she went over the international group information—again and again. Having settled on a strategy, she retired to her room to freshen up. By now it was noon, perfect for another dry run at the South Office Building.

She entered the building as usual with a group of people and nobody said anything to her. In the elevator one of the women nodded to her and wished her a nice day as she got off on the third floor. Exiting on the fifth floor, Angela was able to find the desk she sat at previously without any trouble. She set up her laptop, plugged in the Ethernet connection and called the Help Desk number that she learned from Charlie's notes. The person who answered was not one of the three that she had targeted, so Angela apologized and hung up. It was too early to work her strategy anyway. Angela was nervous. She needed to relax. She sat there wondering what she should do to kill some time when her cell phone rang. It was Charlie.

"Double-A, I hope I'm not interrupting anything."

"No, Charlie, I was just sitting here wondering what I should do for the next few hours."

“Why don’t you take a tour of the plant and check out the hospitality lounge. You might be pleasantly surprised.”

“That’s not a bad idea, but that’s not why you called.”

“You’re right, as usual. I need you to move your time table up. Is there any way you can be back to Chicago by Memorial Day weekend?”

Angela didn’t answer for a long time. “Today’s the fifteenth, which only gives me ten days. It doesn’t allow any room for error.”

“I knew you could do it.” And with that the line went dead.

Angela stared at the phone and debated on whether to call him back or not. It’s useless, she thought. He probably wouldn’t answer anyways. Ten days. She called the airlines and changed her reservation to the twenty-fifth. The airlines charged her another hundred dollars for their trouble because, they said, it was a holiday weekend. She didn’t feel like arguing with them and just agreed to pay the difference using a pre-paid credit card Charlie provided her with before she left Chicago. He thought of everything. She checked her watch. Oddly enough, it still had Central Time and she adjusted it to Mountain Time. One-fifteen. She made up her mind to walk over to the manufacturing plant and take the tour. Packing up her lap top computer, she retraced her steps to the elevator and rode it down to the lower level and again followed a group of people out the back door, through Milly Bohrs’ memorial park and presumably, she hoped, over Crystal Creek to the plant. On the way over, Angela slipped her ID badge into her purse so that she could mingle with the tourists who came for a tour of the plant.

The tour turned out to be fascinating and she developed a new-found respect for the company and to what lengths they strove to maintain quality and productivity. She had never before seen such a clean manufacturing facility. After a stop off at the hospitality lounge for a complimentary glass of local vintage wine, Angela decided it was time to head back to the South Office Building.

When she got back to her desk, yes, she smiled to herself, her desk, Angela started thinking of it as ‘her’ desk now, she checked the time. Good, four-thirty. She hooked up her laptop and called the Help Desk.

“Help Desk, this is Bonnie, how can I help you?” This time she got lucky it was one of her targeted Help Desk associates.

“Hi Bonnie, this is Amara Phillips in International. I just got started as a contract programmer and I’m unable to log on to the network. Can you help me?”

“Sure, what is your user ID and password?”

“That’s just it, I was supposed to start last week, but a family emergency came up and I wasn’t able to get started until this week. By the time I got here, Dennis McFarland already left for Korea. Is there any way you can help me out so that I can get started? They are expecting some prototype database examples by the time they get back after Memorial Day and I just don’t know what to do.”

“It’s almost five o’clock. Let me see what I can do. First, I have to call the business analyst and then IT Security for a username and passwords then I have to get one of the

PC desktop support techs to come over there to help you out. So don't go anywhere, I'll call you back in a few minutes, ok?"

Ten minutes later Bonnie was back on the line. "Hi, Amara? This is Bonnie from the Help Desk calling you back. Ok, I've got everything set up for you and one of the PC techs, Jon Wright is on his way over to the North Office Building to help you out. If you need anything or if you run into a problem, call me back and I'll see what I can do to help you out, ok?"

"Thank you so much Bonnie for all your help. I really appreciate what you're doing for me."

"No problem, that's what we're here for."

After she hung up, Angela busied herself with one of the templates that Charlie supplied for the website database design. A few minutes later, out of the corner of her eye she spotted Jon standing there looking like a star-struck teenager, even though he looked to be in his late thirties. Kind of cute; he was blond and had slate blue eyes, almost gray; slender build. He sported a closely cropped reddish-blond beard, well-trimmed. He looked to be about her height. She pretended to ignore him while he just stood there and silently stared at her. After a long moment, she stood held out her hand and introduced herself.

"Hi, my name is Amara." At the touch of his hand she could feel the electricity shoot through her body; her spine tingled and she had goose bumps running up and down her arms. Her legs grew weak and her knees buckled. The feeling sent shock waves through her being. Jon didn't say a word but only stared into her eyes. No one, not even Stuart ever looked at her the way Jon looked at her just now and the feeling made her nervous and at the same time she felt a sense of exhilaration. It had been a long time since she had feelings like these. Clearly she could see that he too, was under a spell. After another long moment Angela said, "Are you all right, Jon?"

"Yes, ah, I'm...how did you know my name?"

Without a word, Angela pointed to his name tag clipped to his belt and smiled, "Besides, Bonnie called and said not to go anywhere because you were on your way."

They stood and stared at each other for another long moment. He mumbled something and finally Angela said, "I don't mean to be rude, but I don't have a lot of time. I need to pick up my daughter from KinderCare before six and it's going to take me forty-five minutes to drive to Pineview, so if you don't mind, can we try to get this resolved sooner rather than later?"

He asked and she explained the problem of how she was unable to log onto the network and showed him how the configuration was conflicting with her NetZero account. Within a few minutes he had the configuration fixed and was showing her how to log on to the network from either at Bohrs or from home. Good, she said to herself, this is going to be easier than I thought.

While Jon was making notes in what looked to Angela like a journal, he began asking questions about her and what she did at Bohrs. She gave him the cover story Charlie rehearsed many times with her back in Chicago, about programming a database for the international and domestic distributors to use to track their shipments. Then she

insisted that she must get going so that she wouldn't be late to pick up her daughter. While she packed up her laptop computer, Jon offered to walk her to her car.

He was a good conversationalist and kept the dialogue flowing with questions about herself, her family, where she was from, how she got to Springdale and so on. He was easy to talk to and Angela felt more comfortable talking to Jon than she had felt talking to anyone in a long time, since Stuart come to think of it. She gave him the complete cover story about her made-up family, background and everything Charlie coached her on. Strangely, she felt awful about telling Jon all those lies. At one point, she almost started telling him something that was true and caught herself. "I must be more careful," she silently admonished herself.

When they got to her car in the parking lot, Jon lingered along beside her. She had an impulsive urge to kiss him but reluctantly, held back. No, I must not get involved, she thought. Instead, she gave him a quick hug, got in her car before she or he could say another word and as she drove away she could see him in her rear view mirror standing there staring after her.

Instead of driving back to Maryville Hotel, Angela drove out Highway 740 to the Interstate, back to highway 1 and circled back into Maryville. She was sure she was being overly cautious and was beginning to feel like a stupid spy in a cheap 'B' movie. In a lot of ways, she supposed she was.



I went by Amara's desk at SOB the next day but she wasn't there; or the day after. I say Amara's desk but there were no personal effects to identify it as her desk. If one didn't know, one would never have guessed that it was her desk at all. It wasn't unusual for contractors to take up a desk and not completely move in the way employees do and display their personal pictures and so on. But it was odd that there wasn't anything, not a picture, knick knack—anything that would identify her presence. I didn't think too much of it for she just arrived I reminded myself. I left my business card with a 'Sorry, I missed you' note written on the back.

Finally, succumbing to the mounting suspense, I sent her an email on Saturday morning asking her how she was doing and to make sure everything was all right with her computer. I sent it to both her Bohrs email account and her NetZero email address. I didn't get any responses back.

I went about my normal weekend routine, yard work, cleaning around the house, and just general puttering around keeping busy and spending time outside on such a beautiful day. The weather was a perfect eighty degrees; a blue cloudless sky overhead. But I have to admit my thoughts were on Amara and not the weather. I had this hunger deep down inside of me; I wanted to know all about her. Where she came from, what kind of childhood did she have, what kind of life she had, what were her thoughts and feelings. I wanted to confirm and experience the closeness of her that I felt when I first met her. The questions and the want were, quite frankly, driving me mad.

Saturday afternoon I checked my email; nothing. I kept working. Saturday night, again, there was nothing from Amara. Sunday morning; I checked my email; again there was nothing from Amara. After church, I checked my email again and found nothing. Sunday afternoon it was the same old story, nothing. I tried to read without success. I penned a couple of poor verses, and then threw them away. Finally, on Sunday night I received a short note from Amara looking for some help on a networking issue she was having with her laptop computer. I fired back a quick response—too quickly in my anxiety. Then I wrote another note and included a quickly written verse,

*Azure eyes looking back at me
Disrupt my train of thought
Stuttering stammering while you
Secretly smiling--exalt*

*Too easy for you—a woman
To toy with my emotions
Too hard for me to walk away--
Trapped by Eros' potions.*

I'm not sure what it meant, but I included it anyway. It was probably too much, too fast too soon and I quickly afterward regretted my impulsiveness. Not really, but I *was* trapped and wondered what became of my self-discipline. By midnight, she never wrote back which was all the more maddening.

