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## It's Only Your Imagination

“Slow day, Mr. Donovan?”

There were certain voices Cody Donovan would have preferred not invade his dreams and the annoyingly high pitched lisp of his boss, Mr. Tendros, was right there at the top of his list. Cody readjusted his head on the crook of his arms, trying to snuggle into a more comfortable sleep and ignore the bothersome calling of his job.

“Mr. Donovan, I’m talking to you.”

Too late, Cody realized the voice wasn’t coming from inside his head but from just above his left shoulder.

Damn, Tendros had caught him again.

Slowly, Cody opened his eyes and tried to blink away the glaring figure in the opening to his cubicle. Instead his vision cleared, revealing Cody’s worst fear, the scowling face of his boss.

It wasn’t the first time he had been caught neglecting his duties in the last month but it would probably prove to be his last. Cody was already on temporary probation after getting caught rummaging around an office where he had no business being. Unable to explain his presence in the secured room because he himself was unsure of how he’d ended up there or what he’d wanted to accomplish, Cody was forced to succumb to a thorough search of the most personal kind.

He hadn’t minded the company security men tearing apart his workspace in a careful examination, despite the number of curious heads poking over the maze of walls, his co-workers

proving they were nothing better than a bunch of comic strip Ziggy's with their noses perched and their innocent eyes watching but never considering they could be the next one singled out.

Cody's computer was taken, his files secured, but they didn't remove anything he would miss. Personal items weren't allowed within the office work area and except for the little wobbling owl he'd managed to sneak into the corner under the shelving for his folders, everything inside the cubicle belonged to the company.

When no evidence was found, the search moved to his locker and Cody knew enough not to keep anything of any value in there. A jacket and the boots he'd worn to work were the only articles and had been left untouched since the morning punch in.

This left only one other place for Cody to hide any confiscated items from the secured office. With a major amount of protest, Cody was dragged to a private room at the end of the building far away from the other workers and here the most personal of searches was conducted.

Cody couldn't fight the invasive probing or battering of questions that followed. He could only insist on his innocence and the fact they hadn't found whatever they thought he'd stolen. Eventually, they were forced to admit to their error in judgement and Cody was released with a two day suspension and the unshakable feeling that he'd just been violated.

At least he'd been cleared of any wrong doing and allowed to return to work, under the watchful eye of Mr. Tendros.

Who had just caught him in another of his seemingly constant screw-ups.

His grey suit hung off his slender frame in stiff presses. "I believe I asked you a question," Mr. Tendros said, a stick man ready to engulf himself in flame.

“Right. I was just trying to remember what I’d done with the Pensky file.”

Mr. Tendros came into the cramped cubicle, furthering Cody’s claustrophobic panic, and perused the shelf of folders. “And it’s taken you almost twenty minutes to remember? This seems a little inefficient.”

Cody was trapped. Caught with his trousers around his ankles and his ass exposed. The boss was simply stalking him, savouring that brief instant of victory before moving in for the kill.

“Might it not be more productive for you to actually get up and look for it?” Mr. Tendros reached into the stack, pulled a folder out, and tossed it onto Cody’s desk.

Across the front, the label read, ‘Pensky.’

“Was that so hard?”

The malicious cynicism couldn’t be avoided. Cody cringed, staring at the folder in horror while a heavy acidic bubble formed in the pit of his stomach and forced its way up the back of his throat.

“I think we’d better have a chat in my office after work,” Mr. Tendros said.

“Why wait? We might as well get it over with.”

“Very well. I’ll draw up the paperwork and have my secretary call when I’m ready.” The boss’ eyes scanned the room, taking in the other cubicles. He really enjoyed keeping a tight reign on the troops and wanted to make sure no one missed the dismissal. To stray from the flock brought harsh consequences and Cody was now to be used as an example.

A tightly run operation, commanded with the efficiency of a supreme ant colony, the workers were hustled into their cramped work spaces and given very little freedom to roam. They were allowed to venture as far as the lunch room, with four small tables, a sandwich and drink dispenser, and a water

cooler. The walls were bare of the usual paintings or inspirational pictures, instead a barren white that seemed to blur if Cody tried to focus on them and would leave him with a massive migraine if he dared stare too long. Another door through the lunchroom led to the locker room, past this the exit. Four other doors led out of the maze, all off limits, at least until Cody had trespassed into the forbidden area.

