

# *Crossroads*

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I was not having fun.

The immediate reason for that had something to do with being crammed in seat 20D of a 767 for almost two and a half hours. Aside from the usual discomfort of a 23-inch shoulder span crammed into an 18-inch middle seat, there was the added joy of discovering that row 20 sits up against an interior bulkhead. As soon as the oblivious occupant of 19D put his seat in the fully reclined position (which happened about 10 minutes after takeoff, naturally) I lost all hope of using my tray table or even having enough space to hold my John Sandford paperback a comfortable reading distance from my face. By the time we began our descent into Salt Lake City International Airport I was cross-eyed, stiff-shouldered, and more familiar with 19D's scalp than his barber.

But there was more behind my disgruntled state than just a bad seat on a crowded jet. While I waited patiently by the carousel for my checked baggage to appear, I thought about the day everything had started to go sour.

I was in Walt's office, door closed, shooting the breeze while he packed his collection of promotional coffee mugs in a box, wrapping each meticulously in newspaper to avoid breakage. "You sure it wouldn't be easier just to stick around another few years?" I joked, not really expecting him to change his mind.

"No way," he said emphatically. "You saw the early-out package – if they want to give me this kind of money to leave, I'd be an idiot to turn it down."

I just nodded grimly. I was going to miss working for Walt. "Any word on the replacement?"

"Denny is still doing interviews. The candidate pool doesn't look real promising." Walt stopped wrapping mugs for a moment and gave me one of his Wise Elder looks. "He keeps asking me if you're going to apply, Tom. I think he'd really like to have you in here."

“So I can go to meetings, suck up to directors and do revised budget forecasts weekly? No thanks – I’m having too much fun keeping the network running.”

“So be it,” he sighed.

The thing is, I wasn’t kidding – back then things had been pretty good. We had a solid core team of technical managers who knew their stuff and worked well together backed up by a corps of fair-to-good contractors who handled desktop support. In Walt we had a boss who knew how to manage the upper levels and give us enough room and support to do our jobs well. The result was a smooth-running network and a very content IT staff. Most of us had at least 10 years with the company, and saw no reason why we couldn’t go another 10.

Even Walt’s early retirement didn’t hurt things too badly at first. While his office stood empty, the five of us – Veronica, the help desk manager; Pete, the wide-area network genius; Joanna, the Web and database specialist; Jesse, the cable and hardware expert; and myself, the LAN guru – divided up the critical functions and kept all the plates spinning. For four months we functioned as a self-directed team until Denny, the IS Director, announced that he had hired a new manager to replace Walt.

Our first meeting with the new boss set the tone for the year and a half that followed. Kevin held forth at length about his extensive technology experience in the military, followed by a short stint with a large consulting firm. The certificates on the wall told us he had been to a lot of training: Microsoft, Cisco, Oracle, Sun, and a number of reputable independent schools were named on the various documents, all of which were dated within the past two years. Conspicuously absent was any evidence of training in NetWare; that seemed incongruous, as we were very much a Novell shop.

We knew we were in trouble when Kevin launched into a speech about his commitment to customer service, and how he expected each of us to make the same commitment to service every need of our customers, the end users. That philosophy sounds great in principle, but never works in practice. To keep systems manageable and maintainable, IT shops often have to weigh end user requests (which are always expressed as “needs”) against the real needs of the business as a whole; sometimes the benefit to a few users is not enough to justify the corresponding costs.

Sure enough, within a few months Kevin had made his mark. Instead of one standard office suite we were supporting four different packages in multiple configurations. Users had more freedom to change the configuration on their workstations to suit their needs. A dozen new applications had been introduced to meet the needs of small workgroups. Kevin received accolades from the Executive Committee for his customer focus.

Meanwhile, the people who had to make it all work were becoming more and more stressed. Veronica’s help desk staff had little expertise in the new office suites, so they were taking longer to resolve simple calls and had to dispatch techs more often. Joanna had to learn the innards of several new database engines and their corresponding front-

end clients, as well as the custom interfaces of the dozen new applications. Jesse's techs were getting sent out on more and more calls that ended up having nothing to do with broken hardware as users tried unsuccessfully to install their favorite programs from home, which often tried to update drivers or change the network configuration. Pete was seeing increases in broadcast traffic and had to adjust his switches to keep from saturating our wide area network links. And I had fifteen new servers added to my list of responsibilities but no new resources to support them. I found my days getting longer and my pager going off more often in the night. And through it all Kevin regularly hit us with performance reports telling us what we already knew: support incidents were up, average time to resolve was up, systems availability was down, and overtime expenses were getting out of control. Our new leader's inability to see the causal relationship between his new philosophy and the deteriorating state of the network earned him the covert nickname of Commodore Clueless.

The most ominous development, though, was with our contractors who handle the brunt of the day-to-day activity. Most of them had been with us for over a year, which is fairly unusual for entry-level outsourced people. That worked well for us because they knew the environment; through experience, they knew what the most common issues were and understood how to resolve them. But the new stresses introduced by Kevin's changes were taking a toll on their morale and personal time, too. Several were talking openly about looking for new assignments. We could replace their bodies easily, but not their experience or the good relationships we had with them.

We did what we thought was the right thing: the five of us put together a joint status report stating, in as neutral a way as possible, the problems. We used Kevin's own statistics and measurements to demonstrate that we needed either to increase the size of the support staff or revise policy to rein in the workload. Each of us combed meticulously through the document to make sure there was no hint of criticism toward Kevin himself. Then we delivered the report to Kevin and Denny, thinking the solution would be obvious.

A week went by with no word. We were starting to wonder how to politely push things along when Kevin called a team meeting. He started out by praising the thoroughness and professional tone of our report, saying that we had made it obvious that some changes were definitely in order. "Starting the first of the month," he announced, "we'll have four additional contractors assigned to LAN support: one help desk, one administrator, and two field techs." I heard Jesse sigh softly, but something about Kevin's tone put a knot in the pit of my stomach. It took only a few seconds for my fears to be realized.

"Since we don't have the budget to support that headcount at the current rates," Kevin continued, "the new people will come from LANtech, a company recommended by Corporate IS."

I really didn't like the sound of that. "What about our contract with ESS?" I asked, referring to the company that supplied our existing people.

“They’ll be offered a chance to match LANtech’s rate,” Kevin answered smugly. “If they can’t, we’ll give them the required notice and terminate the contract.”

“But what about the good people we already have?” Veronica protested. “If we dump ESS, we’ll lose them.”

Kevin’s expression remained blank, as if this were of no consequence. “Everyone is replaceable.”

We would hear that slogan many times in the months to come as our good, reliable contractors left and were replaced by people from the LANtech. Our worst fears were quickly realized: ESS had been a full-service systems integrator, with resources and expertise to back up their people; LANtech turned out to be little more than a temp agency, hiring people fresh out of training programs with no experience and paying them rock-bottom wages. These people would come in, stay long enough to learn the ropes, and then leave LANtech for better-paying positions with benefits at other area companies. LANtech didn’t suffer because there was always a new trainee to fill the slot, but the strain on our core team was tremendous. The camaraderie between the five of us was still as strong as ever, but our conversations became increasingly bitter. Sarcasm and gallows humor became commonplace as we became more and more overworked. Still, there was an unspoken agreement that we would stick together. Eventually Denny would see the light, even if Commodore Clueless never did.

Things really started to fall apart in January, after the big Y2K non-event was safely behind us, when Kevin met with each of us individually to discuss our performance evaluations for 1999. The standard system in our company rated performance in a number of categories using a 5-point scale with 1 being totally egregious and 5 being practically godlike. In actual practice, most people got 3’s and 4’s; the proportion of 4’s to 3’s tended to separate the high performers from the rest of the pack. Annual merit raises and bonuses were based on the ratings, so people took them very seriously. Under Walt, our group tended to average out between 3.8 and 4.1, which was about as high as the upper echelons would allow a rating to go – Walt always pushed the envelope of political acceptability, even defying the unofficial taboo against giving out 5’s when he could. Our 1998 results, which spanned the transition from Walt to Kevin, had been close to that range thanks largely to Denny.

Given that history, I was expecting to come out around 3.8 for 1999 even with the difficulties we’d had during the year. I felt the floor open up below me when I looked at the write-up Kevin handed me and saw the final figure: 3.1 overall, 2’s in ‘Communication and Teamwork’ and ‘Effective Leadership’.

Kevin’s explanation was brief and unsatisfying. “I can’t fault your technical knowledge,” he said smoothly. “You clearly know a lot about Novell and about servers in general. But you have to admit that things did not run smoothly last year. Server uptime was below the target, overtime attributed to out-of-hours service exceeded the budget limits,

and customer satisfaction with server performance is down. As manager of LAN services, Tom, it's your job to keep those metrics in line and satisfy our customers and last year you didn't do that very well."

The boss took my stunned silence for agreement and went on to his next amazing observation. "You also need to work on your people skills, Tom. I've gotten a few complaints that you take too long to respond to your pager and to voice mail. I'd like to see you spend more time in the office with the LANtech people; there's a lot you can teach them, but they say you're difficult to approach and it's hard to get your attention when they need you. I need you to be a team player."

I was speechless. I was going through a pager battery every week and getting 25 voice mails a day from users to whom Kevin had given out my direct number as a customer relations gesture, mostly with questions that should have gone directly to the help desk. Nobody could keep up with that. Argument would be fruitless, though, I could see that plainly; I signed the form and walked away.

My experience was far from unique; in fact, at 3.1 I had fared better than everyone except Pete, who had suffered the least impact from the sweeping changes. "What can I say?" he joked grimly. "A well-designed WAN is hard to screw up."

Over a hastily arranged dinner at a nearby grill, we plotted our response. The time for diplomacy was over, we decided – we would take our case to Denny directly, five on one, and ask him to overrule both the evaluations and some of Kevin's policy changes. Over several pots of strong coffee at Veronica's apartment we organized our issues and outlined our presentation to Denny. I was elected to see Linda, Denny's secretary, first thing in the morning to schedule the meeting.

Linda did not even pretend surprise when I told her the group wanted to meet with Denny. "How about four o'clock tomorrow?" she suggested. "I've been holding that spot open just in case; Kevin won't be around because he has a meeting in Fairfax."

"What would we do without you?" I half-joked.

"Let's hope none of us has to find out," she answered flatly.

At 3:15 the next day we gathered in a storage room far from our own area to practice making our points and work off some of the emotion. We knew we needed to be cool and businesslike even though we were no longer looking to spare Kevin's image.

Denny greeted us with a forced smile, waving us into his office promptly at four and closing the door softly behind us. We had agreed that Pete would speak first, but before he could get started Denny held him off.

"I know why you're here," he said cheerlessly. "Kevin and I had a long talk earlier today about his concerns, so I think I have a pretty good understanding of what's happening."

I felt a knot forming in my belly – something I’d experienced often since Walt left, and it usually meant something bad was coming. A quick look at my friends told me I was not alone in my foreboding this time.

Denny signed deeply. “Change is always hard to live with,” he declared. “I know how much you all liked and admired Walt; so did I, believe me. When he chose to take the package, I knew it would be hard to replace him because of the great rapport we all had. But Walt is gone; Kevin is in charge now. His way of doing things is different from what you were used to, but that doesn’t make it wrong. He’s got a lot of very good ideas and came highly recommended, but things are not going to work unless you all get behind him and push to make things work. Take that energy that you’ve been pouring into banding together in opposition to change and use it instead to make the right things happen. Talk to Kevin, and listen to him. He’s not an ogre. He has the same goal as all of you – to make our customers happy. In the end, that’s why we have these jobs.”

Denny couldn’t have disrupted our approach any more if he’d deliberately planned it. There was a gruesome silence as we looked frantically back and forth at each other, trying to regroup. First Jesse, then Veronica, then I tried haltingly to raise our issues, quickly trying to rephrase in ways that would not sound as though we were simply whining about having to change, but in the end we looked like feeble, stammering children trying to get out of doing their homework. We’d been completely outmaneuvered and we knew it.

The next day, Friday, Veronica and Jesse called in sick. I tried to get some time to talk with Pete and Joanna, but they were too busy to chat. For the first time I felt the fabric of our group identity beginning to tear.

Monday night my pager went off, offering me a flash of hope. “WE NEED TO TALK,” the message read. “BRIDGE 5, AS SOON AS YOU CAN PLEASE.” It had come from Veronica. Bridge 5 was an 8-port conference bridge we used for emergency conference calls.

As I’d hoped, everyone was on the bridge within a few minutes. I was breathing anxiously; this was the first time we’d been together, virtually or otherwise, since the fiasco in Denny’s office. It didn’t take long for the bottom to fall out.

“I want all of you guys to hear it from me first,” Veronica said breathlessly. “I’m quitting first thing in the morning.”

We were all too numb to respond right away. Finally, I heard Jesse’s voice. “Good for you, Ronnie,” he muttered. “Where are you going?”

“Comsat,” she replied. “Don’t tell Kevin that. I start next week.”

“You’re not giving two weeks’ notice?” I injected.

“They want me right away,” she answered. “Besides, why should I make that prick’s life easier by hanging around?” We were all sad and angry enough to agree with her there; still, there were tears on the phone when we said goodbye and hung up.

The scene was repeated twice over the next several weeks as first Jesse then Joanna paged us to the bridge to announce their resignations. Both followed Veronica’s lead by giving no notice and declining to tell Kevin where they were going.

Three key people resigning within two months of each other set the alarm bells ringing for Kevin and Denny, of course. The big question that Pete and I amused ourselves by debating was, what would they do about it? Pete won the prize, a ten-dollar bill, which I handed over in grim amusement when Kevin came to me with a new top-priority project.

“I need all of the current procedure documents updated,” he declared. “Server configurations, login scripts, groups and rights, applications, the works. We’ve been doing things out of our memories for too long; we have to get our systems bible up to date or there’s no way to make sure things are getting done right.”

“You’re right,” I said, mentally picturing a barn door and three sets of hoof prints. “What did you have in mind for a deadline?”

“I need it by April first.”

“That’s only two weeks away,” I pointed out. “And I’ve got a vacation between now and then.”

“We may have to cancel that,” he replied. “This is important.”

“So is my vacation,” I asserted. “I’ve got plane tickets, hotel reservations, and a \$1500 registration fee that I forfeit if I cancel this close to the conference. Are you going to reimburse me for all that?”

“You know I can’t,” he said reluctantly. Of course I knew; the trip was to Brainshare, Novell’s annual technology conference in Salt Lake City. I’d tried to get him to pay for it as a training function, but he had refused citing budget constraints. Feeling feistier than usual, and with my tax refund in hand, I’d decided to pay the freight myself. I’d never been to a Brainshare before and thought it would be just the thing for my sagging morale.

“Then you’re not canceling my vacation. We’ve been running with an outdated bible for over a year; the system won’t collapse if it stays that way a few more weeks.”

There is no quicker way to raise Kevin’s wrath than to challenge him the way I had just done. He’d spent too long in the military, where a superior officer’s orders are not normally open to discussion. I knew that, but that day I didn’t give a damn; part of me hoped he would lose his cool, make a threat, maybe even fire me on the spot. In one of

those amazing moments of total clarity, I realized that there was nothing left to pin my loyalty to. There was an awesome, liberating power in that revelation.

Kevin may have seen some of that in my face, because for the first time in our stormy relationship he backed down. “All right, see what you can get done before you go on vacation. The rest can be priority one when you get back.”

“Yes, sir!”

As I stood by the smoothly turning mass of Baggage Claim carousel 7 I felt a small resurgence of the triumph I’d experienced in that moment. A few strains of Janis Joplin drifted through my mind: *“Freedom’s just another word for nothin’ left to lose...”*

But that wasn’t quite true, I reminded myself. I did still have a few things to lose: job security; the perks of over a dozen years of service, including extra vacation time and accrued sick leave; a system that, beleaguered as it may be, was still my baby, designed and built from the ground up with my hands and brain; all the friends I’d made and still enjoyed working with.

*Oh, yeah?* Janis taunted me. *How much job security have you really got? You think Kevin won’t try to push you out as soon as you get the procedures updated? You think he’s not already looking for a new LAN guy?*

Maybe. But Denny won’t let him squeeze me out.

*Oh, right, good old Denny ... big help HE’s been!*

She had me there.

*And what about those friends you’re so attached to? How many of them still work there? How many do you think will still work there in another month? When’s the last time you heard from Jesse, anyway?*

I was saved, if you could call it that, by the sight of my first suitcase sliding down from the chute in the center of the carousel. The second came shortly after – I’d deliberately packed two cases, leaving plenty of room for things I’d acquire during the week – and Janis fell silent as my mind became occupied with finding the right place to meet my hotel shuttle.

The shuttle ride was far more interesting and pleasant than the plane ride had been. For one thing, there were only six of us in a converted bus built for twelve, so everyone had a nice seat with plenty of room and a window. For another, the view out those windows was breathtaking. We were surrounded on three sides by mountains, distant and hazy like a soft-focused photograph. They started out green and gray at the base and gave way

to the sparkling white of fresh snow halfway up. The fourth side, I suspected, would be the Great Salt Lake itself, but we were headed away from there and into the city proper.

Salt Lake City seemed smaller than I expected, nestled cozily in between the mountains. It looked no bigger in land area than Silver Spring, Maryland, but I felt immediately drawn to it because of its symmetry and style. I was impressed as we entered the city by the wide, straight streets laid out in a grid. It seemed as though you could look down any major street and see mountains at the end. My spirits lifted; my work problems were now two time zones away, and for the next five days I could leave them there.