That night I slept little which was highly unusual for someone who was known to nearly drop off instantly to sleep when I lay down. Instead, I lay in bed and wondered. And thought; thought of those azure eyes trapping me, luring me, seducing my soul. I wondered about myself, was I so weak that I lacked even a modicum of self-control? Could I let a chance encounter shape and possibly ruin my life? Ever since the kids graduated from high school and moved out of the house it was just the two of us at home now. And I was happy at home—wasn't I? Why was this happening to me?



When she got to her room, Angela was too keyed up to do anything on her computer. She was too keyed up to sleep. Nothing on the television interested her. In truth, all she could think about was Jon. She knew this was dangerous to her task at hand but at the same time, she couldn't help what she was feeling and thinking. It had been a long, long time since she felt this way. She tried reading to no avail. Instead, she lay in bed and thought back to all the good things that she and Stuart used to do together. For the first time in over four years it didn't bring tears to her eyes. Instead, there was an indescribable joy in her heart as she remembered back to a time long ago. Sometime

during the night she fell into a deep sleep and had the most pleasant dreams she could ever remember having in many, many sleepless nights.

When she awoke the next morning she felt more refreshed than she had in years. She experienced a certain lightness in her spirit. She went over to the window and pulled apart the drapes to let the morning light in. She stood at the window, threw her hands wide apart, tilted her head back and soaked up the sun's rays shining in through the glass. It was a glorious morning and she wanted to just stand there and absorb all that was good and right with the world.

Her euphoria was short lived as the memory of why she was in Maryville came crashing in on her psyche. Now she was faced with a dilemma. She had to be careful not to let her emotions get in the way of her mission. Her entire future rode on her ability to complete her assignment on time; two and a half million dollars she reminded herself. It was her one chance she again reminded herself—as if she needed reminding.

After breakfast of juice, fruit, an English muffin and tea, Angela retired to her room to begin her work.

It didn't take her long to gain access to the email server, what, with all the tricks she learned over the years not to mention a few 'tools' she came in possession with, she wasn't known as a top gun for nothing. Angela began the tedious job of searching user mail boxes and scanning emails looking for pertinent information regarding the marketing plan Charlie was looking for or the secret merger discussions he mentioned. She spent the next three days, sixteen hours a day scanning emails from the servers without much luck. She was sure she was going cross-eyed, staring at the computer monitor. She had to rely on finding an email message that had been inadvertently left on the mail server and not downloaded onto the user's hard drive—in which case, it would be impossible to access. Unfortunately, it looked to her like the backup tapes were offline so she was unable to access them.

On Saturday morning she received an email from Jon inquiring after how she was doing. That was sweet of him, she thought. She fought back the urge to answer him and continued her searching.

By Sunday morning she was exhausted and bleary-eyed from staring at her laptop for so long. This isn't going to work, she thought. For one thing, trying to work over a dial up connection is too slow, for another, there is just too much email and too low of a probability of finding what I'm looking for. There were thousands of users and tens of thousands of emails to search through. For the first time since she started, Angela began having doubts about her ability to find what Charlie was looking for.

She received a couple more emails from Jon and in the last one he included a poem that he had obviously just written. She knew it was just written because it was roughly composed and needed editing. But it was sweet, just the same. It seems as though he was as smitten with her as she was with him, she thought. She fired back a question about networking and access through the telephone line regarding how she might speed up her connection and he immediately responded back with an answer. An answer that wasn't going to help her, vexing her already stressed condition.

That night she pondered her situation anew. It was May 20th and she had only five days in which to get the information Charlie's cohorts wanted. She was no closer to

getting it than when she started a week ago. What was she going to do? She had never failed at anything before in her life. She always excelled at everything she put her mind to do. She refused to accept failure now. She must find another way.

That's it! Another way. She'd been going about this all wrong. Instead of scanning the mail servers for relevant email, she needed to search the data servers. Now the question became, how was she going to access the data servers? Angela kept turning it over and over in her mind until sometime during the night she dozed off to sleep no closer to the solution than she was hours before.



The next morning, I collected the usual stack of urgent trouble tickets one expects on a Monday morning and lost myself in my work; sort of. Occasionally, the problem I was working on was intense enough for me to concentrate and I became absorbed in the work at hand. Mostly though, I thought of Amara. I called her desk at SOB a couple of times but nobody answered. I tried calling Bonnie on the Help Desk but her number was busy as it usually was. Her days was spent taking and resolving help desk issues. By the end of the day I was deep in the subterranean bowels of the plant just finishing up a printer queue configuration when I noticed that it was already past five-thirty. It was nearly six by the time I reached my desk at BEB and six-thirty as I was packing up my stuff ready to head home when my desk phone rang. I had the old style black desk phone that didn't have a digital display so I couldn't tell who was calling. I stared at the phone, wondering, should I answer it? Or should I go home? After a brief hesitation I picked up the receiver on the fourth ring.

"Jon? It's Amara," As if I didn't recognize her voice, though she sounded slightly distressed.

"Hi, is everything ok?"

"Yes; no; I hope you don't mind me calling so late. I wasn't sure you'd still be there at this hour. I got your number off the business card you left on my desk. Do you mind? I mean I'm having a problem and I was wondering; can I ask a really, really big favor from you? I know it's late, and you don't have to do it if it's inconvenient, but I'm having some trouble with my internet connection and working on the website and I was hoping maybe you could come by and take a look at it for me. My laptop keeps freezing up. I know it's late, I'm frustrated and I'm asking an awful lot of you. The trouble is that I am under a lot of pressure, deadlines, that sort of thing and with my class schedule, working at night is the only time I can get very much done. I have a prototype database that needs to be uploaded to the server for testing tomorrow. You don't have to drive all the way up here if it's going to be a big hassle for you and I'd understand if you said, 'no you couldn't make it'. Is there any way you can help me out tonight?"

How could I say no? Her voice dripped of honey. A damsel in distress. However, that would mean a forty-five minute drive up the mountains and another hour and a half drive to get back home since I lived a good forty to forty five minutes on the other side of town. I quickly, silently did the calculations. If I got there by seven-fifteen, maybe seven-

thirty, say an hour to work on the problem and test everything, an hour and a half to drive home would put me back home by ten, maybe ten-thirty. "Sure, give me your address, directions and home phone number just in case I get lost," I replied.

"You're so sweet, Jon. How can I ever thank you?"



Angela awoke Monday morning in a dark mood. It was now the twenty-first and her flight was scheduled to leave Springdale on Friday, the twenty-fifth. She had no plan, no idea even of what to do or how to get the information she needed for Charlie. She was feeling desperate.

Down in the restaurant she drank her juice and hardly touched her fruit and toast. Her cup of tea grew cold. Angela had no remembrance of time when the waitress' entreaty broke her reverie.

"Is everything all right miss, you've hardly touched your food. Is something wrong with it?"

"No, no, it's quite all right. I'm not hungry this morning. Here, you can take the plates," she said passing them over to the waitress. "Would you mind bringing me a fresh pot of water so that I can have some hot tea?"

"Why sure, ma'am, no problem," she replied as she shuffled off to the kitchen.

This time when the waitress brought her the tea, Angela prepared it and drank it while it was still hot. When she finished she paid her bill and drove over to the South Office Building. Instead of going to the fifth floor, Angela decided to get off on the fourth floor and walk over to the east side and browse through the marketing department. She found the Bohrs marketing people with no problem. She saw nothing however of the Mexican plant's new GPS application. No sign that they were working on it. She then went on up to the fifth floor, but instead of going over to where 'her' desk was, she wandered over to the east side and browsed through there. Her efforts were rewarded. Though there was nothing mentioned about the new GPS brand name, she saw some oddly shaped, pickup models scattered around on some of their desks. Making a note of the name, Angela continued her exploring. Armed now with a name, she went over to her desk and found a business card with a note that Jon had put on her desk. Jotting down the information she decided to leave his card and left the building. She knew the longer she stayed the more she ran the risk of somebody questioning her reason for being there and discovering her ruse.

Back at the hotel room, Angela logged back on to the network and went to the email server to check the person whose name she had to see if there was any interesting email. There was none. Apparently, she stumbled into another dead end.

By now it was noon and Angela was becoming more and more desperate to find a solution to her dilemma. She thought of Jon. Somehow, Jon seemed to be the key. More than the infatuation, he kept coming up in her thoughts as she struggled to uncover the answer to her predicament. As she thought about it, it occurred to her (why not before?)

that as a PC Help Desk technician, Jon might have access to the data servers. Of course, why didn't she consider that before? The answer was in her own arrogance. Because of her acumen developed over years of working primarily with email accounts and email servers she allowed that to cloud her judgment and hide from her the best way to secure the documents that Charlie was looking for. Plus it meant that she was going to need some help and she had a reputation of a maverick who worked alone. Relying on someone else went against her nature. As she thought about it, the idea of involving someone else increased the risk ten-fold, a danger she often couldn't risk.

As she thought about it that afternoon and struggled with the best way to access the data she thought back on one of Charlie's little stunts that got him in trouble with one of ESS major clients early on in their working relationship. Rumor was that he put a script in one of the senior executive's computer that recorded his keystrokes. Charlie was able to then go back and recreate some very incriminating and damaging memos. Ultimately, Charlie lost his position at ESS. However, using the information gained, he was able to launch a hugely lucrative consulting business that mined the murky gray waters in the gulf between illegal and amoral; blackmail and salesmanship.

Angela knew what she had to do. Looking at the clock, she realized she didn't have enough time to write, test and execute a script herself. She was going to have to call Charlie and get the script from him. She picked up the phone.