Unfortunately, he couldn't remember a lick of it.

Of the other floors in the building, nothing was known. There was no contact with those above or below them. A separate parking garage and elevator prevented a chance encounter. Cody even suspected the different floors kept different hours of business.

Obviously satisfied the others had taken notice, Mr. Tendros sneered with one last scornful look in Cody's direction before leisurely strolling past the other work stations and through door number four to his office. In addition to Mr. Tendros there were three others responsible for managing a section of the floor, plus another executive to oversee them. None of them had ever seen the man in charge of the operation, nor even knew his name. Cody would have killed to know whom his boss answered to.

Quickly, he copied down a few personal contact numbers, e-mail addresses and phone numbers of those he wanted to let know he'd been fired. There was no sense in sending it from his terminal, a tracer program followed all mail and the company didn't need to see what he really thought of their operation. Mr. Tendros already had more than enough kindling to burn Cody's career, the last thing he needed was more fuel.

"I'm so sorry, Cody. I didn't see him coming until it was too late," Linda Stokowsky said, leaning back in her chair to see him. A sweet girl who'd been trying desperately to keep Cody on the straight and narrow, she occupied the cubicle across from him.

"It's okay," Cody said.

"I warned you that sooner than later you were going to get caught."

"I know, I know. I can't figure out what's wrong with me. I just feel tired all the time."

"Have you seen a doctor?"

"Yeah, last week after work. He said he couldn't find anything but wouldn't know for sure until my tests came back." Cody had gone through a series of intrusive and probing tests from the company doctor bringing back a fresh imprint of the horrifying search and in the end he hadn't been able to reveal his true fears to the physician.

When the exam was finally over, Cody was left shivering and oh so cold, so exposed, so vulnerable to the forces eating away at his soul that he hadn't been able to bring himself to admitting something very bad had happened to him in that room. Something so brutal his mind had locked it away and refused to ever look at it again.

A piece of his memory had been stolen by the company. In that forbidden room Cody had lost a piece of himself. He wanted it back.

The company could fire him, they could take away his professional pride, but what they'd taken in that room didn't belong to them. The doctor would never find anything wrong with him. The tests would reveal nothing. What afflicted Cody couldn't be diagnosed or cured by medical procedures.

"Maybe you could pawn it off on a work related sickness," Linda suggested hopefully. "You could say it was chronic fatigue or migraines from staring at your computer screen for too long."

"We both know this runs deeper than him catching me asleep at my desk. He's been waiting for an excuse and company rules are, three strikes and you're out."

A buzzer rang to end the inning. Cody answered his phone and was told the boss was ready to see him. With an encouraging smile to a woman he would probably never see again, Cody slug-footed it to the fourth door, where another buzzer sounded, signalling an abrupt end to Cody's career as a telepusher.

\* \* \*

The company secretary, Mrs. Webb, sat stiff-backed in her chair, looking up from her computer screen only long enough to motion him to a seat with a curt nod before turning back to her typing. A crusty old prude, Mrs. Webb spoke not a word to him and hadn't during any of his visits into the inner sanctum. She glowered at the screen as though she could see right through it and was serving a harsher judgement than even Mr. Tendros could serve.

Making Cody wait was simply to get him sweating under her intense indifference and it worked. Like a charm.

Within minutes a damp trickle formed against his brow and down his sides, his breath came in a shallow wheeze. Suddenly, the outside waiting room was uncomfortably warm, the air stale and hard to breath. Cody felt dizzy, his head heavy, he couldn't focus on anything properly.

Another fit, suddenly upon him, he felt the blackness tugging at his mind, trying to trap him, drag him down, leave him vulnerable.

No! Cody wouldn't let himself give in to the comforting sleep or its magical dream land. Cody needed to stay focussed and alert, needed Mrs. Webb to stop staring at him without actually looking at

him, needed . . . needed . . .

He clamped down on his own tongue, gnashing his teeth together and clenching his jaw hard enough to draw blood. The pain brought tears to his eyes, further blurring his vision, but it chased away the lightheaded sleepiness threatening to overtake him.

“Are you quite all right, Mr. Donovan?”

“Fine,” Cody mumbled around an already swelling tongue. And then he realized the secretary had actually spoken to him. “You can talk?”