The shuttle drove right past the Salt Palace Convention Center and stopped in front of my hotel, the Best Western Salt Plaza. My room on the 8<sup>th</sup> floor was tiny but serviceable; quite a bit less impressive than their web site had led me to expect, but considering how late I'd been in making reservations I counted myself lucky to have found a room so close to the Center. A little placard on the small writing desk welcomed me to Salt Lake City, "Crossroads of the West," a nickname I found darkly ironic considering my situation.

The first order of business, after hanging up my clothes, was to get my bearings and check in at the convention center. I stepped out of the hotel onto the street called South Temple. Light rail tracks ran across the middle of the street, with a small platform directly across from the hotel labeled "UTA TRAX". Studying the transit map gave me a good idea of how the city was laid out.

Salt Lake City's grid centers on the original Mormon Temple built by Brigham Young and his followers. The major streets in town were named for their position in relation to that landmark: North Temple was the first street to the north, West Temple to the west, etc. I saw quickly that the temple itself was actually across the street – West Temple Street, specifically – from my hotel. I was on South Temple, on the west side of town, hence the hotel's address of "West South Temple". The streets in subsequent blocks were numbered and named based on their distance and direction from the city center – that is, the next block south of me was 100 South, then 200 South, then 300 South. Going east I'd find East Temple, then 100 East, 200 East, and so on. It made so much sense that after a few minutes with the map I felt more at ease locating things in Salt Lake than in my adopted home of Washington, DC, which also claims to be a grid city but is a nightmare to navigate through.

The convention center had a main entrance on West Temple, about half a block from my hotel door. I also saw what looked like a secondary entrance on South Temple just a few dozen yards from where I stood. It was a nice day, so I opted for the front door.

It was pretty easy to tell I was at a computer-related convention. The milling crowd inside the convention center was overwhelmingly white and male, with most people carrying standard-issue black laptop bags. A series of friendly people wearing black

“HOST” baseball caps pointed me toward the registration area, which naturally was at the opposite end of the building in Exhibit Hall C.

No matter – it was a pleasant walk. I passed the Grand Ballroom, which according to my floor plan would be home to many of the breakout sessions I’d signed up for. There was the massive Living Legends Hall, where the keynote addresses would take place. I saw places set aside for food; long tables with Compaq desktops lined up on them for conventioners to access the Internet; the Learning Zone, where certification exams would be given all week; a glass-walled gift shop with a dozen different styles of Novell-logo shirts, jackets and other apparel and accessories on display; more breakout rooms; the Developers’ Den, where programming workshops catered to the developer crowd. Finally I found my way into Exhibit Hall C.

There I was issued a black pouch with my ID card and a cord to hang it from my neck, a very nice Novell laptop bag containing brochures and samples from the NetWare Users International user group, and hefty 3-ring binder containing miniature copies of the slides from every scheduled breakout session. Nothing like a little light reading material.

Once I was satisfied that I could find my way around the convention center in a crowd, I took my goodies back to the hotel and spent the evening flipping through it all. It looked like I was in for an enlightening week.

The party started in earnest Monday morning with the keynote speeches. I was pleasantly surprised at the amount of joking around the Novell and Compaq executives did, setting a pleasantly relaxed tone for the conference. I was also relieved that they kept the Microsoft-bashing within reasonable bounds – a little rivalry is healthy, but I’ve never been impressed by “Buy from us because they suck” marketing.

After the keynotes, I had breakout sessions scheduled just about solidly through the midday and afternoon. I was able to move from room to room easily, thanks to my Sunday reconnaissance and my wisdom in leaving the massive binder back at the hotel. The small spiral notebook I’d brought with me was more than adequate for my needs and weighed a whole lot less.

It was almost five o’clock when my last breakout session of the day ended. I was feeling energized, having learned enough in the first day to more than justify the trip. The crowd inside the center was thinning out, so I made my way over to the Learning Zone to join the line of people waiting to register for exams.

One of the special deals available at BrainShare was a half price offer on exams. I needed take a NetWare 5 update exam to keep my certification current and had been putting it off for too long. Since the exam fee is normally \$100 I figured I’d take advantage of the discount. *After all*, a tiny voice reminded me, *you might be updating your resume soon.*

The line was moving slowly, but I didn't particularly mind – I was admiring the hair of the lady in front of me. I've always had a thing for redheads, and she was my favorite type – nice, uniform bright red, with just enough darker and lighter strands to prove it was natural. It was a little wavy, well shaped, and long enough to reach the midpoint of her shoulder blades. As my eye wandered down I noticed a very nice pair of broad, strong-looking shoulders, a firm waist and well-proportioned hips as well. The Novell laptop bag covered much of her rear end, but what I could see filled out her jeans in a most flattering way.

From somewhere ahead of me, a cell phone rang. The object of my attentions shifted, turned, looked left and right. I saw that her arms were full of heavy books. A pair of pale blue eyes met mine briefly, and without thinking I offered her my arms. With a grateful look she passed her burden to me and pulled a cell phone out of her laptop bag.

"Hello," she said softly. Her voice was smooth and sensual. "Hi, Eric ... No, it's okay, I'm not in a class right now." A hint of apprehension came over her face. She looked again at me, and then forward at the dwindling line.

"Go ahead," I said, guessing at her problem. "I'll hold your place."

She rewarded me with a quick smile and stepped away into a nearby alcove. The call was brief, but the line was moving. By the time she finished and came back, only one person remained ahead of her.

"Thank you so much," she said, the sincerity in her voice giving more than usual weight to the common words.

"My pleasure," I replied, and winced inwardly at how corny that sounded.

"You have strange ideas of pleasure," she remarked.

"And you have strange ideas of recreational reading," I retorted, hefting her book collection. "*CNE Update to NetWare 5 Study Guide*, *ZENworks Administrator's Handbook*, and the overheads for the entire week. It's a good thing you work out."

"Thank you – I think." She had a half-smirk on her face and an interested gleam in her eye. "I can take those back now."

"Why bother? You'll only have to put them down again in a second anyway." The person ahead of her was gathering his things, his business complete.

"Good point," she said, then addressed herself to the lady behind the counter. "I'd like to register for the CNE update exam, please."

"The 4.11 to 5 update?"

“That’s it. Can I have a slot on Friday?”

The clerk didn’t even bother looking at her laptop screen. “I’m sorry, that exam is booked solid for Thursday and Friday. I’ve got a handful of slots Wednesday and most of tomorrow is free.”

“Yeesh! I can’t do tomorrow. I probably can’t do Wednesday either if I want to pass it. Is there a waiting list for Friday slots, in case someone cancels?”

“No, ma’am. We thought about doing a waiting list, but it’s too hard to contact people on short notice here. Wednesday is the best I can do for you on that exam.”

I heard a deep sigh from the redhead. “I’m probably just throwing away the fee, but okay. Give me the latest slot you have Wednesday.”

The clerk nodded. “That would be 3:30. Will that be MasterCard, Visa, Discover, or American Express?”

I watched with interest as my new friend signed a credit card voucher and then filled out the brief registration form. I edged a little closer to the table, ostensibly to rest her books on the edge, and was able to steal a peek at her form as she wrote. Her name was Caitlin Austin, and she listed her occupation simply as “CNE”. The company name looked like it had something to do with health care. She paid for the exam with an American Express Corporate card.

Too soon it was time to give Ms. Austin her books back. She took them, but instead of walking away she simply backed up a few steps and waited by a large trashcan. Encouraged, I turned to the clerk and said, “I’ll have what she’s having.”

“Is 3:30 Wednesday okay for you, too?”

I checked my class itinerary. “That’s cutting it a little tight, I’ve got a session at 3:45. Do you have something earlier?”

The clerk checked her schedule. “How about 2:45?”

“Sold.” I pulled out my MasterCard and did the paperwork as quickly as I could, not daring to look back to see if my new friend was still there.

She was, and as I approached her with my notebook in hand, tucking the receipt into one of the divider pockets, she noted my lack of encumbrance with amusement. “Traveling light, I see.”

I shrugged. “The less I carry, the less I have to keep track of. Besides, it leaves my hands free to assist those in need.” Without asking, I picked up her stack of books from where she had set them down, balanced on top of the flat trash can lid.

She responded by taking the two books off the stack, leaving me with the binder. “Let’s split the difference,” she suggested. Now that we both had a free hand, she offered me hers. “I’m Kate, by the way.”

“Tom,” I replied, using my peripheral vision to its fullest. Kate looked at least as good from the front as from the rear. Her hand felt comfortable in mine, too.

There was a steady stream of traffic flowing around us so we joined it, taking the escalator upstairs and heading toward the South Temple exit. “I haven’t carried a girl’s books since high school,” I remarked. “Where are we headed?”

She gave me a playful smile. “My place, of course. I’m at the Wyndham.”

“Nice.” The Wyndham is one of two Marriott hotels in the immediate neighborhood. It was also on West South Temple, immediately next door to the convention center on the west side. “That makes us neighbors, in a way. I’m in the Best Western across the street.”

“I stayed there last time, a few years ago. Some of the rooms are very nice.”

“I wouldn’t know. They’ve got me in 816 – a little hole in the wall tucked behind the elevators. But it’s got the essentials, and it’s close to the action. Plus it’s fifty bucks a night cheaper than the Marriott.”

“You’re very considerate of your company’s money,” she observed.

“Usually. I’m on my own for this trip, though.”

She took a second look at my name badge. “A big company like that, and they wouldn’t pay for Brainshare?”

*Don’t get me started*, I thought. “I gave it my best shot; they have other priorities right now.” Like finding replacements for Veronica, Jesse, Joanna, and for all I knew maybe Pete by the time I got back.

Kate accepted my half-hearted defense of the company and let the matter drop. “Look at those!” We had just emerged from the convention center and were facing a line of about five Hummers – the civilian version of the military’s HUMMV multi-purpose vehicle. One had a pickup truck bed; others were covered in different styles. All bore the name and logo of Allegro, an application service provider specializing in Novell’s GroupWise email and document automation system. “I wonder if they give rides.”

“That would be cool.” We made the left turn at the sidewalk and talked cars for a minute or two before reaching the front canopy of the Wyndham. We passed the parking valet,

who smiled and nodded to us in the most welcoming fashion, and then we joined the stream of people flowing through the hotel's massive revolving door.

Kate stopped short in the middle of the lobby and looked at me, an awkward expression forming on her face. Until that moment, I hadn't even considered what would happen once we reached the hotel, and apparently she hadn't either. "Well," she began hesitantly, "it was nice meeting you, Tom."

"Same here," I replied. A white sign nearby caught my eye and gave me an idea. "I'm going to go check out the Master CNE lounge over there – are you game?"

"I'm game," she agreed, "but I don't qualify. I think I'll just take my things upstairs and make some phone calls."

"As you wish." I handed her back the big binder I'd been carrying and watched as the elevator swallowed her up. We shared one more deep look before the doors closed.

*Doofus!* I scolded myself. *Why didn't you ask her to dinner or something?*

Because I'm an idiot, I answered, looking at my distorted reflection in the shiny elevator doors. Because I haven't dated anyone seriously in over three years. Because I didn't even realize I was interested in dating anyone until the elevator doors had already closed on her. I hadn't come on this trip for the legendary Utah social scene, after all. Shaking my head, I turned and strode into the Master CNE lounge.

It was a cozy little haven. In the first room I found a generous buffet stocked with fresh fruit, coffee and tea, water and ice. A pleasant lady with a digital camera looked my name up on her list of certified people, then handed me a white "Master CNE" ribbon to attach to my badge holder and took my picture for a free photo ID card. In the next room were a number of round meeting tables, some comfortable modular seats by the walls, and a long table with more Compaq desktops for easy Internet access.

My Brainshare ID was actually a b-card, a credit card sized plastic card with a small chip embedded in it and my name, title and company printed on the front. At each session so far door monitors had taken my card and fed it into a reader-equipped Palm Pilot, verifying that I was registered for the session at hand. I'd also been told that the b-card could be used to access the network. Seeing a small card reader attached to the side of the PC case, I slipped my b-card in. A second or so later, the NetWare login box on the screen disappeared and I was presented with a standard Windows desktop. *Cool*, I thought.

I pulled up the Web browser and typed in the URL for our remote email gateway, supplying my office user ID and password. I had about fifteen new messages, mostly routine stuff. One was from Veronica's new email address:

Tom –

I didn't find anything in the news about a plane crash in Utah, so I'm assuming you made there in one piece. If not, can I have your apartment? It's a lot closer to the new job than my place.

Have a good time at your convention. Let me know if you run into any cute, single Mormons.

V.

I laughed out loud. Veronica's main hobby for the past two years had been looking for a way to revive my almost nonexistent social life. She must have fixed me up with a half-dozen blind dates; they were all pleasant enough, but none had left me with a burning desire to pursue a second date. I was too busy building a network with Walt to waste time in bars and nightclubs. Besides, IS guys work a very unsociable schedule: weeknights, weekends, holidays, all of them are subject to cancellation if something breaks or a major job needs doing that involves downtime. It can be hard to maintain a relationship on a schedule like that – girlfriends tend to get annoyed and start looking for someone with a more dependable schedule, like an emergency room doctor.

Still smiling, I composed a reply:

V -

Assumption is the mother of all fuck-ups. Besides, I offered to let you move in with me two years ago and you gave me some lame excuse about your boyfriend not wanting to share the bedroom with me.

Tell you what, though – if I fall in love with a rich, beautiful heiress who wants to keep me in the style to which I would like to become accustomed, I'll mail you my keys.

Tom

The rest of the mail was uninteresting. I skimmed through it anyway out of habit, but there was no urgency. I had an automatic reply rule running that told people I would be out until the middle of the next week, would not be checking voice mail or email, and did not have my pager or cell phone with me. I'd put that last part in deliberately to annoy Kevin, who had tried to argue that an IS professional should always be reachable even when on vacation. I waited until it was too late to change before reminding him that one of his early budget-trimming initiatives had been to reduce our pagers' coverage area from nationwide to the mid-Atlantic region only.

On the way out, I picked up my brand new laminated certification ID card from the lady with the camera. It had my digital mug shot and the names and dates of all my Novell-related certifications: CNA, CNE, Master CNE. It looked fairly impressive.

“Can I see?”

I spun around and saw Kate sitting in an overstuffed chair. I’d walked past without seeing her because I was studying my new card. “Sure,” I replied, handing it to her.

“Nice credentials,” she remarked. “Do you have to be a Master CNE to get one of these?”

“I don’t think so.” I stuck my head in the lounge doorway and checked; sure enough, the girl with camera said that anyone with a certification could get an ID card. She was more than happy to photograph Kate after verifying her CNE status, and promised to have the card ready the next morning, as she had run out of laminating sheets. Kate was agreeable.

I resolved not to waste my second chance. “Can I talk you into having dinner with me?”

“You already have.”

That was surprisingly easy. “Great – your place or mine?”

“Actually, there’s a steak house around the corner from here that I like.”

That worked for me, so we walked back out onto South Temple, crossed West Temple, and went half a block south. The convention center was across the street and a little further down. We got lucky on the wait – they had a number of large parties to seat but no couples, so when a tiny corner table opened up in short order they offered it to us. Kate ordered Guinness for both of us; I opted for the Porterhouse steak and fries, Kate went with sirloin tips, baked potato and salad.

“So,” she began as the waitress scuttled off with our menus, “why does a guy who works for a multi-billion-dollar company have to pay his own way to Brainshare?”

“You really want to know?” I asked. She nodded and fixed her gaze on me expectantly, so I took a long pull of my ale and decided to let her have some of it. “First off, it’s only a multi-billion-dollar company on the stock pages; in real life, it’s a conglomeration of different business units and subsidiaries. I happen to be in one of the smaller, semi-autonomous business units. Our revenues are just a little piece of the overall picture. Our IT budget is an even smaller piece of what the company as a whole spends on technology. They used to be pretty liberal about paying for training, but anything involving travel invariably gets rejected by the Powers That Be.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” she commiserated. “It’s a shame really, because you can learn so much at these things that you can take home and start using right away. I used to come every year.”

“Why’d you stop?”

“Similar reasons, I guess. Budgets got tight, so we could only send one person each year. I fell into doing more administrative work and less hands-on, so it seemed more important to let someone more directly involved with support take the trip instead.”

“And this year?”

She let out a heavy sigh. “This year, we’ve lost a couple of key people and I’ve had to move back into a more active role to cover the work while we look for the right candidates to fill the slots. I got my CNE years ago, and I’ve gotten rusty from not using it. This trip is to help get me up to speed on the things I’ve missed, which is why I’m making bulk purchases at the bookstore. I have no idea how I’m going to pass that exam on Wednesday.”

“Have you taken the class?”

“No,” she confessed. “It didn’t seem necessary at first because except for the VPN servers we’re still on NetWare 4, and we had a guy on staff who was already certified in 5. Now he’s gone, and I can barely get a weekend off let alone three business days to go to class. It was a major coup to get my plate clear enough to let me come up here for a week. My plan was to study the book like a madwoman every night and take the exam Friday.”

“And now?”

“Now my best hope is to waylay a Master CNE and steal his brains between now and Wednesday afternoon.” She gave me a predatory grin and added, “I suppose this would be a bad time to ask if *you’ve* taken the NetWare 5 update class.”