"Charlie, Angela."

"You sound so serious, what's up?"

"I need your help. Remember that script you used to record the keystrokes a few years ago? I need you to email that script to me as soon as possible, preferably, within an hour."

"Sure. Give me about twenty minutes and I'll have that emailed to you. Just so you know, I've re-written it and improved its efficiency."

"Thanks Charlie." This time Angela hung up first before Charlie could interject any comments or inquiry.

True to his word, Angela found Charlie's script that she needed in her email inbox fifteen minutes later. She installed it on her laptop, rebooted and tested the script several times. Angela smiled to herself. Perfect, she thought. She checked the time, it was already after five. She called Nathan and made arrangements to use his house for the evening. She called Jon's desk number at BEB. No answer. She checked with the Help Desk and found out that he was working late at the plant. Good, she thought.

On her way to Pineview Angela stopped off and purchased a couple bottles of Chardonnay. Might as well enjoy myself, she thought to herself. Twice more on the drive up the mountains she tried Jon's desk number and still no answer. By now it was six o'clock. It was getting late. She knew she was running a risk because if she didn't get a hold of him soon she might miss him and add an extra day to her already dwindling time frame. She had only three days left to get the information Charlie wanted.

When she arrived at the house in Pineview, Nathan said he would be spending the night at a friend's house and that Paul and Fay would be fine. Paul had homework to do and Fay would be ready for bed soon. It was nearly six-thirty when Nathan left and

Angela called Jon's desk phone at work. She was ready to hang up when he answered it on the sixth ring.

"Jon, it's Amara."

There was a long pause before he answered. "Hi, is everything ok?"

After explaining her dilemma with her laptop's sluggish performance and making up a story about a looming deadline for the database testing, Jon agreed to drive up and help her with her problem. She gave him the directions to Nathan's house and made up a phone number, hoping he wouldn't have to use it.

"You're so sweet, Jon. How can I ever thank you?" And strangely enough, Angela really meant it.

Within an hour she spotted some approaching headlights and guessed it to be Jon. Angela went outside to meet him as Jon pulled up in the driveway and was getting out of a later model Ford pickup.

"Thank you so much, Jon, for coming up here on such short notice. I don't know what I would have done without your help. I don't know how I can ever repay you."

"Don't think anything about it," he said, "I'm more than happy to help you out."

They went into the house and after a quick introduction Paul and Fay disappeared to their collective rooms. Nathan had arranged a corner of the living room for Angela to set up to use as a temporary office space and Angela directed Jon over to 'her' desk. She offered him something to eat and was glad that he refused. He did however accept a glass of Chardonnay, which was even better.

Angela showed Jon some of the problems she was having with her laptop, the sluggish performance, the long connecting time to the internet and how it seemed to lock up on her. She then activated Charlie's script and turned over the laptop to Jon to work on. He still had that star-struck wonder look in his eyes as he stared at her which made her feel goosey all over.

"Is it all right if I stay here and watch you work?"

"Not at all," he managed to squawk in a tiny voice.

Her laptop was extremely slow, especially on the internet. Jon worked for nearly two hours, rebooting her laptop several times while he was performing system diagnostics and fixes. She refilled her wine glass a couple of times and his as well in the interim. Finally, he announced that he was done and turned it over to her for testing. She was amazed at how fast her laptop was now working and told him so. It was now past nine-thirty and Angela offered Jon another glass of wine which he quickly accepted.

They moved over to the couch and talked for another hour. They laughed together and told stories about the past and some of the funny things they went through during those awkward years in high school. Angela hadn't felt this good and laughed like this in years, since before Stuart was killed. She was really enjoying Jon's company and dangerously so. She decided not to risk it any longer.

"I'm sorry, Jon, but it's past ten-thirty and I must get some things done tonight before I go to bed. Do you mind? I'm so sorry; we were having such a good time."

He apologized for being so thoughtless and gathered up a few of his things. At the door on impulse he turned and gave Angela a long passionate embrace. She could feel his body next to hers. Her heart was pounding in her ears. She moved her mouth, but no words came out. Her knees were weak and she felt like she was going to faint and fall down. After what seemed like an eternity, Jon let go and without a word retreated to his pickup, got in and with a wave drove off. Angela stood there for a long time looking out where he was parked only a moment before. It was pitch black out and getting cool. It gave her goose bumps, at least that's what she told herself they came from.



After I wrote down the information and hung up the phone, I called home and left Debbie a message and headed out the door of BEB. It wasn't unusual for me to go out on these nightly excursions to help people at their home after work; besides, Debbie was working the midnight shift at the hospital tonight so it wasn't like we would be missing anything.

Because of the construction on Highway 1 it took me almost an hour to get to Amara's house. It was exactly where she said it would be, her directions were perfect and I had no trouble finding it which is remarkable given the nature of mountain communities. It was dusk and the dark of night was quickly approaching. It was also a good ten degrees or more cooler up here than down in Maryville. She must have heard me drive up or maybe saw my headlights through the window because she came to the door to greet me before I even got out of my pickup.

"Thank you so much, Jon for coming up here on such short notice. I don't know what I would have done without your help. I don't know how I can ever repay you."

I smiled and said it was no problem as I followed her into her house. She introduced me to her son and daughter who quickly disappeared to their respective rooms. Amara then pointed me to the corner of the living room that she had converted into her make-shift office. It was small a little crowded but manageable. She said she didn't have any beer but instead offered me a glass of wine which I gladly accepted. I lied and said I had already eaten when she offered me something to eat.

She showed me what she was trying to do and the kinds of problems she was experiencing as a result. I was still mesmerized by her azure eyes and couldn't help staring at her. Fortunately she either didn't notice or chose to ignore my bad manners. I knew the fix for her laptop was not going to be easy and said as much.

"Do you mind if I stay and watch you work?" She asked.

Do I mind! "Not at all," I replied trying to hide the exhilaration from my voice. I wanted her to stay. I wanted to be as close as possible to her. Even now I remember how I could smell her presence as I started working on her laptop. I did all the normal things you do before starting the troubleshooting process. The preventive maintenance stuff, running the disk tools, some utility programs I carried with me on floppy disks. Then I maximized her memory configuration as well as the swap file. Of course I deleted the

internet temporary files and cookies. I made some changes to the Internet Explorer configuration as well as the dial up client she was using to access NetZero. Then I downloaded an updated driver for her modem. An hour and forty minutes later after a final reboot and test of what I did I turned the laptop back over to Amara and asked her to test her programming applications. After another twenty minutes we were done and everything seemed to be working fine.

She asked me if I wanted another glass of wine before I left and I quickly, probably too quickly accepted. We sat and talked for over an hour while she told me a little bit more about herself. How she grew up as an overweight child and how everyone always unmercifully teased her. Looking at her today, you could have fooled me. I found out she was forty-four and that her little daughter, Fay was kind of an accident. She and her husband really didn't want any more children, and besides, they weren't really getting along that well and ended up divorcing only a year after Kay was born. She moved here just to get away from her ex-husband who soon followed but he ended up moving on to California. She decided to live in Pineview as much to get away from her sister in Albion as to escape the city. We talked of the awkwardness of growing up and not fitting in with any of the local, popular cliques and laughed and joked and poked fun at ourselves in the process. She then apologized for the late hour; it was by now past ten-thirty and said that she really did need to get some work done tonight. Hurriedly excusing myself, I gathered up my stuff and got ready to leave. At the front door I stopped and turned and couldn't resist giving Amara a big hug. A long, tight embrace; it didn't hurt that she kind of shivered in the cool night air. I confess she felt good in my arms. I wanted the moment to last forever. But of course, such moments never do. Silently, (for what words are adequate?) I got into my car, waved to Amara and drove away.

Illusions of the male ego, that's what my mother always said.



After Jon left, Angela went back inside, cleaned up everything, gathered up her things and drove back down to Maryville.

The next morning after a late breakfast, Angela was back up in her room working on her laptop. Charlie's script produced a huge data file that she opened and in no time found what she was looking for. There was Jon's user ID and password to the network. Perfect. Armed with this information Angela was now able to access the data servers through Jon's credentials and begin her search.

Angela spent the rest of the day in a slow, methodical search of the data servers for the marketing department's data. She was so intent on her task that she worked straight through the day, skipping lunch. Then she missed the evening meal. Later that night she finally found what she was looking for. There buried in the marketing department was the complete marketing strategy and proposed advertising plan for the Mexican plant's CaliGlobal GPS system. Apparently, they were way behind schedule and the new time frame called for a fall launch around a tough guy, bandito-theme along the Border States. The idea was centered around Texas Rangers locating and apprehending tough-

guy Mexican banditos, kind of a white-washed counter to the Mexican drug cartel. She didn't have time to download the files because the scheduled backup was soon to be executed and Angela knew she could always come back in the morning and get the files now that she knew where they were located.

The next morning after a quick breakfast of juice, fruit and hot tea, Angela was back in her room working on her laptop computer. Throughout the morning she was able to download the entire marketing plan, proposed advertising and associated files. By noon she realized she was famished. This time, she decided to stretch her legs and went out and walked around downtown Maryville trying to decide where to eat. She found a nice Italian place a block off the main street where she went inside and ordered lunch and a glass of wine.