“Of course,” Mrs. Webb replied. “What did you expect?”

“It’s just,” Cody stammered, totally stunned by her eloquent English accent. “You never . . .”

“And so you assumed I couldn’t. That can be a dangerous practise, my boy.”

“Then why haven’t you ever said anything?” The darkness skulked away, angry he had been able to defeat it but unwilling to completely disappear. The curtain simply pulled back to re-gather itself.

“The executive board prefers that I refrain from any personal contact with employees. It prevents rumours from circulating out of this office and minimizes speculation. Now that you’re on your way out I guess it doesn’t matter.”

Minimizing office speculation? Yeah, right. Mrs. Webb’s notoriously silent stare covered more than half the mystic surrounding the office. Those actually brave, or foolish, enough to breach the subject of what might go on beyond the locked doors would only get so far as the muted secretary and her school mistress scowl but never daring to contemplate what she might be protecting. At least not while in the company of other workers, who might very well turn them in.

“Besides which,” Mrs. Webb continued, her contrite accent raising her a full head above Cody.

“Why would I be bothered wasting my breath on a useless trouble maker?”

Cody decided he liked the secretary better when she was silent.

“You must realize the company has given you plenty of opportunity to prove yourself, Mr. Donovan. They had such high hopes for you and needed so badly for you to succeed.”

“I’m sorry to disappoint them.”

“No you’re not. You’ve fought against them every step of the way and you can’t even begin to understand the damage you’ve cost. But know this . . .” Mrs. Webb didn’t have a chance to finish.

Instead she gasped harshly, her hand going to her throat.

Cody barely even noticed. The black curtain slammed down.

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The company secretary, Mrs. Webb, sat stiff-backed in her chair, looking up from the empty blotter on her desk only long enough to motion him to a seat with a curt nod. Of course, there were no seats inside the chamber, no white walls that seemed to swim, all that existed inside the box was an all-encompassing darkness, the part of Cody’s soul the company had stolen from him.

Instead of sitting, Cody went to the desk and waited for the secretary’s attention. He wasn’t exactly sure what she found so interesting about the blank blotter on her desk, maybe it was the fact her precious computer was no longer there and without it she felt naked.

After a moment, she finally looked up in startled wonderment and began to ask a question. Her

mouth formed the words but no sound came out. Mrs Webb cleared her throat and tried again.

Cody could clearly make out what she was trying to say, her lips very deliberately formed the words "take a seat" but still there was no sound.

"I think I like you better this way," Cody said. "You're much more pleasant to deal with."

With obvious indignation, Mrs. Webb tried to scold him but her muted retort was too sharp and quick for him to catch all of it. Still, he was able to make out enough of the words to understand she wasn't about to suffer through Cody's insolence. This was her space. Mrs. Webb controlled the inner office in her own stern fashion and like her boss wasn't about to let Cody take that away from her.

Inside the box though, Cody was in control and he had brought her here to deal with her in his own way. The inner sanctum was Cody's safe place, a personal studio where he was the director and could create a controlled environment. Behind the curtain there were no surprises he couldn't anticipate or unlikely outbursts to throw him off kilter. The box was limited only by Cody's imagination.

"Labelling me as a troublemaker might just be the only thing you've got right," he said to her. "Because I'm planning on bringing a whole world of trouble before I'm through here. But don't you, for one second, try to pin someone else's disappointment on me. I've given two years to this company, sacrificing my personal freedom and never once questioning what all the secrecy was for or how all the data we're collecting was being used, and because of one lousy mistake now I'm kicked out to the curb with the rest of the garbage. Well, you better believe that I'll find out what they are hiding, no matter who I have to get involved."

And the curtain pulled away, thrusting him back into the sweaty, pulse-pounding real world of waiting for Mr. Tendros to call him into his office.

Behind her desk, Mrs. Webb's fingers busily clickety-clacked across the keyboard, Cody's lecture all but forgotten.

The phone on her desk buzzed. Without a word, she picked it up and listened, and after replacing the phone in its cradle, motioned with the slightest jerk of her head that Cody could now go to see the boss.

Unsteadily, Cody rose to his feet. "Aren't you going to wish me luck?"

Mrs. Webb only stared at him with disdain.