“Actually, I have,” I answered, laughing. “Early last year. I got paged out of it by my” – I choked off the word “asshole” – “boss so many times I couldn’t take the test right away and never did get back to it. I’ve been reviewing the course book a little at a time so I can take the test this week and be in reasonable shape for it.”

“You’ve got a lot of self discipline,” she remarked. “I’d be cramming myself into a frenzy. In fact, after dinner I probably will be.”

“That’s too bad. You’ll miss the parties that way.”

“I’ve been missing a lot of parties anyway,” she confessed. “Right now I’m trying to remember the last time I had dinner with someone who isn’t a coworker.”

“And where the meal didn’t come in a paper bag?”

“Exactly!”

As if on cue, the waitress appeared with two more glasses of Guinness and our food. The steak was terrific, juicy and tender and just done enough to lie still on the plate for me. The ale was the perfect accompaniment for it. A third round appeared at just the right moment, leaving us with a good supply for slow, after-dinner sipping.

“I probably shouldn’t be drinking this much,” Kate remarked. “I need all the healthy brain cells I can get for the next couple of days.”

“So cancel the test,” I suggested. “You’ve got until the end of August.”

“I know. I also know that if I go back to work without getting this done, August will come way too fast and I won’t be any more prepared than I am now.”

“Then ask yourself how important the certificate really is to you,” I said. “If you’re not going to NetWare 5, why drive yourself nuts trying to pass a test on it? In the end what’s important isn’t what tests you’ve passed, it’s what you can actually do.”

Those pale blue eyes fixed on mine, and for a moment I felt as if I were under a microscope. “You could have taken that test today and passed it, couldn’t you?”

“Probably,” I admitted. “I’ll spend an hour or so tonight and tomorrow night reviewing the parts I haven’t had a chance to actually work with just for insurance, but I’m pretty much ready.”

Kate reached across the table and took both of my hands. “If I can’t steal your brain,” she proposed, still holding me in that penetrating gaze, “how about letting me borrow it for a night or two? I could really use a smart study partner who can translate Novellese into English.”

“What makes you think I can do that?”

“The way you sit here and talk about taking an exam from a class you sort of attended a year ago without so much as a single nervous twitch, while I’m half out of my mind with test anxiety. The way you go into detailed technical tutorials armed with nothing more than a mechanical pencil and a spiral notebook.” She squeezed my hands harder to emphasize her last point. “I was in that NDPS session, about six rows behind you. I learned more from your questions than from the slides and the lecture. My intuition tells me that you are someone who not only understands technology but can also explain it in everyday English. Am I right?”

“You’re right,” I conceded. Back when I had free time I used to hold workshops for sales people, teaching them how to take care of their laptops, send and receive email on the road, and use remote access to get to the network. If I could do that in an hour, I could probably help Kate prepare for her exam in two nights. Looking into those sparkling eyes, I couldn’t think of a single reason not to try. “My brain is yours ... along with any other parts you may find useful.”

That broke the tension nicely. Kate sat back and laughed suggestively. “Let’s start with your brain and I’ll take an option on the rest.”

After dinner we headed to my room to plot our review strategy and retrieve my class manual, which could serve as our study outline. Kate took one look at the interior of my room and suggested that we use her place as our classroom. I had to agree with her. The bedroom in my apartment at home was bigger than my room at the Best Western. If we studied here, we’d be just about forced to do it lying on the bed, since I had only one chair and a tiny, cluttered little writing desk otherwise.

Kate’s room at the Wyndham proved much more accommodating to our needs. In addition to the king-sized bed, she had a separate sitting area with a sofa and coffee table as well as a writing desk and chair. I spread out my course manual and the old notebook I’d used during class on the coffee table, looking over the table of contents first.

“How would you like to organize this?” I asked her.

“I have no idea,” she replied emphatically. “Whatever you think makes the most sense.”

I gave it some thought before answering. “There look to be six topic areas on this test: doing the upgrade, using the Java console, the FastTrack Web server, DNS/DHCP, NDPS, and ZENworks. Have you worked with any of those already?”

“I’ve seen demonstrations of Console One and ZENworks,” she said. “I went to that NDPS session today, as well as a workshop on doing the NetWare upgrade itself. I haven’t actually had to use any of it in the real world.”

“Okay, then. Since you’ve got a head start on those things, let’s go through the installation, Console One and NDPS tonight. That leaves the Web server, DNS/DHCP and ZENworks for tomorrow.”

“That makes sense,” she agreed. “I’ll grab us a bucket of ice and some overpriced sodas from the vending machine while you get yourself organized.”

I looked at my watch: 8:00pm already. “Do you want to set a time limit on this, or just go until we get through it all?”

“We’ve only got the two nights; I don’t mind staying up late as long as we’re making progress. How about you?”

“I tend to stay up too late anyway,” I said. “On the other hand, my body is still running on Eastern Time – to me it’s already ten o’clock. If we’re still going at it when midnight local rolls around, I may start fading on you. What kind of schedule are you on?”

“Mountain time – I’m a local girl. I’ll keep pushing caffeinated sodas on you tonight if you promise to give me a wake-up call in the morning. Deal?”

“Deal.” She had a point; the time difference that worked against me at night would make things easier in the morning, when 8:30 local time would feel like 10:30.

It didn’t take us long to settle into a pattern. I started out by giving her an overview of the first topic, upgrading a server from NetWare 4.11 to NetWare 5, in simple words. She then repeated back what I’d said, but in her own words. Once we were both satisfied that she understood the big picture, we repeated the process in greater detail, covering first the key features of NetWare 5, then mechanics of the upgrade itself, then the migration agent Novell provides to smooth the transition from IPX to IP. This was familiar material to me since I’d been in class for it and also worked with it in my test lab, ignoring statements from Kevin that there was no compelling reason for us to upgrade to NetWare 5. I found I seldom had to refer to the book, which seemed to inspire confidence in my student. Once we had the upgrade itself covered we moved on to Console One, the new Java-based management interface introduced with NetWare 5, and then to Novell Distributed Printing Service, the bi-directional printing system designed to replace the traditional NetWare print queues used by older versions. All of this was likewise familiar material, either from lab work or from breakout sessions that day.

We took very few breaks, and finished up a little before 12:30 in the morning. When we closed the books, Kate reached her arms into the air and stretched, yawning slightly. I suddenly became aware again of the round curves of her breasts filling out the knit sweater she was wearing. The distance between us on the couch had slowly closed during our discussions without my noticing, but now she was close enough to put an arm around if I dared. While I debated the idea with myself, she let herself drop lazily in my direction, laying her head on my shoulder. I buried my face in that beautiful hair and inhaled deeply.

“I could go to sleep right now, right here,” she said drowsily.

“Me too,” I replied. “In fact, my arm is halfway there already.”

Kate’s body shook as she laughed at my joke. “That’s it,” she announced, “We’re getting punchy. Time to call it a night.”

I rose reluctantly from the couch after she did, gathered my books and let her walk me to the door. “Remember, you promised me a wake-up call,” she reminded me.

“When’s your first session?”

“Nine thirty.”

“I’ll call you at 8:30.”

Kate groaned tiredly, then winked and blew me a kiss as she closed the door. My head spinning from the impact, I shuffled back to the Best Western, set my alarm for 8:00, and crashed.

My body woke itself up at 7:50 with no ill affects from the late night. *Love that Eastern time zone*, I thought to myself. By 8:15 I was showered, dressed, and ready for breakfast.

At 8:30 exactly I picked up the phone and dialed Kate’s direct number at the Wyndham. After three rings I heard the click of the handset coming up, but it was several long seconds before Kate’s groggy voice came through. “Hello?”

“Good morning!” I said with exaggerated perkiness. “Are you in the mood for breakfast?”

“I’m in the mood for sleep,” she grumbled. “What gives you the right to be so damned perky?”

“Absolutely nothing,” I replied pleasantly. “I’m faking just it for your benefit.”

That got me a tired chuckle. “There’s a state law against being so witty before breakfast,” she retorted.

“Then come eat with me before I get arrested.”

“I guess I’d better. You get us a table at JB’s, and I’ll be over there in twenty minutes.”

“Okay.”

JB’s Restaurant is attached to the Best Western and sits at the corner of West Temple and South Temple. The breakfast buffet is simple but well stocked and the price is right. I ordered a pot of coffee and waited for Kate. She arrived as promised about twenty minutes later, looking none the worse for wear in a simple denim dress. She was ready for the conference, her name badge in place and laptop bag slung over her shoulder. She was waving a glossy plastic card at me.

“See?” she said, handing me the card. “I got mine.”

It was her Novell certification card from the lady at the lounge. The digital photo was flattering. “You look a little like Nicole Kidman in this,” I remarked. Next to her photo

was her list of credentials: Certified NetWare Administrator, 1995; Certified NetWare Engineer, 1996.

“Your eyes must be tired,” she replied, but I could tell she was pleased. She helped herself to a cup of coffee and managed to get through the whole first sip before her cell phone went off. “Arrgh!” She picked up a menu and used it as a shield while she brought the phone to her face. “Hello? ... I’m at breakfast, Eric, can’t this wait? ... Okay, hold on a minute.” She lowered the menu and looked at me sheepishly. “I refuse to do this in the restaurant,” she said flatly. “Will you order me an omelet while I take this outside?”

“Go,” I told her. “I’ll hold your place for you.”

She made it back just a few seconds after her omelet appeared. “Maybe you should remind Eric about roaming charges,” I suggested.

“Wouldn’t work,” she explained, taking a bite of omelet. “He knows I’m still in the local calling zone.”

“Must be a big local zone.”

“Not really,” she said. “I work in Provo. That’s about an hour south of here down I-15.”

“Wow,” I remarked. “And your company sprang for the Wyndham?”

“They’re pretty understanding about these things. I live in Lake Shore, which is another 25 minutes on the other side of Provo. The first time I came to Brainshare I commuted from home every day. Three hours a day in the car on top of the long schedule made for a miserable week; I was nodding off during classes and missing all the fun parts in the late afternoon and evening. When I told Annette about it, she had the travel policy revised so that for in-state trips we can book a hotel and the company will reimburse us for half of the room rate and taxes. We also get a per diem allowance for meals. It works out much better this way for everyone.”

“Annette is your boss?”

“Our CIO. I told her about all the value I was losing by commuting, and she went to the accounting department and got the rules changed.”

“Just like that?”

“Sure, why not?”

I just shook my head in amazement. I tried to picture Denny pleading a case with our finance department to pay partial costs for a hotel in Baltimore, but it was too fantastic for my imagination to grasp. “Things are certainly different out here,” I conceded.

“We’re a health care company, managing hospitals in the Mountainland area,” she explained. “So our upper management tends to be of a humanistic mind set. Also, since a lot of them are Mormons, they tend to be very family oriented. We’re pretty lucky that way.”

“No argument here,” I said wryly.

Kate gave me another of those piercing stares. “I take it things are different for you back home.”

“A little bit,” I replied, feeling the bile rising in my stomach. “My boss is a raging asshole whose primary objective is to make himself look good at the expense of those underneath him. His boss used to be a decent guy but is either too dense to see that things are falling apart all around him or is too busy looking out for himself to care. I have a support staff made up temps who can barely spell ‘NetWare’ reporting to empty seats because the good people who used to manage them couldn’t stand sitting around handcuffed by clueless leadership while what used to be a great network falls into ruin. I have an apartment I haven’t seen during the daylight hours in about a month because there’s nobody left but me to take care of a fleet of servers that keeps getting older and larger with no sign of any relief coming soon.” Kate’s shell-shocked face brought me back from the edge of the abyss. “Other than that,” I joked weakly, “I’ve no complaints.”

Kate reached across the table and took my hand. “Why do you stay if it’s so miserable?”

Why indeed? Big sigh. “Because it wasn’t always like that. When I first got into the network side, it was different. We had a core team of really good people, including a boss who trusted each of us to exercise our best judgment and kept the corporate IS yo-yo’s out of our hair long enough for us to prove we could do things better than they could. We built a system so reliable, and so easy to support, that we had the highest service metrics and the lowest per-seat support cost of any business unit in the corporation.”

“So where did things go wrong?”

“Walt retired,” I replied grimly. “They offered him six months’ pay up front as an incentive to retire early. Not just him, of course, it was a corporate downsizing measure, but he was part of the eligible group. Walt was always very smart about seeing trends; he figured with a carrot that juicy there must a wicked stick waiting for those who don’t bite, so he took the deal. And then Denny hired this jerk-off Kevin to take his place, and the rest is too depressing to go into in any detail.”

“I’m sorry,” she said quietly, and I could tell she meant it. “I didn’t mean to spoil your breakfast.”

“It’s not your fault,” I said, wiping away a half-formed tear from my own eye. “In a way, it’s my fault. Walt did everything he could to convince me to apply for that job, even told me that if I did Denny would promote me in a heartbeat. But I didn’t want the job; I wanted to keep doing what I was doing and leave the paperwork to someone else. If I’d been a little smarter and taken the management job, maybe none of the rest would have happened.”

“It’s not about being smart,” she argued, squeezing my hands in hers. “If you weren’t smart, you could never have designed and built that network in the first place. It’s about knowing yourself, Tom. One of the hardest things for technical people to do is to make that leap from managing technology to managing people. Let’s face it, it’s exciting and creative and rewarding building networks, planning upgrades, finding new and cool ways to improve on what we’ve built. Becoming the boss means letting go, giving the controls to someone else and watching them take your design, your system, and in effect let them have all the fun while you find yourself going to meetings and studying budget reports. Not everybody can do that; not everybody wants to do that.” There was an energy in her voice, an intensity in her face, that made me wonder if we were still talking about me.

I lifted her hand and kissed it softly. “Thanks, Kate. I needed that.” As I put her hand back down, I spotted her watch: it was 9:25. “And now we’d better get out of here or we’ll be late for our sessions.”

I shooed Kate out of the restaurant immediately, then charged both of our breakfasts to my room and headed across South Temple myself. My trusty spiral notebook firmly in my grasp, I joined the meandering crowd herding into the convention center.

My Tuesday session schedule was full: IPX to IP Migration Strategies at 9:30, Implementing ZENworks for Servers (a new product for managing servers) at noon, Using the NetWare 5.1 Management Portal at 1:30, an advanced ZENworks seminar at 3:00, and Integrating NetWare 5, NDS and Windows 2000 at 4:30. The only slack time in the schedule was between 11:00 and noon. Kate’s first session, Proper Protection of NetWare Data, was scheduled to run until 11:45, so I was surprised to see her outside the Living Legends Hall when I came out of my first session.

In the lobby area outside Living Legends is a Notebook Ports station: a series of high, folding tables skirted in black cloth. Every two feet or so along the table surfaces a pink LAN cord was held in place with gaffer’s tape, and between each four cords was an APC portable UPS power strip. The LAN cords provided connectivity to the Internet, with a DHCP server to dole out IP addresses. Kate had her ThinkPad plugged in. I recognized the familiar look of the GroupWise Web email client on her screen.

“Playing hooky?” I teased.

Kate jumped at the sound of my voice. Seeing me, she took a deep cleansing breath and turned to face me, blocking my view of the laptop screen. “Don’t do that,” she chided, “You gave me quite a start.”

“Sorry. What are you doing, plotting the overthrow of the free world?”

“My security session started getting into SAN and clustering products, and I don’t see us using those any time soon. So I skipped out early and came over here to catch up on office email.”

“No wonder you have that guilty look on your face.”

“Drawbacks of a strict upbringing,” she quipped. “Why don’t you hunt us up a couple of soft drinks, and if you want you can borrow this when I’m done?”

“Sure. Any preferences?”

“Something diet, preferably with caffeine. Lots and lots of caffeine.”

Smiling, I wandered over to one of the refreshment tables where light lunch fare was being laid out: salad makings, fresh fruit, and soft drinks. On the other side of the convention center I knew there was a hot menu available, but this was closer and had plenty of soda choices. I snagged a Diet Coke for Kate and a Sprite for myself, scooped some ice into two plastic cups, and rejoined her at the notebook station.

“My savior,” she praised as I poured her drink over the ice. “My laptop is yours.”

Kate took her can and cup and retreated to one of the cushioned sectional seats that lined the opposite side of the hall. I typed in the URL for our own remote mail interface, logged in, and skimmed through the list of unread.

Only a couple seemed worth any interest. One was from Veronica, just continuing our friendly banter from the day before. The other was from Pete, and had been flagged Private and Urgent.

Tom –

Linda gave me a sneak peek at the req’s for backfilling Ronnie, Jesse and Jo. His Nibs is looking for people with “MCSE plus 2-3 years recent experience supporting Windows NT in an enterprise environment.” The one for Joanna’s job says, “Oracle knowledge desirable, SQL Server experience required.” Thought you oughta know ASAP.

Every muscle in my body clenched tight as I closed my eyes and imagined bludgeoning Kevin with a tire iron. *That duplicitous bastard!* I screamed inwardly. In the midst of my silent fury I felt a gentle hand take hold of my shoulder.

“What’s wrong?” Kate asked softly. I was too angry to answer right away; instead I let out a low, menacing growl and nodded toward the laptop screen. She peeked at the screen and then promptly closed it, causing the ThinkPad to beep in protest as it went into suspend mode. “You need to breathe, Tom,” she said with growing concern in her voice.