Refreshed, Angela returned to her room to continue her search, now looking for the negotiation files of the international attorney whose name Charlie had given her. This proved somewhat easier and by ten that evening she had all the information she needed to download the files the next morning. Exhausted, Angela fell into a deep sleep without even considering eating dinner.

After a late morning breakfast, brunch really, Angela decided to drive over to the South Office Building to retrieve the files. Again, nobody questioned her when she entered SOB and went up to the fifth floor and over to 'her' desk. In less than an hour and a half, she had all the files she needed and was just wrapping up when Jon came by. From the corner of her eye, she noticed him standing there with a goofy expression, just staring at her. "Are you just going to stand there or are you going to come in," she asked, waving to an empty chair.

"I can only stay for a minute. I just got paged a few minutes ago on my way up here; seems like there is an emergency at the plant I have to respond to as soon as possible."

"I've noticed that everything around here for you is an emergency," she said chuckling.

"Let's meet for lunch," Jon blurted out and turned red in embarrassment.

"Oh look, the hot shot Help Desk tech is blushing," she teased. Ok. Say noon at the Mountain View café. I'm sure you know where that is?"

"Better make it twelve-thirty, just to be on the safe side."

"Ok, I'll see you there about twelve-thirty," she said, "don't be late, techie."

Before Angela could say another word, he was gone. It was now after eleven. She had all the files she came for and all she needed to do now was just clean up a few things and try to obliterate her access trail. Though she knew she couldn't completely erase the tell-tale signs, she didn't want to make it any easier than it had to be to find out what happened.

Back in her hotel room Angela emailed the files to Charlie, made copies of all the files onto floppy disks and took them to the post office and mailed them to her post office box back in Rochester, Indiana as a safeguard in case something went wrong. She also mailed a copy overnight to Charlie's office. It was nearly one in the afternoon when she

left the post office and had to really hurry to get to the Mountain View café before she was any later.

She spotted Jon sitting at a booth and went over to him. The minute he spotted her he stood and she began profusely apologizing for losing track of the time, making up some story about a last minute meeting. He said it was no problem, holding up a book of poetry by Emily Dickinson, saying he always came armed for reading, just in case.

“Emily Dickinson! I love Emily Dickinson,” Angela cried out. Closing her eyes she recited,

“My life closed twice before its close—
It yet remains to see,
If Immortality unveil,
A third event for me.”

She thought of Stuart and Jonathon as she recited, tears welling up in her eyes, but for the first time in years, tears of happiness. Seeing her tears, Jon asked, “Are you all right?”

“Yes, yes, of course I am. It’s just that sometimes those lines bring back old memories; good memories, finally.”

“Wow I’m impressed. Not one person in a thousand could have quoted a passage from Emily Dickinson—or any other poet for that matter. Let’s sit,” he said waving to the booth. “Such depth of emotions.”

They ordered her favorite Chardonnay and thankfully, he suggested splitting a meal which she gladly agreed to since she really wasn’t all that hungry.

“Did you know that Tuesday, the day we met was the anniversary of the death of Emily Dickinson,” she asked.

“Well, no,” he replied. “I’ve never given it any thought. How is it you can remember such a thing,” he asked.

“Isn’t it funny how some things stick in your mind?” She was thinking of Stuart’s book, the one he had written about Emily Dickinson that she had edited for him. “In one of your emails you sent a poem. Do you write very much poetry?”

“Indeed I do, but usually nobody wants to talk about it. I’ve self-published a book but never promoted it. I’m not very fond of the poetry I read in the poetry magazines or the poetry books that are published now a days. I think I’m kind of old fashioned in that I believe in more structure and a certain wholeness, compared to these ‘stream of consciousness’ writings you see so often now. Just breaking up a sentence into lines hardly qualifies as poetry to me.”

“I know what you mean. I’m a huge fan of the nineteenth century poetic works.”

“Me too,” he cried out. “I love Walt Whitman. And even though he didn’t write very much poetry, I’m a huge fan of Oscar Wilde. ‘De Profundis’ still brings tears to my eyes

and the 'Ballad of Reading Gaol.' And Blake and Shelley and who could omit Lord Byron?"

"And what of the Brownings? And Keats and Coleridge?"

"And Poe!" He laughed, and she laughed with him. They talked about all kind of books and authors and story lines. Of murder and romance and intrigue.

They finished their meal and had another glass of wine. "Do you know what today is, Jon?"

"Ok, I give up. What is today?"

"Queen Victoria was born on this day in 1819."

"Should this mean something to me?"

"No, it's just something I read in the paper this morning and it stuck with me."

They sat and silently gazed in each other's eyes for a long moment lost in their own thoughts. Jon reached across the table and held Angela's hand, and she once again felt electricity shoot through her body. His eyes were blue, the blue of a clear afternoon sky. As she stared into his eyes it was as if she could see his soul. A kindred spirit. And though Angela was not a particularly religious person, she felt a oneness with Jon at that moment that extended beyond the two of them and she realized a oneness of life.

Jon recited:

Quietly.

We as one,
Alone in a crowd;
The noise disturbs

Our quiet not.

Quietly.

Words:
Thoughts distorted

Together we be
To share in one another
Intimately.

Quietly.

We as one.
The night too short

In the morn we part,
Separately,
Yet...

Quietly.

We two as one.

“I wrote that thirty-some years ago. I don’t know why I thought of it just now.”

“You’ll have to let me read your writings. I’d like that.”

“Someday.”

Angela could hear Jon’s pager vibrating. The spell was broken. “Don’t you have to answer that?”

Jon looked at his pager then checked the time. “Wow! It’s three-thirty. I’m afraid I must go.”

“You’re right, and I should be going as well.”

Angela stood, and Jon quickly stood as well. He laid some money on the table and they walked outside. They walked together across the parking lot and she unlocked her car door and turned to say goodbye. In that moment he reached and grasped her in a tight embrace. She could feel his heart pounding against her chest. Her own heartbeat reverberated in her ears. After a long moment he released her and she got in her car, smiled at Jon and wordlessly drove away, tears streaming down her cheeks.



The next day I didn’t hear from Amara or the following day either. I was so busy I had little time to think about her, which is a lie because I thought about her all the time. I went by her desk a couple of times and tried calling her on her desk phone at SOB. Then on Thursday morning I finished a job in the legal department and went on up to the fifth floor and was rewarded for my efforts. There she was at her desk hunched over her laptop furiously working on something. I stood there for several minutes just watching her, thinking of nothing in particular, just content to stand there and watch her.

“Are you going to just stand there or are you going to come in,” she said waving to an empty chair and without even looking up.

“Only for a short time because I just got paged a few minutes ago and there’s an emergency at the plant I must get to as soon as possible.”

“I’ve noticed that everything around here is an emergency,” she chuckled almost to herself.

“Let’s meet for lunch,” I blurted out, then turned red in embarrassment. It was all the more embarrassing because in truth, I rarely took a lunch break.

“Oh look, the hot shot Help Desk Tech is blushing,” she teased. “Ok, let’s say noon at the Mountain View café. I’m sure you know where that is?”

“Better make it twelve-thirty,” I said as I stood up, mentally calculating how much time the repair may take and the driving time to get there.

“Ok, I’ll see you there about twelve thirty—don’t be late, techie.”

I turned to leave before she could change her mind. But she had already turned her attention back to whatever work she was doing on her laptop.

I got to the Mountain View Cafe a little early and was seated, ordered a beer and waited; and waited some more. The waitress, who I’m sure felt sorry for me because she thought I got stood up kept apologizing and offering to bring me something to eat but I kept saying with the faith of a child, ‘She’ll be here.’ I had my book with me, but in truth, I did little reading for I could only think of Amara and could concentrate on nothing else. Amara finally showed up a few minutes after one o’clock apologizing profusely — explaining that she got hung up in an unannounced meeting with the director who was in charge of the website project. I had risen when I saw her come in and after she got seated, I sat back down. “No problem,” I said only too happy to see her, “I always carry around a book to read just in case,” and showed her what I was reading.

“Emily Dickinson! I love Emily Dickinson,” she cried out. Closing her eyes she recited, “My life closed twice before its close— It yet remains to see, If Immortality unveil, A third event for me.”

I was awe-struck. “Wow, I’m impressed. Not one person in a thousand could have quoted a passage from Emily Dickinson—or any poet for that matter.” Though I recognized the passage I knew I would never have been able to recite it. I *was* impressed. “Such depth of emotions,” I complimented her recitation.

She smiled demurely.

We ordered a glass of wine each and split a meal consisting of soup and a crab salad sandwich and spent the whole time talking literature, favorite authors and memorable books. I thought I read a lot, she was a voracious reader and her memory was much better than mine, giving me book reviews and short synopsis. Glancing at my pager, I saw it was nearly three-thirty.

“I’m afraid I must go,” I reluctantly said. I’m going to have to work ‘til past six to make up for this three-hour lunch I thought to myself.

“You’re right, and I’m already late for class so I too, better get going.”

I paid the bill, left a generous tip for taking up the waitress’ time and table and walked Amara out to her car. Hugging her, I held her especially tight and long and could actually feel her heart beating against my chest and I languished in the scent of her fragrance. I held her for a long while and we wished each other good bye. She got in her car, smiled at me and as she drove away I cursed myself for missing an ideal chance to steal a kiss.

I strode to my car, literally on cloud nine, and little did I know that this would be the last time I would ever see Amara.