"Well, it was nice chatting with you."

Before he stepped past the waiting area, the curtain slammed down again. The black chamber swallowed him up, instantly pulling him from the real world and into dream. There was no desk this time but Mrs. Webb was still there, standing with her face pressed into one corner as if she were a punished child. Slowly, she turned, without seeming to move at all, to face him and Cody realized it wasn't the secretary after all.

Or maybe it was, for when she spoke the prim English accent was still there. Her tone was lighter, not quite as hostile, but it was definitely Mrs. Webb's voice, and so must be the woman before him. An earlier version, maybe, before she'd been corrupted by the company.

Her message was simple and to the point and when she'd finished, she was twisted back around only to vanish into the wall. What she managed was a brief warning. "Cody, be careful of him."

Curtain call!

Cody opened his eyes to find himself seated on a hard wooden chair in the boss' office. Across from him, Mr. Tendros regarded him with the self-assured confidence of a man who was comfortable

with being in charge. There was no waiver to his cool grey eyes, no nervous twitch to expose a false bravado. He wasn't about to let his responsibilities to his job ruin him and almost looked like he enjoyed the idea of finally having Cody under his thumb.

It was up to Tendros to keep the machine running smoothly. If it began to grind or squeak he was the one who would do the oiling. The workers had been drilled many times that anyone responsible for slowing them down would be replaced. The bottom line was all that mattered and if they slacked off, it would disrupt the entire chain and Mr. Tendros wasn't about to lose any sleep over firing someone who couldn't keep up with the rest.

"I must say I'm a little disappointed it has come to this," Mr. Tendros said as he settled into his chair for what looked would be a prolonged assault.

"So am I," Cody replied.

"But the fact remains that this isn't your first infraction against company policy and I would think we've given you more than your fair share of second chances."

"If you say so." Cody wasn't overly concerned with throwing away a potential recommendation for his resume, although it might make for some interesting reading.

"You don't agree?"

"Would I be sitting here if I did?"

"Then you believe we have failed you somehow. Have we not provided you with a stable working environment?"

With all the tippy-toeing around and effort to stay on his best behaviour, with all the secrets and off-limit areas, after the unnecessary personal indignity Cody had suffered, the last word he would use

for this office was stable.

“Neurotic would be a better fit.”

“And this is supposed to explain why you have failed to live up to our expectations?”

“Your expectations?” Cody stammered. “Maybe you set them too high.”

“Obviously we did. We believed in you, Mr. Donovan, and we’ve given you every opportunity to grow with us. But all you have succeeded in proving is that you’ve learned nothing of professional conduct during your stay with us.”

Inwardly, Cody was glad to be relieved of his burden and believed he was getting a chance to get out while the getting was still good. Linda, his cubicle neighbour for the last two years, had been working at the company for more than six years and while she complained of his much she disliked her job on an almost daily basis her prospects grew slimmer with each passing year, ground down by her limited skills. The company grabbed hold and chained you down, not offering any hope for advancement while inducing the belief there was nothing better out there for their employees.

“I’ve discovered a few things since I’ve been here.” And there were still a few mysteries Cody wanted answered.

“What exactly is it that you think you’ve found?”

“That you are hiding something. That the entire company has some big secret holed up in this building and you are purposely keeping it from the rest of us.”

“Your imagination seems to have gotten the better of you.”

Cody’s anger bubbled over, bringing with it the thick black curtain. It threatened to cut him off and thrust him into the void of the black box, to leave him vulnerable to Tendros during the most vital

point in Cody's counterattack. If he were to find the answers to satisfy his curiosity and quell the guilt of leaving the others behind, he had to find out what was in those other rooms. He needed to stay focussed and prove to Mr. Tendros that he wasn't the puffball screw-up he'd been labelled to be. Tendros had been the one to let his imagination get the better of him when he'd decided he'd seen weakness and swooped in to finish Cody off.

He fought the blackness, concentrated on pulling the curtain back. He wouldn't allow himself to be dragged into that world and utilized his rage to force it back.

"What's beneath us? What are they doing on the floor above us? Why haven't we seen any other people?" Cody's words saved him, forced him back to the here and now where he could deal with Mr. Tendros. The curtain retreated but didn't disappear. He could feel it at the back of his mind, like a lost thought drifting along and impatiently trying to reclaim his attention.