She wasn’t telling me anything I didn’t already know. I did take several deep, slow breaths and felt myself slowly getting back into something approaching balance. My white-knuckle grip on the table loosened and I stepped back, giving Kate room to grab the ThinkPad and toss it into her bag.

“What’s wrong?” she repeated.

I really didn’t want to discuss it, but I owed her an answer. “I just found out something new about Kevin. Not only is he a raging ignoramus, but he’s also a deceitful, lying, underhanded SOB.”

Kate took my arm firmly and, in a voice that would not be contradicted, said, “Walk with me.” She steered me around the corner and past the Grand Ballroom to an alcove on the other side. I recognized our destination immediately – the “Neckwork” station on the far side, where conference-goers could get a ten-minute neck and shoulder massage administered by professionals. This station had two massage chairs, both of which were vacant at the moment.

As we approached a pair of athletic-looking ladies in workout gear sprang up to greet us. Introducing themselves as Angie and Liz, they directed me to one of the massage chairs, a strange contraption something like a forward-leaning makeup seat with a front vertical beam and strategically placed pads to support the occupant’s face and shoulders. Angie went right to work on me. “Good heavens you’re tight,” she exclaimed and redoubled the force she was putting into kneading the muscles of my shoulders.

Liz watched Angie work for a moment then turned to Kate. “This is going to take a while,” she said. “Why don’t you climb up here and I’ll work on you for a bit? You look like you could use it.”

Angie’s hands were working magic on my neck and shoulders. She pushed and stretched and squeezed and patted and slowly, steadily, I felt the knots loosen and yield to her touch. The padded supports took on more of my weight as I relaxed. Kate seemed to be enjoying her workout, too – her face was smooth and content, her eyes closed. That seemed like a good idea, so I let mine drop too.

“Isn’t that better?”

Angie’s voice pulled me back to full awareness. I’d been a hair’s breadth away from nodding off. “Absolutely,” I agreed. “I haven’t felt this good in ages.”

“Was that your first massage?”

“Yes, but it won’t be the last.”

Angie grinned and patted me on the back. “Come on back any time. Mornings are better, we get real busy in the afternoon and can’t spend more than a few minutes with any one person.”

“Thanks.”

It was 11:35; we still had about twenty minutes before we had to start finding our next sessions, so Kate led me up the escalator to a little lounge area outside the Novell merchandise booth. There we sank into one of the black leather sofas side by side and, ignoring decorum, put our feet up on the glass coffee table. “Do you want to tell me about it?” she prodded gently.

“We had a core team of five,” I explained in a slow, detached monotone. “The same five, mind you, who designed and built and ran things the whole time under Walt. Since January, three have left already and I’m pretty sure Pete will go soon – he’s been quietly interviewing with Cisco. Pete emailed me because he got a look at the paperwork Kevin put in to hire replacements for the people who left, and in the requirements Kevin is specifically requesting people with Microsoft experience: MCSE, NT and SQL Server.”

“Go on.”

“We’re a Novell shop, Kate. The core servers are all NetWare 4, all part of one well-designed tree. We use ManageWise to monitor and manage the servers and ZENworks to manage the desktops. Most of our mission-critical databases are run on Oracle, either using NetWare or Solaris as the platform depending on fit. We have about 20 NT servers, single-purpose application servers that we manage with NDS to keep things integrated.

“But as I told you at breakfast we’re just a small piece of the corporation, a semi-independent territory if you will. Most of the other business units have no IT staff of their own, just a liaison to the corporate shop. And the corporate shop has bought into Microsoft, and particularly NT, in a big way. So has Kevin. He thinks that since NT is the corporate standard, we should tear down everything we have now and switch to NT. He doesn’t care that there’s nothing wrong with the system we have, or at least there wasn’t before he came along; he doesn’t care that it would cost us a ton of money just to do the conversion; all he cares about is that we follow the corporate standard. He thinks that if we do that, Corporate will give us more money for personnel and support for special projects.”

“Will they?”

“They might. But I think it’s more likely that they’ll use any requests like that to justify absorbing our IS organization into the corporate one. If that happens then we lose all

control over our own infrastructure; all of our systems decisions will be made by people in another state who have no idea how we need to operate to stay in business. There's a reason why our division was spun off as a separate subsidiary, and for that reason the generic corporate solutions won't always work for us. Plus, the level of service that Corporate provides is dismal; even in our current state we're better off than we would be under their model. I'd hate to see that happen, and I'd hate even more to part of the group that implements it."

"You said something about Kevin being deceitful?"

"He's a snake," I said bitterly. "We had this debate almost a year ago, when he first told me he thought we should move to NT. I told him my reasons why I don't think we should; he basically ignored them and kept repeating his mantra, that NT is the corporate standard so we should follow it. I told him, and backed it up with a detailed report, that NT 4.0 is not as well suited for our particular environment as NetWare is. He didn't even read the report; he said if I was that interested in writing, I should write a project plan on how to do the NT conversion. In the end, I went to Denny and told him that I'd resign before I'd participate in replacing a perfectly good system with a less functional, more expensive one just to conform to an arbitrary standard that was adopted without our input. Two hours later, Kevin told he was willing to stay with NetWare as long as we continued to meet our service benchmarks, and that I'd be consulted before any decision was made to change."

"So you won."

"Temporarily, it seems. In the time since then, Kevin's idiotic policies have resulted in more downtime and slower trouble resolution. We're not meeting the benchmarks anymore. Almost all of our in-house talent is gone, and Kevin is actively looking to replace them with NT and SQL experts. That tells me that the decision has already been made behind my back."

"You could go to NT training," she suggested. "Learn how to work around the problems. A lot of people seem to be doing that."

"Been there, done that," I told her. "I started out working with NT in a satellite office. I like NT – it's simple to set up and works very well on a small scale. That's why my Master CNE specialty is NT and NetWare Integration. I could take the MCSE core exams tomorrow and pass them easily. I'm not about me being a NetWare zealot, Kate, because I'm not; I know both systems well. What this is about is professional integrity. By moving behind my back to force an unnecessary and ill-advised platform change down my throat, Kevin is proving to me that he has none."

I could see she still had questions, but the crowd flowing around us had become thick and loud, indicating that our time was nearly up. She gave me a firm, supportive hug and we went our separate ways for the day, agreeing to meet back at her room after my last breakout session for our study date.

My last session ended at 5:45. I went back to the Best Western to wash up, assuming that Kate and I would go out and eat before studying. I was completely unprepared for the sight that greeted me at her door: Kate in yellow running shorts and a white racer back sports bra.

“I suddenly feel overdressed,” I said.

“This?” I couldn’t help but admire the way her muscles moved under the tight-fitting top. Okay, there was more moving than just muscles. “It was something handy to throw on after a workout and a shower. I was hoping we could just do room service for dinner and get an early start, maybe get to bed sooner.”

She certainly had me thinking about an early bedtime. “Sounds great.”

We started out going over the Netscape FastTrack Web server because it was the least familiar topic to both of us. I hadn’t even tried setting it up in the lab because in our structure Web servers fell under Joanna’s jurisdiction. We leaned heavily on the books to get through the basics on how to set up, configure, and manage FastTrack, then practiced explaining it to each other until we were both comfortable. At some point during the discussions dinner arrived and was eaten, but I didn’t pay much attention to it.

The DNS/DHCP review went quickly, mostly because we were both well versed in the basic concepts from having used it already; we simply needed to review how they are integrated with the directory in NetWare 5 and the mechanics of the new GUI management tool. That left us plenty of time to work through the intricacies of ZENworks in detail.

It was only a little after nine when we closed the books for good. “We deserve a reward for all of our hard work,” Kate asserted.

“Did you have something in mind?”

Kate produced a small cooler from under the writing desk and set it on the coffee table. She flipped up the lid and removed two very cold bottles of Genesee Cream Ale. “All I have are the standard hotel glasses. Do you want one?”

“Waste of time,” I said. “I’ll be barbaric and swig from the bottle.”

Kate sat down next to me again, nonchalantly placing an arm behind me on the top of the couch. “Works for me, too.”

“What should we drink to?”

Her brow wrinkled for a moment as she thought about it. “How about to success?”

“On our exams?”

“In general.”

I liked the sound of that. “To success, then.” The ale was so cold it chilled my tongue on the way down. “Delicious!”

After a few minutes of quietly enjoying the ale, I noticed Kate seemed far away. “What is it?”

The hand behind me came forward and idly caressed the back of my neck. “It’s you,” she said. “Whether I pass that test tomorrow or not, you’ve taught me an awful lot of things, Tom. I want to thank you for that somehow.”

“You just did,” I replied sincerely. Looking into her eyes at that moment was all the thanks I really needed. Not that my id wasn’t suggesting some other ways she could thank me ... but I wasn’t ready to go there just yet. Rusty as I was at the dating game, I could sense something very strong developing between the two of us. Maybe we’d end up in bed before the week was out, maybe not, but I wasn’t going to screw things up by pushing.

“I’m serious,” she insisted. “What are you going to do about your job?”

“I don’t know. The obvious answer is to do what all my friends are doing – put together a resume and go looking. I just don’t know if I’m ready for that. I’ve put a large chunk of my adult life into that company. When I started there I didn’t know anything, Kate. They trained me, they let me develop my talents, and they encouraged me to keep growing. I wouldn’t be who I am without those experiences.” Her free hand found mine and gave it a reassuring squeeze. “What do you think I should do?” I asked.

Kate stared off into the distance, her eyes opening wide, and drew in a long breath. “I think I’d better take the fifth,” she answered carefully. “There’s too much at stake here. I can say that if my experience with you is any indication at all, they have gotten far more value from you in service and dedication than they spent on your training. I also think you need to give more credit to yourself for who you are. You have gifts that did not come from any training class, gifts that you would have discovered and used in any profession. Those gifts are yours and will stay with you no matter what job you take.”

“I’ve never quit anything before,” I told her. “I don’t know if I can.”

“It’s not necessarily a question of quitting, Tom. Quitting implies failure. Instead of trying to decide whether or not to quit, ask yourself if there is anything more you can contribute – can you make a positive difference by staying? You seem to have a loyal and noble heart, Tom; can you be happy in a situation where that loyalty isn’t appreciated or returned?”

I didn't know what to say so I just sat there staring into my own lap, stewing in my own mixed-up feelings. Kate pulled me close and held me, stroking the back of my neck and rocking slowly. "Thank you," I finally said. "I still don't know what I'm going to do, but I feel like this has helped."

Kate kissed me softly on the lips. "I hope so. Sleep on it, and maybe things will become clearer in the morning."

I slept fitfully, my mind occupied with half-dreams that vanished every time I woke up, which was often. By 6:30 I gave up on sleep and by 6:45 I had a better idea. I picked up the phone and dialed a number in Salisbury, Maryland. The sound of Walt's voice was instantly reassuring to me.

"Morning, Boss," I said, as I'd done hundreds of times in person.

"Hey, Tom! I was wondering when you'd call."

"What do you mean?"

"I talked to Pete yesterday. Are you getting email out there?"

"I got it," I said grimly. "The question is what am I going to do about it?"

"That's not so tough," Walt replied. "You really only have two choices, stay or go. What happens if you stay?"

"I go over Kevin's head and fight this stupid conversion. If I explain it to the Finance people they won't approve the funds."

"You used to be smarter than that, Tom," Walt scolded. "Finance people don't care about operating systems, they care about following the rules and not making mistakes. Bucking the corporate dictums is not something they do without a lot of arm-twisting, and you don't have nearly enough muscle."

He was right, and in my heart I knew it: choosing to stay meant choosing to cooperate in a conversion that all my experience told me was a bad idea. "Okay, granted. Staying there means having NT shoved down my throat."

"Is that really such a bad thing?" Walt asked. "I know you like NetWare, but you've never struck me as being evangelical about it. Do you really believe that strongly that NT won't work for them, or do you just have your back up because you can't let Kevin be right?"

Another very good point, one I hadn't seriously considered. Was I letting my dislike for Kevin influence my technical judgment? "It's possible," I conceded, "but I don't think that's all of it. You and I looked at both objectively when we were planning the network

in the first place, and we picked NetWare 4 over NT 4 on the merits. Since then NetWare has improved while NT has stagnated because of the delays in Windows 2000. If they really want to adopt the all-Microsoft solution, it doesn't make sense to step backward to NT – we should give 2000 a good thorough look and then migrate to that once they've got the major bugs fixed."

"Have you said any of that to Kevin?"

"All of it, several times. It's irrelevant to him, Boss. All he cares about is following the corporate standard to the letter."

"Then why are you still there?"

He caught me off guard with that one. "Friends," I stammered. "Security. I owe this company a lot, Walt, you know that."

"Bullshit."

"Excuse me?"

"You heard me," he insisted. "Bullshit. What friends are you talking about – Jesse? Joanna? Veronica? Me? They're all gone, Tom. Pete will be gone too as soon as someone makes him the right offer. What security is there in being a LAN engineer whose technical judgment is considered irrelevant? What debt do you owe to a company that no longer wants or appreciates what you have to offer?"

"Wait a minute –"

"No, you wait a minute. You called me from across the country for my opinion, Tom, so listen to it. You keep thinking about how much you don't want to give up the good things about your job, but the fact is that most if not all of those things are gone already. The only thing really holding you there is habit. It's risky and scary to leave a company you've been with for a dozen years; maybe it feels safer to just stay around and be miserable. But understand this, my friend: whether you stay or go, things will never go back to the way they were."

"So you think I should go."

"Do you need to hear the words, is that it? Yes – I think you should go. It's way past time. You need to find a place where your ideas are welcomed, and where you can share what you know with the less experienced folks around you. There's a lot of demand for guys like you in this industry, Tom, it won't take you very long to find a good fit."

Tears welled up in my eyes. I felt as though I'd been released from bondage. "Thanks, Boss," I choked. "I did need to hear that."

“I suspected as much,” he replied, sounding a little shaken up himself. “Now go find yourself a hot Mormon babe and enjoy the rest of your trip.”

“Will do.”

“By the way,” I asked Kate over breakfast at the Wyndham’s restaurant, “are you Mormon?”

“Unitarian,” she replied with a bewildered expression. “By name, at least. It’s been a while since I made it to Church. You?”

“Generic Christian values, no particular sect.”

“And we’re talking about this because?”

“Something Walt said,” I explained, then changed the subject. “I called him this morning. He said some of the same things you did last night, only with a lot less subtlety. He thinks I should have bailed months ago.”

“And what do you think?” Her eyes met mine and looked into my soul.

“I think he’s right. I should have seen it myself, but I guess I didn’t want to. Like a boiling frog.” According to corporate folklore, a frog tossed into a pot of near-boiling water will fight like mad to escape. However, if you place the frog in a pot of lukewarm water it will sit there happily. Turn on the heat and the frog will not notice as the water temperature slowly increases to a lethal level; it will sit there and boil to death. I’ve never heard of anyone actually trying it, but it makes a powerful analogy when applied to complacency in the workplace.

Kate must have heard the same story, because she nodded in understanding. “So does that mean you’re officially on the market?”

“And priced for a quick sale,” I confirmed. “Just as soon as I get my resume together.”

“We could post you on eBay, see what the market will bear.”

“Sure, why not?” I said, getting into the spirit of the joke.

“What if the high bidder wasn’t in DC, though?”

“Shipping and handling charges would be obscene.”

“But would you do it? Is there anything holding you in DC?” She was still smiling, but there was a slight edge to it and her voice seemed a little less capricious. “Family? Friends? Property?”

“Not really,” I replied, giving it more thought than I originally intended. “My sister lives in Dallas and our parents live in Tucson. My friends are my ex-coworkers, there’s no knowing what’ll happen with them now that we don’t work together. My apartment lease is up in September, but it wouldn’t sit empty for long if I left sooner.” Kate seemed to relax as I answered. “Why?” I challenged, still mostly playing. “You planning to bid?”

“You’d be way out of my price range,” she said. “But I know a few people …” Her broad wink had me wondering how much of that exchange had really been idle banter.

Kate paid for breakfast then led the way back upstairs to her room. The conference schedule called for a general session that morning, so we decided to skip the pep rally and use the time to get our minds into test-taking mode. Kate had purchased a practice exam program online which was supposed to be similar enough to the real thing to give a good idea of our chances. Back in her room, we fired up the ThinkPad and took turns having the system grill us.

One thing anyone with a serious certification can tell you is that knowing the material is only about two thirds of what you need to pass an exam. The other third is a familiarity with how the vendor likes to express the concepts – key words and phrases that the vendor likes, sometimes (especially with Microsoft and Novell) with meanings that do not completely jibe with common usage. The great value in practice tests is that they get you used to thinking of things in terms of those phrases, so that you won’t get thrown off by strange wording and blow a question that you should be able to answer. By the end of an hour, Kate and I had both answered about 100 questions and reviewed those answers against what the software expected. We found that we were a little weak in the Web server – no surprise, considering our lack of real-world experience – but sound enough otherwise that we should probably both pass. It was hard to be sure because the exam is adaptive, so the exact question mix would be largely left to chance.

Our session schedules tracked fairly closely for Wednesday. We both had sessions at 11:00 and were even in the same session, NDS Recovery Made Easy, from 12:45 until 2:00. She was already looking jittery as we walked out of Ballroom D together at the end of that class.

“Ninety minutes to go, and I’m already trembling,” she confessed. “How about you?”