My nightmare began the next morning on my way into work. Driving down the interstate highway I got a page from Bonnie. I tried calling her back but her line was busy. On my third attempt I finally got through to her on my cell phone.

“Hi, Bonnie, it’s Jon returning your page.”

“Oh Lord, am I glad I got a hold of you before you got into work. Where are you at right now?”

“I am about to transition from the interstate to the turnpike.”

“Great. Meet me at the Starbucks at Northview Avenue and 24th,” is all she said before she hung up.

That’s odd I thought. It’s so strange that Bonnie would leave the Help Desk during her shift; nobody left the Help Desk unless it was for an emergency—and it better be a good one at that unless you want to incur the wrath of Madge the Help Desk Manager.

When I got to Starbuck’s, Bonnie was already there waiting in line. I joined her and she ordered her favorite latte and I ordered coffee and found a table off to the side, in a semi-secluded area so we could talk in private. I could see the alarm in Bonnie’s eyes. “What’s up?” I asked.

“You’re not going to believe what happened last night. Well, they think it was last night. They’re sure it was sometime within the past couple of days, most probably last night. Somebody hacked into the server and downloaded a confidential file from the legal department that contained secret negotiations of a possible merger between BMG and Schuler. If word of this merger ever leaks out, it could cost the BMG shareholders millions of dollars.”

I’m so dull. I still hadn’t made the connection. “So, what does this have to do with us?”

“Duh! They think it was Amara!”

At the mention of Amara’s name I froze, literally; struck immobile, a cold chill went up my spine.

“And you and I are on the hot seat because it looks like we were complicit in all of this by helping Amara. I can tell you now, Georgette, Tom and Nora have been in Georgette’s office since five this morning and they are on the warpath.”

This was not good. No, this was bad, very bad. Georgette was the Senior Vice President of I/T. Tom was the Vice President of I/T and Nora was the Director over the group Bonnie and I were part of. This was bound to trickle down to Madge who was our manager. I could see that it was going to get real ugly real quick. “What if I turned around and just went back home,” I quipped.

“It’s not really a laughing matter, Jon. What are we going to do? What are you going to do?” I could hear the anxiety in Bonnie’s voice. Or was it fear?

“What can we do? We can’t do anything right now. First of all, we didn’t do anything wrong. We’re going to have to play this by ear. We’ve got no choice but to play this one straight up—just tell the truth. As a contractor, I have no HR protection. You, on the other hand, as an employee have some options under the Human Resources’ rules. It’s possible that I’ll be made the fall guy and get hung out to dry. No, it’s probable. Do this, when you get back to BEB call Lilly Preston your HR rep and talk to her. Even though she is supposed to represent you, just be wary. Always keep in mind that her first loyalty is to the company so be careful what and how you say anything to her. In the meantime, I’m going to go in and try to sort this mess out and assess the damage. Are you sure it was Amara? And are you sure about that pending merger file? If it’s a secret file, how do you know anything about it?”

“It’s mainly speculation from Chuck, who was at Maryville West all night.” Maryville West was the location of the offsite network servers. Chuck was the main network administrator and in position to know these things.

“If it came from Chuck, there’s definitely a problem. He’s not one to idly speculate. He’s not one to spin the rumor mill, either. We’d better go to work before it gets too late. Regardless of what happens, don’t worry about me. Concentrate on protecting yourself. Ok Bonnie?”

“Well there is a problem. When Amara first called into the Help Desk, I did not have her account listed on the master index. I called Sandra, the Business Analyst for the International Group and she said she would generate the work order. When I called down to Network Security, Rob did me a big favor and set up her account prior to having the proper paperwork from Sandra, mainly as a favor to me since it was getting so late in the day and Amara said she was under the gun to get some work done for Samantha, the International Director before the next day’s meeting. We were under so much pressure that day. The Help Desk was like a zoo. I promised him that I’d get the paperwork to him the next morning from Sandra, which I forgot to do in the rush of things. So if they go to Rob, he’s going to point back to me and throw me under the bus just to protect himself. I’m in the middle of all of this. And you know how Sandra is.”

Yes indeed, I knew how Sandra S. Shumate was. She wasn’t known as SS Shumate for nothing. Very political and cunning, she was always huddling with Kolleen and the two of them followed Madge around like puppy dogs. I’ve had a couple of run-ins with the three of them already because of my unorthodox methods and my independent working modus operandi and I wouldn’t put anything past them and their Machiavellian intrigues. This was shaping up to be a very sticky situation.

“Okay. We have no other option that I can think of. You know, Bonnie, we didn’t do anything wrong. Keep that in mind; it will help you get through this. Just tell the truth,” I admonished again.

We both stood and walked out to our cars. Bonnie still had that scared look and I tried again to reassure her that everything was going to be all right. But of course, we both knew it wasn’t going to be all right at all. If what they are saying is even part way

true, heads are going to roll; starting with my head and then Bonnie's head was sure to follow.

On my way in to BMG, I called Amara's home number. No answer; in fact, it was a disconnected number. Then I called her desk number at SOB, again, there was no answer. By now I was at BEB.

My ID badge with the magnetic strip failed to unlock the front door to BEB. That's strange, I thought, but didn't have time to give it any more consideration because so many people were arriving to work that I was able to just fall in behind them and follow them inside. So much for high level security, I smiled to myself. I got to my desk and booted up my computer and started getting ready for the day. I put in another call to Amara, still no answer. I typed in my username and password to log onto the BMG network; access denied, invalid username. Ah, I thought, oh, this is getting serious. I called Ron down in Network Security. No answer. I tried Bonnie's number at the Help Desk, it was busy. I tried calling my friend, Darcy who was a paralegal in the BMG legal department and got no answer there. I was just getting ready to walk over to the Help Desk area when Madge mysteriously showed up in my cubicle.

"Jon, could you come to my office please." It really wasn't a question, and she didn't stick around for an answer. I grabbed my notebook and logbook and headed over to Madge's office. Not surprisingly, Nora was sitting there at Madge's small conference table. My greeting was met with an icy, cold stare; and silence. I took a seat and waited for the fireworks that were sure to ensue.

I had been to Nora's office several times to work on her laptop computer. She was a novice user, dumb really, about computers in particular and I/T in general which wasn't shocking since she came to the I/T department from over in the Finance Department. We all know what finance people care about, nothing but numbers. You don't get to be called a bean counter for nothing. One day when I was working on her laptop I noticed a book, *How to Talk I/T Talk* on her desk. Typical corporate America, talk the talk. She was also on fast track for promotion being a Hispanic woman in this day of political correctness and reverse discrimination and was a completely ruthless corporate politician. After what Bonnie had told me earlier, I knew I was in trouble and my career at BMG was quickly dissolving right before my eyes.

Madge was the first to speak. "I'm sure Bonnie has told you about our, ah, little difficulty last night."

There was no sense beating around the bush or denying the obvious and I figured the truth was my best option, "Yeah, she paged me this morning on my way in and we met at Starbucks for a cup of coffee. She mentioned that there was a rumor going around about a purloined file."

"And that a, ah," glancing at her notes, Madge continued, "An Amara Phillips seems to be involved."

There was a long silence. I'm not sure how I was supposed to respond to that last remark, so I said nothing. Finally, Nora could take the pressure of the silence no longer and said, "Have you seen these?" She reached into a file folder she had in front of her and pulled out some black and white photos and laid them on the table in front of me. I picked them up and thumbed through them. One was a photo of Amara and me getting

on the elevator from the 5th floor at SOB. Another showed us walking out of the front door of the South Office Building. Another one showed us standing at her car in the parking lot talking. They were all time and date stamped from last week, and from the grainy appearance they were obviously taken from a security camera and enlarged. I laid the pictures on the table and stared at Nora. "So." She reached into her file folder and pulled out my business card with the note I left for Amara and tossed it on the table next to the pictures. "Does this ring a bell, Mr. Wright?" So now I was all of a sudden, *Mr. Wright*. Then she reached into the file folder and pulled out a copy of the emails I had sent to Amara and tossed them on the table in front of me. I glanced through them.

"Seems our Mr. Wright is a fledgling poet of sorts," Nora said, with a slight sneer in her voice. "A romantic, no doubt from the looks of it."

So this is how they play the game, I thought to myself. But, why me, I wondered? What could they possibly gain by railroading me on circumstantial evidence? There was something else going on here, something here wasn't quite right. Either they were trying to cover something up or I was innocently caught in a web of intrigue. "I'm not sure I understand the connection," I said, looking into Nora's feline eyes.

"Do you mind if we look at your log book for the past week," Madge inquired. "We all know that you keep a daily journal because I've seen you writing in it when you worked on my laptop."

I opened the log book to last week and turned it around so they could read it and placed it on the table in front of Nora. "I've got nothing to hide," I said.

"Ah, yes, it seems that you set up Amara's personal laptop to access the BMG network from off site last week, which as you should know, is against Bohr's I/T policy. Then, I see you went to her house the other night and again worked on her laptop configuration so that she could access the BMG network's confidential files. And here I see that you met her for lunch yesterday at the Mountain View café—the last time she has been seen by anyone," Nora recited. Looking up at me, she continued, "Looks like you've been spending a lot of time with Amara Phillips. You seem to be the last person to have seen her."

"You mean she's gone?" I blurted out unintentionally.

"Very thorough, our Mr. Wright," Madge added, ignoring my question.

"Yes, yes he is. Too bad we can't train the rest of the techs to keep such complete records. It would sure make our jobs easier, wouldn't it?" Madge observed.