Mr. Tendros regarded him for a cool moment before leaning forward to rest his elbows on his desk. "Do you really need to know so badly?"

"Two years I've been running the phones and gathering data off the internet, all day, every day. What do I get for my effort? Suspicion and guilt."

"If that were actually the case, you wouldn't still be here."

"It's exactly the reason I'm here now," Cody said. The curtain was on the verge of dropping. He couldn't hold it any longer. "You don't trust me and you've just been waiting for a reason to get me out. You know that I found something inside that office."

"What? What did you find?"

Cody wasn't sure and was having a hard time staying with the conversation. Mr. Tendros was

nothing more than a shadowy outline lost in the vast universe of his black chair. The veil was down, swallowing everything behind the boss.

“If there is any lack of trust, it is yours,” Mr. Tendros said, completely unaware of the dark shroud hanging over him. “You had your chance. You conducted your little investigation. So what did you find that has you so convinced we are trying to hide something?”

Cody couldn't answer. He was mesmerized by the advancing darkness, mystified by how fully it covered everything it touched. The entire back half of the room was gone. Not changed, there were no fuzzy outlines or vague shapes where the filing cabinets and computer desk once stood. There was nothing. No sign, no life, simply a huge blackness erasing time itself.

The curtain coiled around the chair just as Mr. Tendros bolted upright. “Cody, are you even listening to me?” He started around the desk when Cody's eyes remained unfocused and fixed on the spot where the chair had been, not even making it to the corner and then the curtain bloomed outwards, as if pushed from behind by a gentle breeze, and caught hold of the back of Mr. Tendros jacket. He stopped suddenly and even though Cody could not make out his face, he was sure of the confused surprise on the administrator's face as he turned to see a huge black wall. He didn't get a chance to react, the curtain wrapped around him and jerked him inside.

And then it was coming for Cody, slowly advancing toward him, pulling at him, trying to draw him in. Cody would be swallowed up and there was no way to know if he would ever be able to get back out. A terrible fear gripped him at the thought of spending his eternity trapped inside the box. How long would it take for the loneliness to overwhelm him and drive him mad?

Cody squeezed his eyes shut, his last and only defence. If he just kept his eyes closed and

concentrated on the chair beneath him, maybe he would be okay. Maybe he could convince himself that he really was just sitting in a chair in Mr. Tendros office, that the boss was still lecturing him on his many downfalls. The blackness was simply a part of his imagination, a defence mechanism Cody's subconscious had created to combat the stresses of his job.

When he opened his eyes, Cody was indeed still seated on the chair in an office. Only, Mr. Tendros was no longer across from him. Cody was shocked to realize he wasn't even in the boss' office any longer but had somehow ended up back in the forbidden room, where his life had taken such a dramatic swerve.

But where was Tendros?

And how had Cody gotten here?

Uneasily, Cody looked around the room but didn't see any lingering signs of the black curtain. Actually, everything looked quite normal and ordinary and as it should be, making him wonder if maybe he hadn't been asleep at his desk all along.

Was he still?

A line of filing cabinets filled one wall, a desk with a computer and fax machine sat against another. In the corner, a paper shredder, the walls surrounding him bare and the same off-white that made his head spin.

On shaky legs, Cody stood up and slowly slid his foot out to test the solidity of the room around him, fully expecting to step out and sink through the floor. This was simply an illusion created to lure him into the box, where he would be trapped forever.

His foot found solid ground. The curtain didn't swoop down to cover him. Feeling a little more

secure, Cody decided to search the room.

The paper shredder was clean, the waste basket beneath it empty. Neither the computer nor fax machine would turn on when he tried the power buttons. Both machines were plugged into the wall but it seemed the socket was dead.

The filing cabinets were locked but using his pen-knife, another company no-no but they had never caught him, he managed to jimmy the drawer open. Cody was sure the racket from his banging of the metal cabinet would bring someone and when he finally pried the first drawer open he stood silently by the door for nearly a full minute, listening for the approach of footsteps.

None came. In fact, there was no sound coming from the other side of the door.

Letting his curiosity get the better of him, Cody reached for the doorknob. If he just cracked it open a little bit . . .