“I’m fine,” I said simply. I’ve always been a very cool test-taker. My attitude is that at that point either I know the material or I don’t. If I do, there’s nothing to be nervous about; if I don’t, being nervous won’t help anyway. I didn’t try to explain this philosophy to Kate because I’ve learned the hard way that test anxiety does not yield to logic. Instead I tried to come up with a way to get her mind off it.

My first thought, to find Angie and Liz at the Neckwork station, didn't pan out. There was a big crowd waiting for neck rubs, and the girls we'd met Tuesday were not on duty then. By pure happenstance I looked over at a map of the convention center and my eye fell on an area I hadn't yet visited: Planet Novell.

"I've got an idea," I announced. "Come with me." Arm in arm we strode through the crowd, past the Learning Zone, and around to Exhibit Hall 1. A lot of the nearby sessions weren't letting out until 3:00, so we easily joined into the thin stream of people entering the recreational area.

We bypassed the Dr. Cache Challenge and other trivia contests and went straight for the Sports Lounge. It was laid out like a Chuck E Cheese, with pinball machines, foosball stations, and basketball shooting booths. Off to one side was a table with about 10 Compaq desktops, several of which were unoccupied, and a sign inviting us to play a round of Unreal Tournament. "That's for me!" I declared and bellied up to a free workstation.

"What is this?"

"It's a first-person shooting game, like Doom or Quake but tons cooler. Watch." I adjusted the character appearance to my liking, set the name to "Tominator", and joined the match already in progress.

It was a team Death Match, five Blue players versus five Red. Three players on each team were actual people, the others were 'bots' – simulated players controlled by the host computer. The objective was to kill as many of the opposing team as possible. Killed players and bots respawn immediately to fight again, but lose any weapons they accumulated along the way. The first team to achieve 50 kills, or 'frags' in game parlance, would win. The level was one of my favorites from the demo version of the game, featuring three impossibly tall and narrow towers with nothing but a deadly drop waiting for the player who makes a misstep or misjudges a leap from tower to tower.

I was Blue. Kate watched over my shoulder as I killed a Red player with my pistol, which is the only weapon provided at respawn, and took his ASMD Shock Rifle. Then I joined the fray seriously, jumping from tower to tower, grabbing up better weapons or extra ammunition or a healing pack at every opportunity. I had a good initial run, scoring six frags before the blast from a Red player's rocket launcher threw me off the roof of a tower. I respawned and took out two more, getting killed twice myself in the process, before the game ended: Blue 50, Red 42.

We still had twenty minutes before my exam and nobody waiting to play, so I signed up for the next game. In that one Blue took Red by a bigger margin, 50 to 37, and I was the top scorer with 19 frags. I was ready to go, but the Red group demanded a grudge match. They got it, and the human players spent the entire game focused on destroying me. My teammates used their single-mindedness to advantage: the final score ended up Blue 50, Red 33 even though I only managed to frag 8 myself.

The Blue team burst into loud congratulations; several high-fives later, I saw it was 2:35. I was riding high on adrenaline and ready for anything.

At the testing center I gave my notebook and badge holder to Kate for safekeeping, signed the nondisclosure agreement, and followed the testing proctor to my assigned station. I took a moment to close my eyes and breath deeply a few times to get settled, then started my test.

Fifteen minutes later I emerged from the testing room, relieved. The system had asked the minimum 15 questions and passed me. The after-test survey, which used to be optional, took longer than the exam itself. The test proctor smiled broadly as he pressed his seal into my report. "Nice work," he said.

I reached out to take the grade report from him, but Kate was a hair quicker. "Show and tell time," she said, then her jaw dropped. "This is a perfect score!"

"Fifteen out of fifteen," the proctor agreed. "First one this week."

"A fluke," I said modestly. "You know what adaptive tests are like."

"Let's hope it's as gentle with me, then," Kate retorted.

With about 40 minutes yet to go before Kate's exam, we opted to make use of a nearby Notebook Ports station and check in with the outside world. Kate had an impressive number of emails waiting for her, so I went foraging for beverages to give her some privacy.

When I got back she was on her cell phone with a pained expression on her face. Seeing me, she perked up. "Wait a second, Eric, I may have another idea." Kate lowered her cell phone and placed a finger over the microphone. "You wouldn't happen to know any way to get around the console lock password on a server, would you?"

"With or without downing the server?" I asked.

"Without if you can," she replied. "With if you must."

NetWare 4 has a very simple mechanism for securing the console against unauthorized use: you choose 'Lock Server Console' from a menu and then type in a password. That password must then be re-entered to unlock the console. The major weakness in that system is that the password is transient – whatever the last operator types in becomes the password until the console is unlocked again. If the operator forgets what password they used, or manages to mistype it twice out of haste or sloppiness, there is no obvious way to get around it. Fortunately for Eric, I'd seen this problem before. "I know a couple of possibilities."

“Great!” Lifting the phone back to her face, she said, “Eric, I’m handing you over to Tom; he’s a Master CNE and he knows a trick or two that might help.” Then she handed the phone to me.

“Hi, Eric,” I began. “Tell me what happened.”

“We always lock the console when it’s not actively in use. We had a new person in there today who locked it, but apparently they mistyped the password because it won’t take the one we normally use. I’ve already tried a couple of likely misspellings and they haven’t worked. The only other way I know of to unlock the console is to hard boot the server.”

“It’s a 4.11 server?”

“Yes. Support Pack 7a, if that makes a difference.”

“Is it set up for bindery emulation?”

“I don’t know,” he replied, but I saw Kate nodding vigorously.

“Kate says it is; that makes it much easier. Do you have a workstation handy?”

“Right here.”

“Good. Here’s what you need to do…” With Kate watching and listening intently, I guided Eric through the process of changing the password on the bindery Supervisor account, which on NetWare 4 can be used to override a lost console lock password. Then I instructed him to type that new password on the console.

“It worked!” he exclaimed. “That’s so cool! How did you learn that?”

“The same way you just did,” I answered, winking broadly at Kate as I handed her the phone.

“Everything okay now?” she asked Eric. His answer caused her to break out into laughter. “I’ll take that under advisement. ... Bye.”

Kate took one look at my rising eyebrows and blushed. “Let’s just say that Eric wants me to convey his heartfelt gratitude,” she said.

“Gets a little excited, doesn’t he?”

She shrugged. “He’s only 24. The ink is still wet on his CNA certificate, but he’s well educated, enthusiastic and very smart. With the right guidance and some real world experience he’ll be very good.”

“Pretty green to be standing in for you, isn’t he?”

“We’re running a bit thin on technical staff right now. I’m here; our senior administrator is on maternity leave; our top engineer left us to take a job with Novell and we haven’t found a replacement for him yet. Until we do, we’re stuck in survival mode.”

I could relate. Most of the LANtech people on my team made Eric seem like a grizzled veteran. Any thought of trying to do a significant upgrade under those conditions was a pipe dream; yet another sign it was time to go.

Before long it was time for Kate’s exam. I offered to blow off the beginning of my 3:45 session and wait for her, but she wouldn’t hear of it. We agreed to meet in the Developers’ Den, a lounge area not far from the South Temple exit. I took her laptop bag and its contents with me since she couldn’t bring them with her for the exam. We shared a quick kiss for luck and I watched her disappear into the testing room. I waited until 3:45, then high-tailed it to my afternoon session.

My 3:45 session was a hands-on lesson in NDS Programming with ActiveX Controls using Visual Basic and Delphi. I don’t write programs very often and I’m not a professional coder by any means, but I’m good enough to pull out my C++ compiler and whip up a utility to solve a specific problem when I need to. I was used to writing most of the code myself, incorporating Novell’s libraries to allow my programs to access network services. With the ActiveX controls, however, a lot of the programming work could be eliminated. Something as simple as an Excel spreadsheet can use an ActiveX control to interact with the network, and can be set up in minutes instead of hours. The instructor took us through several example programs, which we edited and ran on our own workstations. I hardly noticed the time flying by until a hand touched my shoulder and Kate slipped into the empty seat next to me. Wordlessly she slipped me a folded sheet of paper.

It was her test report, sealed and approved. She had passed, answering 17 of 19 questions correctly. I was so happy for her that I forgot for a moment where I was; I pumped my fist and shouted, “Yes!”

The instructor heard me at the front of the room and took it in stride. “Yes,” he agreed, “it’s very exciting when things come together so easily. Now in the final example, you’ll see how the Session control can be used with the Directory control to query NDS ...”

We snickered like school children for a moment or two, then Kate took back her paper and her laptop bag. “I’m going to go freshen up,” she said. “Meet me in the lobby of the Wyndham at seven – we’re celebrating.”

The session ran long, lasting until almost 6:00. When I finally emerged from the room the convention center was nearly empty. What few people I did see were rushing to get out, since the conference party was scheduled to start at seven at the nearby Utah Fun Dome.

Back at the Best Western I showered, shaved, and put on fresh clothes. I wasn't sure what she had in mind, so I got out the best clothes I had with me: black dress pants and a crisp white short-sleeved shirt. I hadn't thought to bring a jacket or tie – I seldom wear those even at home – so I left the shirt collar open and pulled on a gray knit vest. That was as close to formal as I was going to get on short notice. A sudden thought struck me and sent me to my shaving kit in the bathroom. I dug through the black zippered case quickly and there they were: three little foil packets, relics of an Ocean City trip taken a long time ago while on the rebound from my last serious relationship. The condoms had been in that bag at least two and a half years but the packets were still intact so I reasoned they should still be okay. I slipped two into my pants pocket, just in case.

When I got to the Wyndham lobby I found myself wishing I'd packed a jacket and tie. Kate was dressed to kill in a slinky black sheath dress, cut low in the front and even lower in the back. Her hair was tied up in a tight, intricate knot, which emphasized the smoothness of her neck and shoulders. A simple gold herringbone necklace and earrings provided just enough ornamentation. Sheer hose and black shoes with modest heels completed the ensemble.

I said exactly what was on my mind: “Wow, Kate!”

She looked me over carefully. “Not bad for a technocrat on a business trip,” she said, smiling. “Not bad at all.”

“Where to, the Fun Dome?”

“Not right away,” she replied coyly. “I thought we'd start out at Benihana and then improvise from there.”

“Lead the way.”

We walked out of the Wyndham and back toward the convention center, crossing West Temple before turning right. We passed JW's Steak House, where we had eaten on Monday, and kept going. Benihana turned out to be a little bit south of the convention center at 165 South West Temple.

The place was packed. Hand in hand, Kate and I snaked our way through the crowd toward the hostess. She greeted Kate warmly and waved us toward the bar area. “We have a reservation for 7:30,” Kate explained. “But since they tend to be busy, I thought it would be best to show up early and wait in the bar.”

I followed Kate into the bar, which was a little less crowded than the main dining area. We were able to find two seats together on the left side. The bartender also seemed to recognize Kate; he nodded at her, smiling pleasantly, and produced a magnum of champagne in ice and two flutes. “Shall I open for you?” he asked in a charming Japanese accent.

Kate looked at me inquiringly. “That’s fine with me,” I replied. “Not to mention probably safer for the innocent bystanders.”

The bystanders were never in danger – this was good champagne, with a real cork rather than a plastic stopper. The bartender opened it expertly and poured glasses for both of us, leaving the bottle within easy reach. Kate raised her glass high, studying the bubbles for a moment in the light. “To success?” she suggested.

“Why not? To success.” The first sip was absolutely divine so I drank deeply, letting the delicate flavor wash over my tongue. “This is really, really good. What is it?”

“I have no idea,” she answered. “I just asked them for the best in the house.”

I pushed aside the white linen wrapping the bottle and snuck a peek at the label, but was none the wiser. “Something French, I think,” I said. “I don’t recognize any of the words.”

We sat there at the bar sipping champagne and enjoying each other’s company. The conversation stayed light and easy, steering well clear of work and networking by unspoken agreement. I lost track of how much champagne we had consumed because the helpful bartender kept topping off our glasses, but by the time the hostess came to escort us to our table we were both feeling pretty mellow.

The hostess led us past the sushi bar and upstairs to the larger dining area. It was very impressive to look at: a huge room filled with long, curved tables where groups of people sat together. In the center of each table were the steel grill and a skilled chef who chatted pleasantly with his guests as he prepared their food.

Kate and I found ourselves at one of the smaller tables, equipped with only six seats. The hostess introduced us to Hiro, our personal chef for the evening, and gave us our menus. Moments later a bus boy appeared with the rest of our champagne, thoughtfully transferred to a steel pedestal with fresh ice to keep it cold for us. “You are celebrating?” Hiro asked pleasantly.

“We are,” Kate replied. “We both passed important exams today which will hopefully help our careers.”

“Ah, you are with the Brainshare,” he guessed. “Lots of Novell people in town this week.”

“Most of them seem to be downstairs,” I observed. “Plenty of empty seats up here.”

“Yes,” Hiro agreed, looking around. “The sushi bar is very popular tonight. Not as many people interested in teppanyaki. Tomorrow, maybe things are different.”

On an impulse, I closed my menu. “What would you suggest for dinner tonight, Hiro?”

Hiro beamed. “You like chicken, steak, or seafood? Or maybe a combination?”

The champagne was definitely getting to me a little, so I decided on some protein to slow things down. “How about steak, with a little seafood on the side?”

“Okay – you like teriyaki beef?”

“Love it.”

“One of the house specialties is teriyaki beef julienne. Teriyaki beef strips, green onions, and shrimp. Very good with your champagne.”

“Sold,” I said approvingly.

Hiro looked over to Kate. “And you, Miss?”

“I’m in a seafood mood,” she said thoughtfully. “What’s in the seafood combination plate?”

“Cold-water lobster tail, ocean scallops, and shrimp.”

“Sounds perfect.”

Hiro entertained us with stories about some of the interesting patrons he gets during Brainshare week while he fixed our salads. While we were eating those we were joined by another couple who introduced themselves as Gloria and Reuben from Chicago. Hiro welcomed them as warmly as he had us, and soon the five of us were pals. Gloria, we discovered, was part owner of a flower shop. Reuben was a fleet supervisor for UPS. They were in their fifties, had been married to each other for 23 years, and were in Salt Lake City on a skiing vacation.

“How long have you two been married?” Gloria asked.

I laughed, and Kate choked on her champagne. “We’re not,” I hastened to explain. “We just met here this week at the Novell convention.” To bolster my claim, I held up my left hand. “See? No ring.”

“I’m so sorry,” Gloria gushed. “I have no idea why I thought you two were married.”

“Gloria wants everyone to be married,” Reuben explained. “If she’d been born a hundred years earlier, she’d have been a village matchmaker.”

Kate steered the conversation back to safer, neutral topics. Between her knowledge of the area and Hiro’s, I learned more than I ever knew about Utah in general and the Salt Lake City area in particular. The city’s nickname, “Crossroads of the West,” came from

the fact that it is a major transportation hub for the western United States, with over half the country within a two and half hour plane ride. I learned that those mountains that I'd enjoyed looking at all week were home to something like 10 world-class ski resorts, a fact that had not been lost on the 2002 Olympic selection committee. A little further south toward Kate's home was Mount Timpanogos, which is famous for the Timpanogos Cave National Monument and for a huge network of hiking trails, and the Provo River, which provides some of the best trout fishing in the western United States.

"All anybody knows about Utah back home," I remarked, "is that it's home to the Utah Jazz, Orrin Hatch, and a whole bunch of Mormons."

"Where's home?" Reuben asked.

"DC."

"That's too bad," Gloria remarked, looking at Kate. "He seems like such a nice fellow, too." I wasn't quite sure what she meant by that, so I just laughed it off and took my turn telling them stories about the peculiar brand of insanity that is Washington.

The food was incredible, by the way. My teriyaki beef julienne was succulent, the shrimp perfect. I even ate the green onions, which I don't normally go for. Kate's seafood platter looked equally delectable. And Hiro's preparation skills were first class. Knives whirled and flashed in a dance so complex that at times it seemed as though he had three arms. All the while he smiled and laughed with us and kept up his end of the conversation, making us all feel totally at home.

By the time dinner was over we had finished our champagne and put a serious crimp in a carafe of a very nice white wine. I was feeling no pain, and Kate seemed to be walking a little more carefully on her way back from the ladies' room. "Maybe we'd better slow down on the drinks a little," I suggested. "There's still plenty of evening to get through."

Kate grinned slyly and pulled me closer. "Suppose I told you I was trying to get you drunk and have my way with you?" she asked in a sultry murmur.

"Suppose I told you that you could have had me anyway?" I countered, softly enough that I hoped Gloria and Reuben wouldn't hear.

"In that case, suppose we say goodnight to Hiro and go back to my place?"

"I suppose we should."

We drew a lot of looks as we wove through the dining room and out of the restaurant, arms firmly intertwined. I felt as though there was a neon sign overhead advertising our intentions. We took our time meandering across the street and over to the Wyndham. Kate was strangely quiet, and seemed to be staring into space a bit. I put it down to the alcohol and tightened my grip on her a little bit just in case.

The elevator doors closed on us, leaving us alone, and impulse started to take over. Kate leaned back against me and I put my arms around her waist. My head was suddenly filled with the most tantalizing aroma, the mixture of her perfume and her own natural scent. The side of her throat was too much temptation – I snuggled in and started kissing her lightly along the right side of her neck, working my way down to the shoulder, luxuriating in the fragrance and the texture of her skin against my lips. “You smell delicious,” I said hungrily.