"Ah, here it is. Write this down Madge and call Security." Nora read off Amara's address and home phone number from my daily journal.

Madge immediately got on the phone and relayed the information to someone in Bohrs' Security.

I sat there in stunned silence. Nora looked up and gave me a cold, hard predatory glare. If looks could kill, as my mother often said, I'd be a dead man. "I still don't understand the connection," I barely whispered.

"Let me spell it out for you, Mr. Wright," Nora said. "At the least you are guilty of violating company policy. As a contractor, that is grounds for immediate dismissal, no

questions asked. On the other hand, one might get the opinion that you are somehow complicit in a crime, a crime of corporate espionage. That is a felony punishable by prison time. There is suspicion and it is being checked out as we speak, that your username and password are associated with the security breach. If the file that was stolen ever gets into the general public, it could cost BMG stockholders millions of dollars. Bohrs' Internal Security is doing an investigation right now as we speak. Some people are pushing for an escalation to the State Bureau of Investigation and possibly the FBI level as well. Obviously then, we would like to keep this out of the media. For your information," and here she dropped the bomb shell, "there is no such person as Amara Phillips. Nobody by that name was hired by anybody in BMG for any reason. You, Bonnie and Rob have all been either duped and/or are singularly or as a group culpable with our little so-called Miss Phillips, or whatever her real name is."

I noticed that SS Shumate's name was plainly missing from her list of culpability. Evidently she had covered her tracks well.

"Which is it?"

Nobody wants to be made to look like a fool, I thought. "Which is what?" I was still reeling over the notion that Amara didn't exist. But she did. I saw her, I talked to her, I met her kids, we had lunch together, I hugged her—I could still smell her and feel her body next to mine—even now, days later. There was no question that I was going to need to get some help on this one, and get it pronto, right away; right now, this instant. I decided to take the bravado tack, "I've been here for more than four years now. You all know how I feel about BMG, the people here and the work I do to help our clients, including you," I said as I looked directly at Nora. "Do you think I would knowingly do anything to jeopardize my job and my friendships? This is the one job I've had in my whole life that I actually loved doing." The inadvertent past tense usage didn't escape my notice, or Nora's for that matter.

"Nevertheless," it was Madge's turn, "We have no choice but to terminate our relationship with you as a contractor. I've already notified Mr. Johnson, your contractor company representative. As you no doubt have already discovered, your Bohrs' network account has been disabled; I am asking you to turn over your ID badge, our company laptop that you have been using and pager and pick up your personal property and vacate the premises. Security has already been notified and they are sending an officer over to escort you from BEB to your car and off the company property. We are going to continue to investigate this matter and we're asking you to keep yourself available for any further questioning."

Madge never looked me in the eye as she spoke staring at the table top. It's almost as if she was embarrassed by the whole thing, as well as she should be. After all of the things I had done for her, including working overtime to get her out of one jam after another and not charging the company; after all the personal work I did for her and her friends on their home computers on my personal time; after all of this, this is the way I am being rewarded? Of all the beers and times we shared together after-hours as a group, team building. Then there were the outings at her house for '*the team*.' "If that's what you want Madge, then fine. It sounds like you have already made up your mind."

I stood, picked up my notebook and logbook, laid my ID badge and pager on the table and said with just a note of sarcasm, "I'll leave my laptop on my desk. Is there anything else that you want from me?"

Neither of them spoke, but only shook their head.

When I left Madge's office, one of the security guards was already at my cubicle to escort me off the property. It was Officer Gentry, Tim Gentry, who I knew well. "I'm sorry about this, Jon."

"I know, you're just doing your job, Tim."

We went over to my desk and I gathered up all my personal stuff and we left the building. Tim walked with me all the way to the car. Several people stopped and stared at us. I'm sure the rumors will be flying as soon as I'm gone if not before. That's the way it is in corporate America. As soon as somebody leaves the company anything and everything that ever went wrong was their fault. I suspected that it was going to be no different in my case. I put my stuff in the car, shook Tim's hand, wished him well and drove away from BMG.

I was still in a daze thinking about Amara. Could it be true? And if it was, how could she do this to me? How do I get myself in these situations, I wondered.

Not wanting to believe what was happening, I drove up to Pineview to confront Amara and straighten out this mess once and for all. When I got to Amara's house I parked the car and walked up to the front door and knocked. The force of my knocking pushed the door ajar so I stepped inside of her house. Well, what used to be her house. It was now completely empty. Everything was gone; the furniture and all of the stuff that makes up a household, everything was gone. I walked through the empty, hollow house listening to the echo of my footsteps and looking around and then out the back door. I went down and checked the garbage cans; empty. No sign of anybody or anything. Nada. It reminded me of one of those *Twilight Zones* episodes we used to watch on television. I retreated through the house and back out through the front door, closing it on my way out. By now there was no sense in worrying about fingerprints, mine were already all over the place from the other night. I checked around the front yard, driveway and in the garage. Nothing. No sign of Amara or anybody else. It's as if nobody existed here.

I got back in my car and drove down the road that I had come up the mountain on to the nearest 7-Eleven store. I checked the phone book by the pay phone and scribbled down the address to the KinderCare. I went inside and got directions from the clerk to the childcare center. I drove over there and talked to one of the teachers who came to the counter. There was no record of a Kay Phillips and nobody there had heard of her or Amara Phillips.

I drove back down Highway 1 into Springdale and stopped at the first KinderCare along the way. Same thing. Nobody knew a Kay or Amara Phillips. I drove over to Springdale University and talked to one of the admission clerks. She said there was no one registered for classes by the name of Amara Phillips.

I called Bonnie's number at the Help Desk. On the third try I finally got through. Only it wasn't Bonnie who answered the phone. It was the back-stabbing, conniving Kolleen. How could I be so lucky? "Can I talk to Bonnie, please?"

“She’s in a meeting; can I take a message, Jon?”

The smirk in her voice shrieked across the miles into my cell phone, it was all I could do to keep the sarcasm out of my voice. “Just tell her I called,” I said.

“Ok, Jon. Is there anything I can do for you?”

“No Kolleen, thanks for asking.” *You’ve done enough already*, I thought to myself.

What to do now? I called Darcy in the legal department. No answer. There was nothing else left for me to do, so I drove on home.



Back in Chicago Angela departed the plane, claimed her luggage, found her car and drove to Charlie’s office. The late Friday afternoon traffic was murder. Especially in the rain and ever-present wind. When she got there, what she found was a vacant office space and the door locked. She called his number on her cell phone and it rang for several minutes but no one answered before it rolled over to voice mail. Angela left a frantic message for Charlie. Now she began to panic. She checked her watch; five-forty. It was too late to call the bank and check her balance. That would have to wait until Monday. She asked around at some of the adjacent offices but the people who were in, they were of no help. She got the number of the landlord from one of the tenants and called. After several rings, someone answered.

It was the answering service and they informed her that the landlord would not be available until Monday morning.

By now she was in a full fledged panic mode. What was going on, she wondered aloud. But there was no one to ask. Charlie was her only contact. It wasn’t like him to double cross her after all the years they’ve known each other and helped each other out of jams. There, she said it. ‘Double-cross.’ Surely not. She tried to think but couldn’t think of anyone to call who might know where Charlie could be found. She knew none of his friends. She didn’t dare call ESS. The truth of the matter was that she couldn’t call anybody until Monday. And she knew it but didn’t want to believe it. She refused to believe that Charlie would do this to her. There must be an explanation she thought. But then she cursed herself for being so stupid and gullible. She should have protected herself better. She trusted Charlie. That was the problem. She was too trusting.

Angela tried to fight back the mounting tears with little success. Deep down inside she knew she had been had. Yet, she didn’t want to believe it. There had to be some explanation she thought again. But none came to mind.

There was nothing left to do but drive home. It was a long, miserable drive; in the rain; in the dark; crying. Angela never felt so lonely in all her life. Twenty four hours ago she was flirting, feeling the love of life for the first time in years and now it all came crashing down around her.



The next day's newspaper only said that it was a single car accident most probably caused by the inclement weather and probably driver drowsiness. No alcohol or drugs were involved in the accident according to the police report.



I was sitting at Starbucks having a cup of coffee when Bonnie walked in. I had called her earlier and she said she was off from work so, yeah, she could meet me for a cup of coffee and chat about 'the good ole days.' It was Friday, the day after Thanksgiving and there were only a few people in the restaurant. I stood and waved so Bonnie could see me. I walked over and gave her a big hug. "You look so good, Bonnie," holding her at arm's length, "At forty-eight, you look great and younger women would die to look just like you." I gave her another big hug.

"Bonnie, I'm so glad you could come down to see me."

"I heard you were in town and if you didn't call me, I would have killed you," she said laughingly.

Bonnie ordered her usual latté and we went back over to the table where I'd been sitting. "How's San Diego?" she asked.

"It's beautiful. I'm living about a quarter of a mile off the beach. After Debbie and I split up, I moved to San Diego and rented a room in a small, older, rather run-down house in a crummy neighborhood, but hey, it's Southern California—and it's reasonably inexpensive—for California anyway. I often walk down to the beach at night just to sit there and listen to the ocean. I'm working for a small company building and repairing computers. It's not much, but it keeps me busy and barely pays the rent. The truth of the matter is that I have few wants and needs."