The door was locked. The cool metal knob refused to turn in his hand. Cody felt a stiff panic begin to form. There was no other way out. He had to figure out how to unlock it.

The filing cabinets held the answer. Whatever the room was, the files seemed to be the only thing he had access to and so Cody went and started leafing through the folders in the first drawer.

The files covered the company expenses – production costs, internet fees, employee wages, – for the eleventh floor. The second and third drawers covered the same – paper, rental of the cubicle walls and other office equipment, expense accounts. Cody was actually surprised to see how expensive it was to run one floor. The company was shelling out major bucks, but for what?

Cody still didn't have a clue.

The next cabinet was filled with taxation documentation and even if things weren't as they

should be, Cody was so completely out of his element he wouldn't have been able to tell. So many numbers stacked in a zig-zag of columns across the page, one running into the next in some mathematical code that only a first-class accountant could decipher.

Inside the third cabinet Cody found what he was looking for. Names. Hundreds of them. The alphabetical listings crammed the cabinet from top to bottom.

Cody's hand trembled as he reached inside the top drawer and pulled it out far enough to locate the D section. The trembling became full-blown shakes as his fingers closed on the file with his name and began to pull it out.

What was he expecting to find?

Cody opened the folder.

Printed on the top page were his name, current address, and a list of contacts in case the company needed to get a hold of him during his off hours. Below this was the usual identification information; date of birth, marital status, years of employment . . .

His eyes stopped and widened. There must be some kind of mistake. A typo or maybe another Donovan who worked on one of the other floors, Cody knew there must be some simple, reasonable explanation because what he was looking at didn't make any sense.

In the box beside the years of employment was the number eleven.

Eleven years?

Obviously, whoever had typed up his papers was half-asleep and put in the wrong number.

The next page only furthered his confusion. And the third, and fourth, and fifth, and on and on, all a testimony to the years of Cody's loyal service.

According to his file, he'd started out on the bottom floor at the age of twenty-one. There were many recommendations and citations commending Cody's performance and within a year he was promoted up to the second floor.

But Cody had celebrated his twenty-first birthday on a remote island, while sailing the Coral Sea with friends. They'd gone diving and he'd speared his very first fish.

A lot had happened over the eleven years since but his year on the boat had been one of the happiest of his life and Cody still had many fond memories of his travels to Australia.

The year the folder had him on the second floor, he'd actually been working the docks in Halifax and it was here that he met a fantastic girl and fell in love. He was twenty-two, she was eighteen and Cody was certain he could spend the rest of his life trying to make her happy but her parents had gotten in the way and sent her away to college.

Again, the report stated Cody had an excellent year and was showing fantastic potential. Within the year he'd moved up another floor.

Cody saved up enough money to follow his flame to school but by the time he arrived, she'd already found a new guy, leaving Cody alone and heartbroken in a strange city. That had been a tough year.

Year three for the company was another one of growth, at least for the first six months. After that, his performance started to decline and at the bottom, instead of a glowing recommendation as had been seen in the past, a discomfoting statement was scrawled under the evaluation.

"Employee # 51362, Cody Donovan, has begun to show signs of backloging and on more than one occasion has suffered a massive slipstream. Recommendation for reprogramming before

further advancement.”

The fourth year was spent on the third floor but there was such a vast improvement that they bumped him straight to level five when promotion time came around.

Cody tried to remember what had happened to him after he'd been dumped. He couldn't. He remembered standing in the street, with the rain soaking his head and hiding the tears after being told he was no longer wanted. Afterwards, he'd walked the lonely streets, out in the rain and cold, shivering against the chill of his aching heart.

Where had he gone? The next thing he remembered clearly was starting over again in the small town of Lexenburg. Cody had found a little apartment above an ancient family run grocery store and paid his way by unloading the supplies and running errands. He'd spent two years contentedly living in the friendly town before a supposedly big time record producer had come along and decided Cody would make a perfect personal assistant and off he'd gone to scour the countryside in search of new talent.

The job hadn't turned out to be as glamorous as promised and Cody found himself spending most of his time in the back booth of one skanky bar after another trying to score some nose candy for his boss.

During the same period of time, his evaluation reflected a poor motivation and more dangerous slacker tendencies. Another reprogramming was suggested.

Cody skipped ahead to the final page in the folder. There were numerous incidents listed, as well as the disciplinary action taken and the result.