She sighed and pressed a little harder against me, rubbing her butt up against the lump of my hardening cock, and tilted her head back to give me a better angle of attack. Without thinking, I lifted my hands to her breasts and started fondling her through the stretchy black dress. Her nipples responded by hardening to my touch. I almost didn’t notice when the elevator dinged and the doors opened. Kate did, though, and abruptly pushed my hands down as two teenage girls walked in on us. Their eyes widened a little for a second, then turned away and made a great show of not looking at us.

*Only three more floors*, I told myself as I hid the evidence of my arousal behind Kate. The elevator opened again on our floor. I heard the distinct sound of giggling as the doors slid shut behind us.

Kate led me by the hand down the hall to her room. I nibbled on her neck a little more while she fumbled in her purse for the key. “You’re not helping,” she chided, but her body relaxed against mine anyway. Soon her fingers closed on the small plastic key card and slipped it into the lock. The door clicked and she pushed it open.

I followed her inside and then closed the door behind us, turning the bolt all the way. As an afterthought, I opened the door again long enough to hang the “Do Not Disturb” sign on the knob and then locked it again. As soon as I turned around Kate wrapped herself around me in a strong embrace. Our lips met and parted in unison, allowing our tongues to begin dancing together. The taste of the wine was still in our mouths along with just a hint of seafood and teriyaki – a scrumptious combination.

Gently at first, then more insistently, I felt Kate’s hands pulling on my vest and shirt. I let go of her long enough to lift the vest over my head and fling it aside. She had the shirt unbuttoned and off me in record time, then we went back to deep kissing. I ran my hands along the low back of her dress looking for a zipper. Finding none, I dropped them down lower and lifted on her dress, slipping my hands underneath. I felt the silky smoothness of panty hose on her thighs and up higher, uninterrupted, to her buttocks. Either the hose were the kind with the built-in panties or she wasn’t wearing any. I gave each buttock a squeeze and felt the strong muscles working inside. I started lifting up the dress, intending to strip it off her. Kate pulled back a little and stopped me.

“Hold that thought,” she said breathlessly. “I’ll just be a minute.” Before I could reply she slipped into the bathroom and closed the door.

The combination of the alcohol, the equally intoxicating scent of her perfume and the rapid transfer of blood from brain to groin had left me dizzy and breathless. The nearest place to sit down was the corner of her bed so I worked my way over, keeping a hand on the wall for support, and plopped down heavily. I kicked my shoes off, then my socks and undershirt.

From the bathroom I heard a toilet flush, then water running in the sink. The door opened and Kate came out. She was still wearing the slinky dress, but the shoes and panty hose were in her hand. Her eyes wandered hungrily over me as she approached the bed, and her seductive smile told me she liked what she could see so far.

Kate came to a stop in front of me, midway between the bed and the vanity opposite. With a knowing smile, she dropped the hose and shoes on the floor then turned her back to me. I watched her reflection in the mirror as she slowly removed the gold necklace and earrings. She saw me watching and grinned slyly, bringing her hands slowly up to her shoulders. With a little flick of each hand the thin straps of her dress fell off her shoulders and down to the elbows. Carefully holding the loose fabric of the dress against her bosom, she slipped first one arm, then the other free of the straps and let it fall. She was nude, her back in full view to me, the reflection of her front obscured by her body itself. "Enjoying the view?" she teased.

"Absolutely," I replied with feeling. She had a delightful rear end.

"Show me."

No problem, I was about to burst through my briefs anyway. I stood up long enough to drop my pants and underwear and kick them away then sat back down on the edge of the bed. "Very nice," she said, looking at the reflection of my hard-on in the mirror.

"Exquisite," I replied, letting my eyes show her it wasn't me I was talking about.

Kate reached up with both hands and released her hair, letting it fall easily and naturally to her back, then turned and approached me. The front view of her was even more spectacular than the back: I saw beautiful, teardrop-shaped breasts, a strong waist and hips, and a delightful patch of bright, curly red hair pointing the way to paradise.

Impatient, I reached out and pulled her to me, my face falling quite conveniently between her breasts. The perfume scent in her cleavage was even stronger than in the elevator, making me dizzy again as I inhaled her. Her arms encircled me and held me closely. In a fog, I kissed my way along until I found a ripe, hard nipple then locked on to it and began teasing it with my lips and tongue. Kate let me enjoy her, switching sides every few minutes, and I felt her relax against me. Her breathing got deeper and heavier, and her hands began to wander over my back and neck. One hand remained closed, I noticed in passing, but was too preoccupied to wonder why. Instead, I let my own hands wander more aggressively over Kate's body. Everywhere they went I felt the same thing: a

smooth, soft layer of skin on top and underneath firm, ripe muscle. Kate was either naturally athletic or spent a lot of time in the gym. I prayed silently for endurance.

Kate let me know when she'd had enough by climbing onto the bed over me, gently but firmly forcing me onto my back. She had me pinned and pressed her advantage by locking her lips onto mine again for another round of passionate kissing. My hard, rigid cock kept brushing against her pelt and driving me insane. A thick, warm trickle of moisture oozing down the shaft told me she was ready too.

Her hungry lips left mine and began to move south, tracing a line down the center of my chest, my belly, and coming agonizingly close to my raging cock. She rose up and contemplated my leaning tower. Her right hand, which had been closed for most of the festivities so far, opened to reveal a foil packet. *So we both came prepared*, I thought to myself.

"Ready?" she asked as her fingers tore the packet open.

"Completely," I answered emphatically, holding out a hand for the condom.

She slapped my hand playfully. "Lie back," she told me. "This is one of my favorite bits of foreplay." Watching me intently, she unrolled a little bit of the condom and popped it into her mouth. "Mmm, strawberry," she said thickly.

I'd heard of flavored condoms before, but never quite understood what the point was. Kate wasted no time in showing me. She bent over and right away I felt her lips parting around the head of my aching cock. I felt a tongue pressing down on me, and in a flash I realized she was placing the condom with it.

Shockwaves traveled down my cock and through my body as Kate steadily worked the condom down over my shaft, using her teeth and tongue to unroll the latex a quarter inch at a time. It was agony and ecstasy rolled – or should I say unrolled – into one. Every so often she would pause and give a good, hard suck on the covered portion, sending me into paroxysms.

*I am NOT gonna blow this too soon, I vowed, I am not. ... Baseball, think about baseball ... Orioles ... Ripken should hit 3000 pretty early, maybe during the Detroit series; I should try to get tickets ... The O's will probably suck in the beginning, especially with Erikson on the DL ... Their bullpen isn't looking too solid, except maybe compared to last year. ... Sweet Jesus, I can't hold this much longer!*

"How are you doing up there?" Mercifully, Kate's mouth had come away from my cock. She was watching my face while her right hand played idly with my balls.

I was panting like a sprinter at the finish line. "Fine," I squeaked painfully. "I was just wondering if this is Mussina's year to win 20 games."

Kate grinned down at me wickedly. "I love a guy with self control," she said. "Batter up!" With that, she climbed back up on top of me and pinned my shoulders to the bed with her hands. She teased me just a little more, grinding her hips against me once or twice, letting me feel the wet smears she left where her thighs touched me, then she rose up and thrust herself down over my shaft. "Ooooooh," she moaned, "Feels like the heavy hitter is in the box."

Her eyes closed and she sat upright, letting herself settle farther and farther down on me until I was buried to the hilt. "You feel so good inside me," she said. "I could stay like this for hours." Then she quickly looked back at my face, and laughed heartily at the worried look she found there. Even the laughter was mild torture, as it caused her muscles to contract around my shaft. "Don't worry, I was only kidding; I'm as close to the edge as you are, and I think we've both waited long enough."

She got me laughing too, a painful, almost manic laughter that made my cock twitch. "Do you torment all your men like this?"

Her face softened. "No, this is all just for you. I've been fantasizing about this since late Monday night."

I laughed softly one more time. "I'm always the last to know," I lamented.

Kate put a finger to her lips and began slowly pumping her legs, lifting herself up and dropping herself back down over my saddle horn. I reached up, found her breasts, and gave them plenty of loving attention. Her eyes opened wider and stared directly into mine, making some kind of electrical connection between us. I couldn't have looked away if I'd wanted to. She began to moan with each stroke and each squeeze of a breast. I was very happy for the condom at that point, because it deadened the sensation just enough to give me a little extra stamina – without it I was sure I'd have blown my load long before. As it was, I was able to keep going and concentrate on the rising pitch and pace of Kate's heavy, gasping breaths. Her moans became grunts, and then short groans, and then she threw her head back violently and let out a loud, joyous cry. I felt her muscles clamp down tightly against me and her entire body shuddered. Her weight shifted as her spine relaxed; the hands that had been caressing her breasts were now supporting her writhing frame. I held her steady, breathing with her, keeping myself pressed firmly in place where it seemed to do the most good, and as she let out another loud cry I felt my cock explode. Bright spots crossed my field of vision as I surrendered to my own overpowering climax. For a few seconds my entire body ran on automatic pilot, clenching and releasing with every heavy pulse of my cannon.

When it was over I had no strength left to hold her up; Kate folded down on top of me and slid off, rolling over onto her back with a huge, blissful sigh. "You have no idea how badly I needed that," she said. "It's been so long."

"I can relate," I replied. It had been a long time for me too.

Without another word, Kate rolled over onto her side and pulled me up toward her. My head fell neatly between her breasts. I tossed an arm around her, nestled in, and we both went to sleep.

I woke up a few hours later with a dry mouth and a soggy condom still hanging from my flaccid penis. Both were easy enough to take care of, I even managed to get myself disentangled and to the bathroom without waking Kate. Standing in the bathroom doorway, letting the light bounce off the walls and gently illuminate the bed area, I found myself standing still, just admiring the beauty and peace of the sleeping woman.

*Well, Tom, the inner voice said, you've done it again – acted without thinking. What happens next, bright guy?*

I wasn't sure. It had been very easy for me to sit across the breakfast table from Kate and say there was nothing holding me in DC, but the fact was I'd been there a long time. Was I really willing to pack up and move cross-country based on a relationship of less than 60 hours' duration?

*Why not? The only thing really holding you in DC is your job, and you've already decided to leave that. And there's an opening in her own company.*

Office romances are so dicey, though. I'd never tried one before, but I'd seen plenty of them end up in personal, as well as professional, ruin. Besides, she had mentioned the opening in front of me several times but never suggested I apply for it – that must mean something, I thought.

*So get a job with Novell. Or the government. Or a different company. A good IS guy can work effectively in any industry.*

This was stupid, I realized. There I was, standing naked in a doorway chasing my own mental tail when 10 feet away was a woman I should be snuggling up to, perhaps making love to. I banished the inner voices to a dark closet of my mind and slid back into bed. Kate sensed the movement and pulled me to a breast again. Why not, I figured, and started gently suckling at her.

Kate remained asleep, her breathing steady and slow, but her body responded to my touch. The nipple in my mouth became hard and erect, and she shifted back a little to give me easier access. My right hand caressed her body idly, sliding slowly up and down her side from just under the arm, down the smooth side of her torso, over the generous curve of her hip and down the upper thigh. Her legs parted slightly. I accepted the opening and slid my hand down over her mound, massaging her pudendum with my palm and letting my fingers probe gently between her inner thighs. Her lips opened at my touch and her juices began to flow.

I probed a little deeper, learning the folds of her inner sanctum, feeling gently for the little round nub I knew would be there. I found it and brushed against it. She drew in a

sharp breath and then let it out with a soft, sleepy moan. Her hand clasped the back of my head and pulled it more tightly into her. I reached a little deeper with my right hand, slipping a finger up and into her canal, reaching deep inside her.

She was stirring now, panting lightly and letting a little moan escape her lips with each stroke of my finger along the upper wall of her vagina. Her hips began to rock with me, pushing against my palm and increasing the reach of my finger. “Mmmmmm, I like this,” she sighed drowsily.

I kept it up, moving my palm in a circular motion and stroking in and out of her with my finger. A little experimentation taught me just the right way to move to gently sideswipe her clitoris, and each time I succeeded I was rewarded with a gasp and a moan. Soon she surrendered herself to me totally, throwing her head back and letting me take her to another deep, long, satisfying climax. We held each other and kissed for a while, then fell back into sleep.

I woke in the morning on my back with a hard-on, and the curious sensation of someone playing with my balls. “Good morning,” Kate said from somewhere near my feet. Before I could react, she had ripped open another condom packet and started repeating her trick from the night before, using her teeth and tongue to roll it slowly down over my hardening rod. When I’d had all of that I could stand, I pulled her up to me and climbed on top, adoring her lips, her breasts, working my way down her body with little kisses until I came to the sweetness below.

Kate moaned and purred as I went down on her, her responses telling me exactly where and how she liked to be kissed, licked, and sucked. Her flavor and her scent were mesmerizing for me, I wanted as much of it as I could get. After a short while I heard her moaning, “In me now, please,” but I didn’t stop right away. It was my turn to tantalize and torment her the way she had done me, and I wanted to savor it a little. I kept going until I pushed her over the edge.

Her climax was intense. Her thighs clamped down around my head like a machinist’s vise. Fingers wove into my hair and clenched, grabbing fistfuls and pulling me in deeper. I had about ten seconds of air left by my reckoning when the vise loosened its grip, her thighs becoming soft and inviting again. I started to relax into them.

“Oh, no you don’t,” Kate’s voice said, and I felt strong arms pulling me back up and tossing me on my back. I was too weak to resist; Kate pounced on top of me easily and slid down over my waiting shaft. She started pumping immediately, anxiously, squeezing me inside her as she moved up and down. My hips picked up on her rhythm and matched it, and soon we were both coming together.

“Ready for breakfast now?” she asked when our breathing had returned to normal.

“No thanks,” I replied, making a big show of licking my lips. “I just ate.”

Kate grabbed a pillow and swatted me with it. “Hit the shower, wise guy!”

I showered quickly, not sure what time it was, not entirely sure I cared that much. When I came out of the bathroom I was treated to a unique sight: Kate, still nude, had her ThinkPad out on the coffee table and was reading something on the screen. “A computer geek’s wet dream come true,” I cracked.

“Come here, I’ve been wanting to show you this since yesterday.”

It felt a little strange, but what the heck – I plopped my naked body down next to hers and turned the laptop to get a better viewing angle. It was an MS Word document entitled “Candidate Profile” and it was about me. My name, age, certifications, and information on my current job were neatly typed into fields on this standardized form. I wasn’t sure what to make of it. “What’s this?”

“I have a friend who works in a recruiting firm,” she explained. “I told her about your situation, and she offered to put together a professionally-produced resume for you if you want. This is her standard form; I started filling it out with what I know from talking to you. If you want to finish it, she’ll have a proof ready for you in 24 hours and she’ll ship the finished copies anywhere you want.”

“I see,” I said, still not quite comfortable with it. “I’m not sure I’m ready to sign up with a headhunter. Don’t they have fees and whatnot?”

“The new employer usually pays those,” she replied. “But that doesn’t apply here. She’s not putting you in their system, Tom, she just offered to do the resume as a favor to me. You’d be under no obligation at all. Or are you changing your mind about your job?” There was something strange in her voice, a hint of stress that hadn’t been there a few minutes before.

“Not likely,” I answered firmly. I was definitely going to need a resume; it couldn’t hurt to have it done by a pro. So I put an arm around Kate and kissed her. “Thanks.”

While Kate took her turn in the shower, I quickly filled in the rest of the details on the profile and saved it to disk. When the File Save dialog came up, it displayed the list of existing folders in her documents directory. She had folders with names including BUDGET, DR PLAN, METRICS, PERSONNEL, and PROJECTS. There were also folders named after people, including an ERIC folder. Kate must do a lot of administrative work, I reasoned. I remembered our first dinner together. “I fell into doing more administrative work and less hands-on,” she’d said. It certainly looked that way. On an impulse, I created a TOM folder and saved my profile in it. Then, having snooped as much as my scruples would allow, I shut down the system and started hunting for my clothes.

It was 9:05 when Kate came out of the shower. We hadn’t left ourselves time for breakfast, so we kissed goodbye and talked randomly about getting together in the

afternoon before I hustled myself back to the Best Western to retrieve my notebook and badge and to change into fresh clothes.

I looked at the pristine bed in my neglected room and wondered what the maid would do when she saw the bed hadn't been slept in. Probably nothing, I decided, but better safe than embarrassed. I pulled the sheets aside and climbed into bed, rolled around a few times, then got up again. Now it looked slept in. I laughed at myself as I changed clothes.

My first session was a long one entitled 'Optimizing ZENworks in a Production Environment', running from 9:30 until 11:45. I didn't have another until 1:30, which had me thinking about finding Kate for some lunch. I checked the copy of her schedule she'd given me the day before: no dice. Kate was scheduled for a session on ZENworks for Networks from noon until 1:15. I hadn't registered for that session, but since Kate would be there I decided to go anyway.

I didn't see Kate in the line of people waiting to enter the breakout room, so I hung back for a bit. In due course the door monitor opened the door and started checking people in, plugging their bcards into her Palm Pilot to make sure they were registered before waving them through. Soon it was 12:02, there were no more people waiting to enter, and Kate hadn't shown up yet.

"Did you want to attend this session?" the monitor asked me nicely. "There are some open seats."

I looked around one more time for Kate in vain. "I think I would," I answered, and gave her my bcard.

I sat as close as I could to the door, figuring that Kate was just running late and would be in soon. The lecturer gave a very good presentation on ZENworks for Networks, a new product that allows Cisco and Lucent routers and switches to be configured and controlled through Novell Directory Services. Pete would like this, I thought, especially the Quality of Service controls.