We sat in silence for a few minutes steeped in our thoughts staring at our coffee reluctant to bring up old wounds. "When did you leave Bohrs?" I finally asked.

"It was about a month after you were forced to leave. At first they tried to get me to quit, which I didn't want to do. I'd been there on the Help Desk for eight years; my seniority was second only to Taryn who has been there for ten years. Can you imagine working for ten years on a help desk answering phones and dealing with people who think a computer is like a radio or television, an appliance that all you have to do is turn it on and select a channel? Can you believe I was there for so long? I had two meetings with Lilly Preston, you remember her, the HR rep? Anyway, she was of little help. Like you once said, she's all about the company. Fran has wanted me to get another job for the past couple of years. But then, he himself could never hold a job for very long and really couldn't say too much about my situation. I'm drawing unemployment now while I'm looking for another job. With the economy the way it is, this could turn into a long, drawn out affair."

"Eight years at Bohrs. Almost a lifetime; I made it barely past four years."

“They sure did you dirty.”

We sat for a while not knowing really where to start.

“Tell me, did you ever find or talk to Amara again?”

“No,” I sadly replied, very sadly. “I never talked to Amara again. It’s like she never existed. I went by her house but she had already moved out. I tracked down and talked to the landlord of the house where she was living but he said he never heard of her. He said some guy had signed a six-month lease for the house during that time frame and as far as he knew, never moved in. Nobody at the childcare center knew her or her daughter either. I went out on the internet and there wasn’t a trace of her anywhere that I could find. Her NetZero account was discontinued so I can’t email her. It’s funny; it was like she never existed. A ghost—an apparition and figment of my imagination.”

“But we both know she did exist. I talked to her at the Help Desk.”

“Yeah, we did. What happened after I left,” I said wishing to change the subject.”

“It went pretty fast. They grilled me for hours but I really had nothing to tell them and I knew nothing of value. Only that I got the call, had Rob create the user account and called you to help her set up her computer, that’s all I knew. That’s the truth, as you very well know. We went over and over it for hours, to the point of tears. Yeah, they had me crying before it was over. The part I regret is that I wish I would never have gotten you involved. If I could take anything back, that’s what I wish I could undo. Of all the PC techs out there at Bohrs, I always liked you the best. You were the best.”

“Well, I don’t regret it one bit,” I said ignoring her compliment. It was always hard for me to accept compliments.

“They really trashed your reputation at Bohrs. From the moment Tim escorted you from the property, tongues started wagging. People who I thought were our friends fed the rumor mills, led by you-know-who, Kolleen. As for the mysterious merger file that was downloaded, they were able to track it to an offsite laptop from the IP address. They are pretty sure Amara had something to do with it. Of course they went on to say you were in cahoots with her. That she couldn’t have done it without you because it looks like your username and password were used to access the confidential databases. They claimed to have pictures of the two of you. Do they? They can’t prove it, but that doesn’t stop them from insinuating your involvement. They also claim to have email messages of you and Amara conspiring together. The merger with Schuler never materialized; though don’t be surprised if they pull it off in the future after they manipulate the stock prices again. I think they are just waiting for everything to cool off and calm back down. Plus, Fran said that it has something to do with the price of their stock which I don’t understand. They also somehow managed to keep everything out of the media. Rob got a job back east somewhere in upstate New York with IBM a couple of months after I left. Kolleen is now a business analyst—her reward, I suppose for her part in this entire skullduggery, though I am not sure what she did other than to poison Madge’s mind. There were rumors going around about Kolleen and Madge—some kind of indiscretion, if you know what I mean. I also heard that it caused a lot of friction with Kolleen’s roommate, Julie and put a strain on Madge’s marriage. Sandra, she moved up the corporate ladder after transferring to another department. Don’t be surprised if she becomes a director in the near future. I heard Nora is moving back over to SOB,

probably in Sales and Marketing—so she can ruin that department like she did Finance and I/T. I heard rumors that Tom is going to retire even though he is only fifty-eight, now that ESS has taken over all of Bohrs' IT functions. Oh, yeah, the director of International resigned last summer, 'to pursue other interests'—which as you know, is corporate-speak for being forced to leave."

"And Georgette?"

"Oh, she's doing well, she's a survivor. You don't reach those echelons of the corporate hierarchy without possessing political savvy. I don't think anything negative came her way. She was well insulated. Looks like Tom and Nora took the brunt of it.

"Madge left before I did; she too, is pursuing other interests, again. I've heard that she's trying to get on with ESS. After only six months a lot of the techs you knew are gone. You wouldn't even recognize the place. I had lunch with Lorayne a couple of weeks ago. She is still there; same ole Lorayne. She's trying to get a transfer into the programming support department, which she should have no trouble getting—heck, with her personality she'll have no trouble getting whatever job she wants at Bohrs. As you know, everybody loves Lorayne."

"How's Fran doing?"

"Fine, Thanks for asking. Though he was hot for me to leave Bohrs, now that all I'm doing is drawing unemployment compensation it's created a hardship on us financially, but we are getting by okay. What about Debbie, how is she doing?"

"You know nursing, she's doing all right, but I think she's getting burned out with patient care. It'll wear on you, especially after twenty-six years. We separated after what happened last summer. I don't think she believed me when I told her nothing happened. She said my obsession with Amara was more than she could take."

"No! I didn't know that but I confess I've heard rumors. Then again, after what we've been through I've learned that you can't believe everything you hear—or read."

We sat in an awkward silence for a while, each deep within our own thoughts, me, mostly reliving memories.

"Tell me, Jon, did you ever talk to Amara after that?"

"No, I never did," I whispered.

"What happened to you, Jon, whatever happened with you and Amara?"

"You know, Bonnie, I had been married for nearly twenty years and never once have I ever done anything to jeopardize our relationship. Oh, I may have been tempted, sort of, a time or two but nothing serious. Nothing until I met Amara. There was something there, some sort of chemistry, an energy. It was almost as if there was a compelling force drawing me in to her, a powerful force beyond my comprehension. Do you believe in love at first sight?"

"As a matter of fact, I do."

"Have you ever met anyone who just completely overwhelmed you?"

“Yeah, I have. I’ve never told anyone before, but there was someone at Bohrs who literally swept me off my feet. I’ve never told anyone before, not even Fran. If the truth be known, if he would have pushed the issue, I think I would have had an affair with him in a heartbeat even though he was a married man. Is that terrible of me?”

“No; no,” I replied. I was thinking of Amara; would I? Could I? “What kept you from, ah, doing anything?”

“Mostly I was afraid. I was afraid that I would get into a big tangled up mess that I couldn’t get out of. I was afraid that I would hurt Fran in a way I never want to hurt him. We’ve been married for over twenty-five years now. I’ve never even had sex with anyone in my life other than Fran. I was afraid that, maybe I would like it? And that I would hate myself for the rest of my life. And I couldn’t live with that. But I think I was mostly afraid that I would like it and I wouldn’t want to stop if I started. And if I started he might stop and the hurt of rejection would be more than I could bear.”

“Is that the kind of way it was with you and Amara?”

“Yea Bonnie, ah, sort of. In the beginning, when I first met her there was this, this feeling; this emotion welling up from the core of my being that froze me in place. When I first met Amara I actually stood there and dumbly stared at her for several minutes. When I first laid eyes on her that day on the 5th floor of the South Office Building I was so enchanted that I just stood there and stared at her. That’s never happened to me before. Looking back on it, she must have thought I was some kind of hick who just fell off the hay wagon, which in a lot of ways, I am—and was. It wasn’t like I wanted to jump her bones right there on the spot, it was more like, and I hate to say this because it may sound corny, but it was more of a spiritual thing than anything else.”

“Yes, yes, that’s it exactly! I didn’t think anyone else could possibly understand what I was feeling. It’s a soul-mate sort of experience, though I know that term has been really abused lately.”

“I never thought of it as a soul-mate experience, but I will say I thought she touched my soul in a way that it has never been touched before. Odd, isn’t it that at fifty-one I would feel and say such a thing—talking like a teenager.”

“No! I know exactly what you mean,” Bonnie exclaimed throwing her hands in the air for emphasis. “It’s that this guy, and I won’t mention his name because he is married, did the same for me. It’s not like Fran and I are not getting along or anything like that, but when he walked into my life I just melted. I babbled like a little girl. And I don’t mind telling you this, in fact, I don’t know why I’m telling you any of this at all because I have never told anybody any of this before, not even Jacquelyn, who is my very bestest of best friends, I felt so foolish while it was happening. I almost felt like a teenager at a rock concert, like I completely lost my mind. Which, I’m sure I did; but I didn’t do anything, nothing bad anyway—and I wanted to. We had lunch a few times and I actually kissed him—I wanted to. Is that so bad?”

“I’m not so sure it’s bad to want to do something, we are after all, human. We have human emotions and human feelings. And I’m thinking of my case, I swear Bonnie, the chemical reaction—if that is what it is—drove me and was so much stronger than any feeling I’ve ever experienced before. I think it was something beyond whatever emotion, logic or thought I may have ever had.”

“So you’re thinking it was beyond your control?”

“That sounds too much like a cop-out, doesn’t it? We are, after all, ultimately responsible for our actions.”

“But is that what you’re thinking?”

“Yeah, in a way, it was beyond my control, though I, and it sounds like you, controlled my response to whatever it was that was happening; controlled it by restraint. I think I regret that now. No, I know that I regret it now.”