Kate never showed. I didn't have time to go looking for her after the session because I had another one scheduled immediately afterward, but when that one ended at 2:45 I made a beeline back to my room at the Best Western. I wasn't wearing a pager or a cell phone, so if Kate had tried to contact me it would have to be through the hotel. Sure enough, when I reached my room the red light on my phone was flashing. I followed the instructions on the faceplate for checking voice mail and found there was one message.

"Tom, it's Kate," her voice said, sounding a bit frazzled. "I had to come down to Provo unexpectedly, so you won't find me at the Workstation Security session this afternoon the way we planned. I still expect to be back there this evening, though, so call me when you get a chance." She added her cell phone number and blew me a digitally recorded kiss.

I took a deep breath, then dialed the cell phone number.

“Hello?” Her voice sounded less strained than in the message.

“Hi, it’s Tom. Was it something I said?”

“I don’t scare off that easily,” she chortled back. “No, we had a minor system meltdown here. All of our printers suddenly stopped processing queued jobs, and Eric didn’t have a PIN number to open an incident with Novell. That’s my fault, I should have made sure he had one before I left.”

“Do you need some help?”

“No, we’ve got it in hand now. Novell Tech Support helped us figure out what to do, it’s just taking a little time to do it. I’ll be heading back up to Salt Lake City in an hour or so. There are some things I need to go over with Annette while I’m here.”

“Okay. What would you like to do about dinner?”

“Surprise me,” she suggested. “Just make sure it’s nourishing – you’re going to need your stamina.” I could imagine the lecherous grin on her face as she said the last part.

“Guess I’ll look up oysters in the yellow pages.”

The Workstation Security seminar started at 4:30 in Ballroom F. We were both registered for it, so I went and took a seat in the back row in case Kate showed up. At about 5:10 I felt a familiar hand on my shoulder and turned to kiss Kate, who then slipped into the seat beside me. “I missed you,” I whispered.

“Same here,” she replied.

The lecture continued, but my attention flagged. Now that Kate was next to me again, I was struck by how much I really had missed her in the short time she was gone. That disturbed me, because in less than 24 hours I was supposed to get on a plane back to DC. Long distance relationships are hard, and relationships with IS people are very hard – a long distance relationship between IS people seemed like a guaranteed disaster. What was I prepared to do about that?

“Tom? We can go now.”

I shook the fog out of my head and saw that indeed, the seminar was over and people were filing out of the room. “Sorry,” I said reflexively. “Out gathering wool, I guess.”

“It’s been a long day,” she said. “Have you made any dinner plans?”

“I’m in kind of a simple mood. There’s a diner back behind the Best Western that looks like it might fit the bill. It’s called Dee’s.”

“I don’t think I know it,” she said. “Sounds like fun.”

Dee’s did not disappoint. It had a simple, roadside atmosphere and plain honest food, not the best in Salt Lake City in all likelihood but good enough. The ribs and chicken combination plate worked well for me, since I hadn’t had a substantial meal all day, only a sandwich after talking to Kate. She was in better shape, having had lunch in Provo, so she went with a grilled chicken sandwich and salad. We thought about beer, but went for iced tea instead. “I’ve still got some Genesee in the cooler at the Wyndham for later,” Kate confessed.

“I’ve got a radical idea,” I announced at the end of dinner. “Why don’t we actually go to a Brainshare social function this evening?”

Kate’s eyes widened. “I don’t know,” she said in mock skepticism. “I hear all kinds of computer geeks hang out at those things.”

“Every once in a while you meet a really sexy woman there, though,” I countered playfully.

“What if I said I’d rather take you back to the Wyndham and screw your brains out?”

“You mean we can’t do both?”

“You drive a hard bargain, Mister ... fortunately, you also drive something else pretty hard. Okay, you can have it both ways tonight.”

So it was that for the first time all week Kate and I showed up at an after-hours function associated with the convention. Thursday night was Meet the Experts night, a chance to rub elbows with some of Novell’s technical elite. We got there about 7:30 and mingled until 9:00. I’m not a real sociable type, so that was enough for me. Kate was also content to call it a night then.

Our lovemaking that night was different from the first night. Having gotten the initial burst of pent-up desire out of our system, we were able to relax more and cherish each moment. There was a lot of holding, caressing, and kissing as we lay together, taking our time, making every minute count. I went down on her again, kissing and adoring her into a slow, easy climax, and she returned the favor by repeating the condom trick and then climbing on me, riding me lazily to my own release.

Afterward I disposed of the condom and we moved to the sofa, still naked, to cuddle and sip ale.

“That was sweet,” Kate said. I just nodded my agreement and held her to me, stroking her hair with my free hand. After a short silence, she spoke again. “We need to talk, Tom.”

“You sound serious.” There was a gravity in her tone that I hadn’t heard before.

“I am serious. We have a lot of unfinished business, and only a few hours left.”

“I know.” My flight out of Salt Lake City was due to leave at 12:55. “I’ve become very fond of you in the last few days, Kate. Enough so that I don’t entirely want to get on that plane tomorrow, but I think I have to. So the question is, where do we go from here? Do you want us to try and continue?”

“I absolutely do,” she answered softly. “You mean a lot to me, Tom, and I don’t want to see you go back to DC and be miserable. I know you have to go, but you don’t necessarily have to stay there. You could come back after you quit your job, stay with me while you look for a new one. I can even help you look. You know there’s an opening on my own team that’s practically tailor-made for you.”

“I’ve thought about that. Maybe I’m being influenced by my feelings for you, but I really like Utah. I like the mountains and the atmosphere and the people that I’ve met here. I could be happy here, I think, even if I came out on my own. If being with you is part of the package, I can’t think of anywhere else I’d rather live.”

I felt tears dripping lightly onto my chest. My own eyes were getting a little moist too.

“I almost wish you hadn’t said that, Tom,” Kate confessed. “It makes this next part so much more difficult.”

Huh? “What next part?”

Kate got up and found a small packet of Kleenex in the bathroom. Bringing it with her, she returned to the sofa dabbing her eyes a tissue. This time when she sat down, she positioned herself away from me a bit so she could look me in the eye. “I haven’t been entirely open with you about my own job situation,” she said. “I used to do engineering work for the company, like you do, designing and supporting solutions. About two years ago I accepted a promotion into management and became head of the network group, the way Walt was for you. I let my CNE skills go because I was no longer working directly on the system, I was managing the people who do. Then we lost our best engineer, and I haven’t been able to find a replacement, so I’ve been doing both jobs.”

If she was expecting surprise, she didn’t get it. “As deceptions go,” I said, “That’s not exactly a whopper. I was beginning to suspect as much anyway.” Thinking I was making things easier, I added, “I’ve also been wondering if you were hinting that you’d like me to apply for that engineering job.”

“That’s the crux of the problem,” she said. “All week long, there have been two things I’ve wanted to do with you: hire you and make love with you. We really do need someone like you, Tom, to pull our systems together. We need someone who can take our younger people under his wing and teach them by example and by word, and build the kind of team that you had before Kevin came on the scene.”

Kate paused for a long pull of her ale before continuing. “The problem is, that engineering position reports to me. If I offer you that job and you accept it, then our personal relationship has to end. I can’t bring someone that I’m sleeping with into my team and put him in a position of authority, Tom; it’s against every principle of management ethics, and it could very well alienate the rest of the team and poison all of those important relationships.”

“They wouldn’t have to know,” I offered half-heartedly, knowing it was a non-starter.

“They’d know,” she said flatly. “We would know, and they would see us sitting across the conference table from each other and within a week they would know, and then they would despise us for trying to fool them.”

All I could do was agree, and wait for the next shoe that I could sense was about to drop.

“The other side of this is that we really do need you, Tom. That job has been open for four months. I must have interviewed thirty candidates. None of them had anything close to your talent or willingness to help, Tom. Most of them were paper CNE’s, people who could pass a test but didn’t understand a thing about how networks should be run. Others had glass room mentalities and ridiculous salary expectations because of their experience. None of them wanted to work for a nonprofit organization for industry average pay. Like you, I’m very emotionally attached to this company, Tom, and if you are willing to take that job I feel like I owe it to them to give you up. That’s my dilemma: do I offer you the job, knowing that it may mean sacrificing a young relationship, or do I do the selfish thing and keep you for myself?”

I didn’t know what to say; I just sat there, staring into her tearful eyes, absorbing the impact of all she had said. Finally a few mental gears started turning. I wanted a life with Kate, there was no question anymore – the final straw for me was the sense of honor she was showing me now. We were so much alike in so many ways. No job was worth sacrificing that. “For what it’s worth, Kate,” I began slowly, “If you offer me a choice between the job and you ...”

A soft but firm hand clamped down over my mouth. “Don’t say it,” she pleaded, “Not yet. I’m not done confessing yet.”

I nodded my understanding, and she let go of my mouth.

“When I went back to the office today, I used some of that time behind a closed door with Annette. She’s my mentor as well as my boss, and I needed her advice. I told her

everything, and I do mean everything, about you and about us. I told her about my dilemma, and asked for her advice.”

“And what did she say?”

“She told me to sleep on it,” she said. “Actually she told me to make love to you, tell you everything, and then both of us sleep on it. She also told me that under no circumstances was I to ask you about taking that job, and that if you started to volunteer an answer I was to cut you off.”

“Okay,” I acknowledged. “So what do we do now?”

“I want you to make love to me again, and then I want us to sleep in each other’s arms.”

She got her wish. We made love one more time, slowly and quietly, in the bittersweet knowledge that it might be the last time. Afterwards we held each other closely and went to sleep.

I slept fitfully, my rest disturbed by a series of strange dreams. In one, Kate and I were seated at the head of a conference table with a bunch of people I didn’t know. Kate was explaining that I had been hired to take over the lead engineering role in her organization, and asked Eric to fill me in on the status of current projects. One of the men started speaking, but the words were all jumbled and I couldn’t understand them. As he talked, I realized that my cock was getting hard. The more I tried to concentrate on listening to Eric, the longer and harder my cock became. Within a few minutes it ripped through the front of my pants, up to the underside of the table top, and then lifted the table up. Everyone looked at Kate and asked, “Is there something you’re not telling us?”

In another, Kate and I were sitting down to breakfast. We were in our own house, at our own table (I knew this even though I was unfamiliar with the room). We had our calendars out and were discussing when we could get together and have sex.

“I’m working late all week this week,” she said. “We’re doing a lot of upgrades, and I don’t have an engineer yet. I may be free next Tuesday between 8 and 9.”

“Tuesday’s no good for me,” I replied. “I’m doing a server upgrade. How about 6:30am on the 19<sup>th</sup>?”

“That might work, but I’d have to be done by seven so I can leave for my budget meeting.”

“I’ll make it quick.”

Another had me sitting in a small waiting room of some kind, done in green, with a big-screen TV set on the wall opposite me. A greasy-looking guy in a tux was asking Kate about our first date and she was telling him about how we met in the line at the Learning

Zone and had dinner at the steak house. The scene reminded me of a sleazy game show I'd flipped past a few times, "Blind Date." As I watched, Kate continued to relate how we had taken and passed our tests, and then launched into a lurid description of our first night's lovemaking. I sat in shocked silence listening to the account.

At the end the host spoke up. "And now Kate, it's time to make that momentous decision. What will you do: date him or hire him?"

Kate seemed to freeze, face simultaneously pensive and fearful. The studio audience started shouting out their own suggestions – "Date him!" "Hire him!" "Date him!" "Hire him!" The "Hire him" group seemed to be getting louder and the "Date him" group quieter. I tried to shout "Date him!" at the image of Kate on screen, but all I could manage was a hoarse whisper – my voice was gone.

No problem, I could just go to her and tell her to choose dating. But then I realized the waiting room I was in didn't have any doors. I pounded on the walls, desperate to get out, to find Kate, but there was no exit.

And then, in the distance, I heard the faint ringing of a cell phone. I started looking for it, tossing the couch cushions aside, feeling in the cracks with my hand, but I couldn't find it. The phone fell silent ...

"... Tom? Wake up, honey."

"Huh?"

Kate was standing over me, her cell phone in her hand. "We need to get up, Tom," Kate said. "Annette just called. She's on her way up here from Provo and she wants to meet with us both."

That woke me up quickly. "What about?"

"I didn't ask. Whatever it is, we'll find out in about an hour."

I threw my clothes on and headed back to the Best Western. On my way through the Wyndham lobby, I had a thought and detoured to the Master CNE lounge. The door was ajar, so I poked my head in to see if anyone was home and found myself face to face with the photo girl from the other day.

"I'm sorry," she said sweetly, "the lounge doesn't open until eight."

I checked my watch: 7:15. "That's fine," I said. "I'm looking for a quiet place where I can have a small business meeting in about an hour. Would it be okay for me to use one of the round tables in here?"

“Sure,” she answered, nodding. “It should be pretty quiet in here, not too many people come in first thing.”

“Thanks,” I said sincerely. “You just made my morning.”

Back at the Best Western I showered, shaved, and dressed in record time. I buzzed Kate and told her I’d gotten the use of the Master CNE lounge; she liked the idea. We decided to have her meet Annette in the lobby and then bring her into the lounge where I’d be holding our table just in case the place got popular on the last day of the conference.

I went back to the Wyndham at 7:55. The photo girl was waiting for me, and even told me to feel free to offer my guests coffee or juice from the refreshments spread. A couple of other small groups did drift in when the lounge opened, but there was plenty of room for all.

At 8:20 the photo girl stepped through the doorway from the outer anteroom and pointed to my table. Kate came in next, followed by another woman and a man. I stood quickly and Kate performed the introductions.

“Tom, this is my supervisor, Annette Cooper and our HR Director, Ed Poole. This is Tom Mulhearn.” Annette was a blonde who looked to be in her late 40’s, medium height but very thin, almost boney-looking. She was attractive in her way, but no match for Kate. Ed Poole was a big, hefty man with a fringe of graying black hair ringing the sides of his otherwise polished bald head. We did a round of friendly handshakes and I offered them beverages. Kate volunteered to fetch the drinks, leaving me momentarily alone with the two strangers.

“How are you finding Utah, Tom?” Annette asked politely. I assumed it was a throwaway question, but looking into her kind, gentle face it seemed as though she sincerely wanted to know.

“I like it here,” I said frankly. “The city is clean and well laid out, the scenery is amazing, and all the people I’ve met this week have been unbelievably good to me. If nothing else, you folks really know how to charm the tourists.”

“It seems to be working both ways,” she replied. “You’ve made a very strong impression on Eric. And on Kate, of course.”

Kate arrived on the heels of that remark with their coffee. “Just a little bit,” she agreed with a wink.

Annette smiled at that. She had a very comforting smile. She took a good taste of her coffee, set the cup down approvingly, and addressed us both. “I don’t see any reason to keep you in suspense,” she began. “Ed and I are here, obviously, because we want to talk to both of you about your situation. Kate told me about how you’ve helped her this week and about the personal relationship that’s formed in the process. She also told me about

the ethical conflict between wanting to continue that relationship and also wanting to bring you on board.”

Annette took another sip of coffee, then continued. “Kate is a highly valued member of our team, Tom. Even before she showed me your resume and qualifications, I was ready to make you an offer based entirely on her opinion of your talents. When she left my office yesterday, I resolved that if there were any way possible that we could bring you on and avoid the ethical concerns that are troubling her, I would find it. I called on Ed, who is our human resources director, and together we came up with what I think is a win-win proposal.”

The boss reached into an attaché case she had brought with her and pulled out a manila file pocket. She removed the top sheet and passed it over to me. It was an organization chart of her company’s IS department.

“This is the organizational structure that is in place today,” she explained. “As you can see, Kate is the overall manager of LAN services. The team leader for each department – Engineering, Administration, Help Desk and Desktop Support – reports to Kate. Right now the Engineering lead position is vacant, and it has been for something like four months. That’s the job we very much want to offer to you, Tom. The main functions of that position are to act as our senior technical advisor on LAN technology issues, to design and lead the implementation of system upgrades and enhancements, and to act as an escalation point for problems that require a high level of expertise to troubleshoot. Secondary functions, which are very important to us, would include the ability to teach and advise the first- and second-level support people so that their technical skills increase as they gain experience. Ideally, you would find yourself doing more designing and directing as time goes on and the people under you get better at execution and support.”

She paused for a breath and some more coffee. “Before we go any further, Tom, this is probably a good point to ask you if you are interested in the position. Don’t factor in anything about your relationship with Kate; we’ll deal with that separately. What I need to know is, does the job as I’ve described it appeal to you? Would you accept it, assuming that we can come to agreement on pay and relocation issues?”

I felt like a contestant on Final Jeopardy, trying to figure out how much to bet without knowing what the actual question was going to be. I knew the answer, though; it was just a question of saying it. “Yes,” I said finally. “I’m interested. One of the most satisfying parts of my old job, before things went sour, was helping others to learn the craft of networking. I miss that, and I’d like to be able to do that again.”

Annette’s eyes told me I’d passed the first test. “I’m glad to hear that, Tom. Now let me show you both the solution that Ed and I came up with last night.” A second organization chart came out of the folder. I put it between myself and Kate so we could both see it well. “As you can see, this second chart has been reorganized a bit. The titles are still undefined as yet, but in essence Kate would continue to be manager of user support services – the help desk and the desktop support teams – and you would become manager

of the engineering and administration teams. You would then report directly to me. That makes you Kate's peer, outside of her chain of command but of course still working with her very closely."

I felt Kate's hand grip mine.

"Before you get too excited, there are some downsides to this structure," Annette warned. "In the existing plan, the team leaders are not formal supervisors. Kate is solely responsible for the personnel issues including performance evaluations, time accounting, and expense reporting. In the new structure, Tom, you would have to assume the supervisor role for the people under you. That means being willing to do more paperwork than you are used to, and assuming responsibility for helping these people develop their careers. It means staring at budget reports sometimes, and dealing with personal issues. You need to decide whether you're willing to do that as part of the job."

Annette turned to Kate. "The other downside, Kate, is that by making Tom's position equal to yours, I have to upgrade the salary class to equal yours. There isn't enough budget money this year to fund that unless I can cut a headcount somewhere else within the organization. The obvious choice, in fact the only choice I'm willing to make because it's the only one that doesn't cost us a real person, is to cut the third engineering position that was funded for this year but hasn't been filled yet. I know you lobbied hard for that third position when Gupreet was still here; are you willing to give it up, at least for this year, in order to get Tom on board?"

Kate wasted no time in answering. "Yes," she said decisively. "I'd rather have someone of Tom's caliber in the senior slot than two vacancies we can't fill."

"And what about you, Tom? You've had a few minutes to think about it; are you still interested in the job with the extra personnel duties on top?"

I answered slowly. "About 18 months ago, a man I respect tried to steer me into a position very similar to what you've outlined. Rejecting that offer has been my number one regret ever since. I won't make that mistake again."

Annette seemed pleased with my answer. "Kate, does this arrangement satisfy your concerns?"

"It does," she said tearfully. "Thank you. Thank you both."

"Don't thank us yet. Tom, I understand from Kate that you're coming from a bad situation. What concerns do you have about potentially coming on board with us?"

That needed some thought. "I guess my biggest concern is the composition of the group. I know you've lost key people and the ones you have left are largely inexperienced. The big question is, why are you losing people and what are you doing to try and keep the ones you have left? It's tough to develop young talent with a revolving door in action."

“You’re thinking like a manager already,” Annette noted with a smile. “As far as losing people goes, we’ve really only lost one: Gupreet, our last senior engineer, left us because Novell offered him a lot more money and he has children who will be entering college in a few years. He left on good terms. The only other member of our team who isn’t with us now is Nadine, one of our administrators, who is on maternity leave. She’ll be back in about five weeks.

“We do pretty well at retaining our people, Tom. Our biggest weakness is salary. We don’t have the deep pockets that some of the high-tech companies in Orem and Provo have, so we can’t match the top salaries they offer. I try to compensate for that by fostering a positive work environment and doing everything in my power to make sure the people who work for me are properly encouraged and challenged. The best example I can give you is this meeting, Tom. I’m offering you a job without benefit of a formal interview based on Kate’s conviction that you are the person we need. I’m willing to restructure the department in order to find an arrangement that you can both live with. And if you accept my offer, you’ll be negotiating your startup package with the head of Human Resources. That should tell you about the lengths to which I’m willing to go to get good people and retain them.”

It did. It also fit in with other things Kate had already told me, such as how Annette had gotten the travel policy modified to help cover Kate’s hotel expenses. “If I’ve learned anything from my situation,” I said, “it’s that loyalty to a company is crazy; loyalty should be reserved for the people that you work with, and work for, who value it and return it. What you’ve done here today just confirms what I already suspected from talking with Kate – you already know that, and you practice it. That makes you exactly the kind of organization I want to be a part of. I’m yours.”

Annette beamed. “That’s great. I think we’re going to work together very well. There’s just one more thing.” She looked sharply at both of us. “I don’t think you need me to remind you about the pitfalls of office romances, but I’m going to do it anyway. Tom has already made a strong first impression, but it will be up to the two of you to make sure the relationship stays in its proper place and to retain the respect of your teams. If you don’t, there will have repercussions through out the department.

“There’s also the issue of what happens when the relationship is over. I hope that it never becomes an issue, that you have a long and happy time together. But if that’s not to be, I’m holding you both accountable for making sure that the breakup doesn’t throw my LAN department into chaos. Is that understood?”

“Understood,” we agreed.

Annette sighed contentedly and pushed her chair away from the table. “Good,” she said. “Kate, why don’t we see if you can sneak me into the closing keynote address while Tom and Ed hammer out the details?”

I took off my badge holder and handed it to Annette. “Here, this should help. They don’t scan badges for the general sessions, so nobody will question the name on it.”

“Thanks.” The two women strolled out of the lounge together, leaving me alone with Ed Poole.

The negotiations were short and painless. We settled on a base salary that was roughly equal to my present pay in DC. With the difference in the cost of living, that was equivalent to about a 15 percent raise. We discussed a relocation allowance and settled on a not-to-exceed figure that seemed reasonable to me. We estimated I would need 2 or 3 weeks to get my DC affairs in order for a move, plus I’d have to pass a physical in Provo before I could start, so we put my effective date at May 1. That seemed like a long way off until I realized it was already March 31. The benefits package was more or less comparable to what I already had; being a health care organization, the medical options were a bit more generous than I was used to. There were a few minor perks offered by the old company that they couldn’t match, but nothing major. When I put my signature on the final offer sheet, I was perfectly content with the deal.

“It’s going to be a pleasure having you on board, Tom,” Ed said. “By the way, Annette asked me to give you this now that you’re signed up.” He pulled a plain white envelope out of his breast pocket and handed it to me. Inside was a check for \$1870 made out to me.

“What’s this for?” I asked, puzzled.

“Your Brainshare registration fee,” he explained, “Plus half of your hotel room charges. We called the Best Western to verify the room rate and taxes. It’s Annette’s way of welcoming you to the team.”

With nothing left to do but wait for the women to return, Ed and I retired to the restaurant for some breakfast. We ate blueberry pancakes and talked trout fishing until about 10:30, when the girls found us.

“How was it?” I asked.

“Fascinating,” Annette answered. “Drew Major was the speaker. I’d have gladly stayed for more, but Kate thought we’d better get going.” She pointed to the check in my hand. “Looks like we have a deal.”

“Signed, sealed, and delivered,” I confirmed. “Thank you for this. For everything.”

“You’ll earn it, and then some,” she replied confidently. “How would you like to check out of your hotel and come to Provo? The team is already dying to meet you.”

Some of the air hissed out of my balloon as I realized what time it was. “I’d really like to,” I said, “but I can’t. I have a 12:55 flight and it’s going to be crowded; if I’m not checked in ahead of time I’ll lose my seat.”

“That could work,” Kate said. I could see the wheels turning in her head. “With the conference ending today, every plane out of this city is going to be packed. By Sunday, though, the rush will be over. I know a nice, comfortable place in Lake Shore where you can stay for the weekend; you could meet the team, see the area a little, and then with any luck have a more pleasant flight home.”

I weighed my options carefully: spend the day shoehorned into a flying sardine can, or spend two more nights with Kate first and maybe have some elbow room on the return flight Sunday? Decisions should all be this tough.

“Works for me,” I said happily.

Time was tight; I normally gather up my stuff the night before I check out of a hotel so I don’t have to rush around in the morning, but of course this time I hadn’t even slept in the room in two nights. The desk clerk was accommodating, though, so I was able to get my things packed in some semblance of order rather than madly tossing things into suitcases. By 11:30 Kate and I were headed south on Route 15 in her red Subaru Outback station wagon.

Annette and Ed had a good 45-minute head start on us. By the time we made it to Provo, got me signed in and found the 4<sup>th</sup> floor team room, she had already presented the new organization chart to the crew.

Eric turned out to be a short, stocky, Hispanic guy with a boyish face. That surprised me, since I hadn’t caught any hint of an accent over the phone. “That’s what growing up in Orem will do for you,” he explained with a grin. He was my junior engineer, a Microsoft MCSE who was studying for his Novell CNE exams in his spare time.

My new team also included three administrators. Nadine, the new mother still on leave, had the most experience. Aldo, a thin black man about Eric’s age, had been there two years. Sam (short for Samantha), a perky brunette with a tomboy look, was a relative newcomer at eight months. All were Certified NetWare Administrators, though, which was a big improvement over where I was coming from.

We spent the rest of the afternoon getting to know each other and gathering documentation on the system for me to take and review while I wrapped things up in DC. By the time I set foot in Provo again I wanted to be familiar with the existing design and procedures so they wouldn’t have to waste a lot of time getting me up to speed. We even set up my user account and a client-to-site VPN node so that I could access the system remotely over my DSL.

Kate took me home with her to Lake Shore. She lived alone in a 4-bedroom rancher on a cul-de-sac. One of the spare bedrooms was set up as a satellite office complete with cable modem, printer, scanner, fax, and a NetWare 5 server running BorderManager for secure site-to-site VPN access. A workstation plugged into her Ethernet switch would be fully connected to the office network at an impressive speed. “I do a lot of work from this office,” she explained. “By the time you get back, I’ll have space cleared out for another workstation and an extra phone for you.”

“Will I be spending a lot of time here?” I asked innocently.

“You’d better be.” She gave me a soft punch on the shoulder followed by a kiss that curled my toes.

The other spare bedrooms were made up as guest rooms. “This house has been in my family since I was a kid,” she told me. “It was a vacation home for us at first. When I started working in Provo I took up residence here because it was convenient. Last year I bought the place outright from my folks. I keep these two rooms made up because every once in a while my folks or one of my brothers will come up for a few days on short notice.”

Kate had closed off part of the redwood deck out back and turned it into a pretty impressive home gym. It featured a serious looking resistance-training rig, a recumbent stationary bike and a Nordic Track all laid out in an enclosure with plenty of windows to allow a view of the back yard. An adjoining section, divided off with panels of discreet glass, held a Jacuzzi. “You take your workouts seriously,” I remarked with respect.

“Sometimes it’s the only way to keep from pulling my hair out. Twenty minutes on any of these machines, or in the tub, can salvage my whole day.”

“And it’s better for you than my system of stress relief.”

“What’s that?”

“Find a defenseless piece of furniture and kick the crap out of it.”

“Maybe I should put in a heavy bag.”

The rest of the weekend was a blur. We spent quite a lot of it in bed, learning more ways to arouse and delight each other. She gave me the cook’s tour of Lake Shore, including a drive up to the Utah Lake itself.

We also made some plans for my move. I decided to sell off my old Bronco rather than move it across the country. I’d be staying with Kate right away, so I didn’t need a lot of furniture; I’d give most of it to Goodwill rather than pay to move it. The good stuff I’d

keep in a rented storage unit at first until Kate and I could see how the relationship was working out, then take it from there.

Sunday came way too soon for either of us. We held hands during the entire drive from Lake Shore back to Salt Lake City International, where I caught my postponed flight back to DC. I still had my paperback from the flight out, and this time I actually got to read it.

The first thing I did when I got home Sunday was to page the old crew. “MY TURN,” the message read. “BRIDGE 5, STAT.” Inside of five minutes everyone was on the bridge wanting to know the details. I gave them an abbreviated, PG-rated version of the story and received congratulations from all of them. Veronica offered to housesit if I couldn’t get the place rented before I had to return to Provo. Jesse offered his pickup truck to supplement my Bronco in clearing the place out. Pete and Joanna offered to come over and drink beer with me while I packed. When I told them my plan for resigning, they howled with wicked laughter.

By arrangement with Kevin I had the day off on Monday. I spent it productively, making the initial calls to movers to set up appointments for quotes and checking with Goodwill on what kind of stuff they were willing to take. Then I went through my apartment from stem to stern and found every item in it that belonged to the company. Like a lot of IS people, I work from home a lot; as a result, I had a fair amount of things, mostly copies of manuals and software and systems documentation, that the company had paid for. All of it went into my Bronco. As I was loading the last of it, my pager went off.

“NEED TO SPEAK WITH YOU TUES AM,” the message read. “PLS REPORT MY OFFICE 0800.” Kevin, of course.

*No problem*, I thought to myself, smiling broadly. *In fact, it’ll be a pleasure...*

At just before 8:00 that evening I pulled into the office with my loaded Bronco. The place was deserted as usual except for the rent-a-cop in the lobby. He was used to seeing me come and go at all hours, moving boxes and computers and all manner of equipment with my Bronco, so he paid me very little attention. I wasn’t required to sign in unless I came after 8:00. The company’s property, all 3 boxes of it, was quickly stowed on the floor in my cubicle out of the way. I then gathered up all of the personal affects from my cubicle. There wasn’t much: a few knickknacks; my original Novell certificates; my copies of my performance evaluations, timesheets and expense reports. It all fit in a fairly small box, which the rent-a-cop didn’t even question when it left the building under my arm.

Back at home, I typed up a one-sentence resignation letter (“I hereby resign my position with the company effective immediately.”), sealed it in a plain white envelope and wrote Kevin’s name on the front. That went into my laptop case.

I got up extra early Tuesday morning and made it into the office at 6:45, knowing that I'd be a good hour ahead of Kevin. Using my key, I entered his office and left the envelope on top of his chair along with my final timesheet. Then I went back to my cubicle and deleted my own user account, email account, and home directory on the network. I wiped the drives on my laptop and desktop and restored them to their original configurations. Then I closed my eyes and waited quietly.

At 7:55, Linda appeared at the entrance to my cube. Her face was bursting with ill-concealed excitement. "Kevin got in about five minutes ago," she said. "Not one minute later he came marching out of his office, and asked me to come get you. He looked like someone just shot his dog, Tom. What did you do?"

"I left a little note for him," I replied with a wink and a grin. "I have one for you too, actually," I added and handed her a Rolodex card with Kate's home address on it.

"Lake Shore, Utah?" she said, mystified.

"That's where you can send the check for my unused vacation time. Is Denny around?"

"No, he's got a meeting in Arlington."

"Cool. Well, I'd better not keep the boss waiting, eh?"

My best poker face was fixed firmly in place when Linda ushered me into Kevin's office, closing the door behind us. His eyes glared at me with barely-controlled rage. He flipped my envelope across the desk toward me. "What the hell is this?"

Maintaining my outward cool, I removed the sheet of paper from the envelope, looked at it, and put it back. "It's my resignation," I replied casually, dropping the envelope back on his desk.

I could see him fighting to hold in his temper. "I think you owe me an explanation."

I let him try to stare me down for a minute before answering. "I think the letter says it all."

"This letter says nothing," he argued. "I want to know what you think you're doing."

"Resigning," I replied with a shrug.

Seeing that he was getting nowhere with the frontal assault, he tried a different tack. He covered his face with his hands for a moment and sighed deeply, then looked back at me with a softer expression. "I understand you're not happy with some of the decisions I've

made here, Tom. I would hope that before you do something this drastic that we could talk about things. What can I do to persuade you to stay on?"

A long list of suggestions – vile, debasing, painful suggestions – came to mind, but I was determined to stay on the high road. "Nothing."

"Look, I know we don't have a very good relationship. If you'd rather negotiate with someone in HR ..."

"It doesn't matter," I said evenly. "I already have another job."

"I see." Kevin's shoulders slumped and his gaze fell to a spot somewhere on his desk. "Would there be any point in my asking with what company?"

"No."

"Why are you doing this?" The question came out almost as a whine. He seemed so pathetic in that moment that I almost broke my promise to myself and told him why. Almost, but not quite.

Just over two weeks later I found myself once again sitting in a 767 on final approach into Salt Lake City International Airport. It had been a much better flight than the last one – or maybe it just felt that way because this time I knew Kate would be waiting for me at the terminal.

My Bronco was history, sold for slightly less than book value to a 20-year-old college student who reminded me a little bit of Eric. So were most of the furnishings in my apartment that I didn't deem worth transporting across country. All the rest of my belongings had been picked up by the moving company and should arrive in Lake Shore in about a week. Veronica had taken up residence in my old apartment, intending take advantage of it during the week to shorten her commuting time until a new tenant could be found. I wasn't worried, the rental market was pretty healthy and Kate was willing to let me earn my room and board in other ways. ("Is that legal in Utah?" I'd quipped.)

I'd had one more chance to see Walt before leaving town, when our whole gang descended on his place in Salisbury for a going-away party. It got pretty maudlin, and if all that was said comes true then Kate and I will have a steady stream of out-of-town visitors during the peak skiing season. Pete, the last one of us still working for the old company, made the party even more interesting by sharing with us an internal organization announcement.

"Effective May 1," he read, "Kevin Hilliard, Network Systems Manager, will be placed on special assignment. Individuals currently reporting to Mr. Hilliard will report on an interim basis to Dennis Crider, Director of Information Technology." We all knew what

‘special assignment’ meant: Kevin was being given a finite amount of time to quietly find himself a new job outside the company. “I bought Linda lunch,” Pete added, “and she told me that Denny is on his way out too. By the end of the month, Corporate IS will be in charge of the shop.”

“What about you?” we asked.

He shrugged. “Best guess is my headcount gets transferred to Corporate. I don’t care; I got my offer letter from Cisco yesterday. Come May first, I’m outta there.”

The plane landed smoothly, bringing my attention back to the here and now. I shouldered my carry-on and joined the line of passengers streaming out of the plane.

I spotted Kate hovering near the terminal end of the jet way, straining to see down through the crowd. Her face brightened immediately when she saw me, and the second I was clear of the opening she smothered me with welcoming kisses and hugs.

I was definitely having fun.

-wg

5/4/00