“But to tell you the truth, if he walked in that door right now I’m not sure how I would react. I’m not so sure that I am strong enough to do the ‘right’ thing.”

“And what is the *right* thing, Bonnie?”

“What would you do if Amara walked in the door right now?”

“I have thought about it. As a matter of fact I’ve spent many hours and many sleepless nights thinking about just that very thing. What would I do? Part of me says nothing. Most of me says that I want to experience that feeling again, no, stronger this time. That exhilaration! I want to exalt in it: celebrate myself, herself—ourselves. I want to complete me, if that makes any sense. But the truth is, I am a coward at heart and I don’t think that I have the courage to pull it off. Maybe it’s not cowardice, maybe it’s loyalty? Or maybe it’s fear; fear that something beautiful will get tarnished in some carnal way. Sometimes the want is better than the having. I fear I am a romanticist at heart and sometimes it’s easier to dream than to live.”

“I know I’ve thought a lot about loyalty while this was going on with me. Thankfully, ever since I left Bohrs I’ve not had to deal with it because I never see him anymore and I avoid going to places that we went to together. Tell me Jon, why do I talk to you about this instead of Fran? Why do you talk to me about Amara instead of talking to Debbie last summer about how you feel?”

“I think it is because Debbie and I were too close; I didn’t want to hurt her feelings. I think she would have felt threatened by what was going on and wouldn’t be able to handle it and besides, I’m sure it would only cause a fight. But really, deep down inside I am a coward. I don’t deal very well with confrontation; never have. In the end it didn’t matter because she left anyway after I lost my contracting job at Bohrs.”

“You and me both, I’ve always done everything I could to avoid a confrontation. I’m thinking that in all of this conversation, neither one of us has mentioned the word, *love*. Why do you suppose that is?”

“We tend to talk all about love, but we never say love. So many people I know say love a lot but never really talk about love, do they? Then there are other people I know who talk a lot about love but who don’t really love at all—other than themselves—self-love.”

“Yeah, and love is a word that means so many different things to so many different people. There are so many degrees of love, so many kinds of love. People smarter than us have debated and discussed the meaning of love for so many millennia without any satisfactory conclusions. There must be millions of lines of poetry dedicated to trying to understand *love*. How are we to arrive at any meaningful understanding now?”

Do you love Amara? Did you?"

I sat and thought about that for a while. Did I love her? "I may say—or think—I *love you*, but in reality I don't even know her. How can you know someone after being with her a couple of times for only a few hours? And look what she did to me. She apparently used me for what seems to be corporate espionage. Like some kind of bad 'B' movie."

After a few minutes of silence I said, "Yeah, I loved Amara. At least I loved the image of what Amara created and how she made me feel."

"Really, that stuff about corporate espionage was only conjecture. Nothing was ever proven."

"With some very convincing circumstantial evidence, I might add, but that is not really the question here, is it?"

"Sure it is, because if there is even the slightest hint of love, how can someone do such a thing? How can one betray a love or even, say, a fondness?"

"That brings up the Judas aspect in this situation and we can talk all day about that and get nowhere. Like Lancelot and Arthur. How can anyone ever understand a betrayal? Did Lancelot even think he betrayed Arthur? Did Arthur ever stop loving Lancelot? Or Guinevere? Do you think Jesus ever stopped loving Judas?" I pondered aloud.

"What if you weren't betrayed at all," Bonnie asked.

Something I've often contemplated. "Did you know that Amara means *bitterness*?" I asked after a while.

"No, really?"

"Yeah, I looked it up on the internet one night. To me, I like to think it's not bitter like resentful or like leaving a disagreeable taste in your mouth. I see it more like grievous; like a disappointment. Like a promise of something not fulfilled. Does that make sense? No matter how we look at this or how I try to rationalize what happened, last summer a part of me died. Something inside of me died; there is now a gaping hole; a vacuous emptiness where before there was feeling, emotion—even joy. I wrote a verse about it," I said while scribbling it down on the back of a napkin and sliding it over to Bonnie so she could read.

Icy flurries meet Dawning light

This morning gray defined

A Wintered heart no longer mourns

Summer night's Fatality

Who? The owl mocks in contempt—

Echoes deaden in my mind

Absorbed in its Mortality

—Could not fully Comprehend.

“That is so sad, and dark. And melancholy,” she added.

“Amara liked Emily Dickinson, I think. She said so. She quoted a line from one of her poems when we met for lunch that day.”

“How apropos. In the four years we worked together I had no idea that you wrote poetry or that we had so much in common. We should share our poetry. I’ve secretly written poetry since I was six or seven. I’ve never let anybody read mine before; not even Fran. I was always afraid to; I was afraid people would laugh at me. Afraid that I would feel embarrassed.

“Maybe we are the soul mates in all of this after all. Maybe we were together somehow in another life. Could that be the lesson here in this thing called, *life*?”

“It could be.”

“Do you think it’s possible to love two people at the same time?”

“Boy, I’ve thought a lot about that. Sometimes I rationalize in my mind that yes, it is possible. Then I wonder if I’m just trying to justify having my cake and eat it too, as my mother used to say.”

“But you do believe it’s possible?”

“Yeah, I think you can love more than one person. But on the other hand, could it be the same and as strong as a commitment to one person? Can the intensity be the same?”

“Well, that’s just it. If you are working on building a strong relationship with your partner, how can there be room for another person?”

“Surely it must be different.”

“And how do you know that it’s love and not just lust?”

“Bingo! Isn’t that the sixty-four-thousand-dollar question?”

“So, when you think back on Amara, was it love or was it lust that you felt?”

“I can’t admit to myself that it was just lust. Though there was sexual tension, I can’t bring myself to call it lust. I’ve felt lust before—many times. This was different. This was definitely something other than lust. Do I dare say, *love*?”

“As a romanticist, I like to think of it as love.”

“Yeah, and so do I. Have you ever thought of the difference between ‘being in love’ and ‘loving someone,’ Bonnie?”

“For me, falling in love was not a conscience decision; it just happened. With Fran, I make a conscience decision every day to love him.”

“Sometimes you’re scary, Bonnie. Sometimes it sounds like I’m talking to myself. With Amara, I also didn’t make a conscience decision to ‘fall in love.’ From the moment I saw her something snapped inside of me. Even as it was happening though, I chose not to stop it. So in that respect, I would have to say that I made a conscience decision to allow it to happen; at least, to allow it to continue.”

“Is it that rational?”

“It’s easy in hindsight to analyze something. But thinking back on it, I would say that whatever was happening to me was something that went beyond whatever we choose to call normal. It really was beyond my control and while it was beyond my control, I wanted it to happen. So, while in the beginning I was, let’s say captivated, I consciously chose to pursue her. I wanted to re-experience that emotion I felt the first time I came around the corner and saw Amara for the first time sitting at her desk.”

“What are you going to do now?”

“Since Amara is gone and I have no idea where she is and believe me, I’ve looked everywhere I could think, there is nothing I can do about her. She is gone; a memory; a distant mirage on the horizon of my mind. I’m left with idle dreams. Dreaming of what could have been. My dad, who was a very practical man, often accused and berated me for being a dreamer. Perhaps he was right.”

We sat in silence for many minutes lost in our own thoughts.

“Oh, look at the time. Do you realize that we’ve been here for nearly three hours? I’m so sorry, I must run off.” Bonnie stood and I helped her put on her coat. “I’m so sorry, I really must be going. I’m already late. I told Fran we would only be here a couple of hours and we’re promised at a friend of his for this evening. I’m so sorry, Jon, but I must be going.”

I gave Bonnie a big hug and we exchanged pleasantries and promised to keep in touch—all the things friends promise before they part—promises they never keep. Promises they never really intended to keep.

That was more than six years ago... and I haven’t heard or seen or spoken to Bonnie since.



POSTSCRIPT

Charlie got back from his jog on the sandy beach early that September evening and stood at the corner window overlooking China Beach and the Pacific Ocean. Perfect he thought, watching another stunning sunset. What a gorgeous view. I'll say one thing; Angela knew what she was doing when she picked this place. What a waste he thought again about that fateful night. While he was waiting for her at her apartment, he received the news about the fatal car accident during a call from the highway patrol. Such a tragic family. First Stuart and Jonathan and now Angela was gone. Irony how all three perished in car accidents. *I wonder if it's something in their DNA* he mused.

After the funeral Charlie moved to Sea Cliff to think about his future. He had the million-dollar house Angela picked out and it was free and clear of any mortgage. It took some finagling, but he finally got title in his name. The transfer of funds from the bank account was much easier accomplished since he had all of Angela's access codes and passwords. Now he had the house and the money and precious little else.

They'll be calling, he thought, and they'll want me to do another job. He wondered if this time he could say no or will he be seduced by the thrill of the chase? Living on the edge—the adrenaline rush—once again tempting fate.

How ironic he thought, that after 9/11 all the money spent on those marketing plans to work the bandito angle went all down the tubes. That whole marketing ploy would have to be scratched, of course. There is no way public sentiment would ever tolerate that, not now, not after what happened to the World Trade Towers. On the other hand, with the information Angela inadvertently supplied, his recently purchased stock options in Schuler and Bohrs should do really well in the future. The upside potential after the merger should at least quadruple his half a million-dollar investment. Too bad Angela couldn't be here today to enjoy the fruits of her labor.

Amara. Life is bittersweet Charlie reflected, and turned back toward the kitchen. I think I'll have another glass of wine.