The final paragraph read,

“Despite repeated attempts to realign Employee #51326's program, the test protocol continues to display signs of the malfunction. It now appears it has run into a nonnegotiable loop and to continue to seek out the cause of this glitch at this time must be viewed as an inappropriate waste of resources. New test subjects have shown vast improvements under a much more rigorous work schedule and we must now realize this model is no longer of use. Recommendation: termination of the program.”

Cody stared at the last line with a mixture of disbelief and anger. Termination of the program? They made it sound as if he were some simple software programme they could just delete from the hard drive with the flick of a button.

Well, Cody couldn't just be erased. He wouldn't allow them to just shove him away. He would expose them.

The last page in the folder definitely belonged to Cody but what he couldn't figure out was why they would go to such trouble of creating this false history. What was to be gained?

He figured he might find out from one of the other folders but didn't get a chance to check as a bleep-bleep and whirl from behind caused him to turn. The fan from the computer clicked and chugged to life as it powered up. After a moment the fax machine also lit up in a Christmas tree of greens and reds.

Somebody was coming. Footsteps from just outside the door, pausing, and then Cody heard the rattle of keys. A metallic scratching as the key was inserted into the lock. Cody stuffed the folder back into the cabinet and slammed the drawer shut just as the door began to open. He turned, searching for somewhere to hide.

It was already too late. The door swung open and Cody was caught out in the open. Mr.

Tendros walked into the room, his head down and reading over a report. He jumped when he looked up and saw Cody.

“How did you get in here?” Mr. Tendros asked. “You know this area is off limits.”

“I’m . . . I’m not really sure,” Cody stammered in complete confusion.

“You know, I don’t understand what’s gotten into you. I guess it doesn’t really matter, come over here and I’ll fix you right up.” He reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a small black box.

“This won’t hurt a bit.”

Cody threw up his arms to protect himself as Mr. Tendros came across the room and reached out with the device in his hand.

Of course Mr. Tendros lied. There was an incredible amount of pain when the device clamped onto his arm, sending a powerful shock coursing up to his shoulders, where it fanned out across his back and straight down his spine. The electric pulse made every muscle in Cody’s body painfully contract, every nerve to jitter, and suddenly the only thing Cody knew was the pain caused by the little black box. It filled him with a surging world of hurt, overloading his circuits.

Cody’s body shook in one last massive convulsion and then he felt himself fall down, down, through the floor, and straight into the prison of the black box.

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Angrily, Mr. Tendros stormed around the side of his desk and bent low so he was right in Cody’s face. “I asked what you think you’ve found?”

To his surprise, Cody found himself seated on the hard wooden chair in Mr. Tendros' office.

The curtain was gone, pulled back for the last time, Cody suspected.

"If you are so certain we are hiding something then tell me what you discovered in that room."

Mr. Tendros' rage was so intense, little droplets of spit assaulted Cody's eyebrow and nose.

"I don't remember," Cody said.

"Exactly. So how can you be so sure?"

"I don't remember because you made sure I would forget. I was reprogrammed in that room, wasn't I?"

The idea Cody might actually know what happened inside the office gave the boss a startled moment. His hand crept up along his side ever so slowly and casually slipped inside the pocket of his jacket.

"Reprogramming? I don't know what you are talking about."

Cody was ready as the hand emerged. He quickly lashed out and pinned the arm, snatching the device before Mr. Tendros could recover. The boss stumbled backwards, bumped his desk and almost toppled to the floor. Cody grabbed hold while he was fighting for balance, spun him around, and pushed him back into the chair.

"Now, let's try this again," Cody said, holding the device up above his shoulder and readying to strike the boss should he continue with his uncooperative attitude. "When was my last reprogramming?"

"After we found you in the office," Mr. Tendros blubbered. He cowered in his chair, the man of dignity and power all but lost in this quivering soul.

"Why can't I remember any of it?"

“You weren’t supposed to. Your memory was wiped clean in the hopes it would eradicate the glitch.”

“Wiped clean?” Cody was stunned. He had memories, there were very specific events he could remember. It had to be a lie.

Mr. Tendros saw Cody’s momentary lapse and lunged forward. The company administrator didn’t have enough weight behind him and Cody was able to catch him in time and get the black box up into the nape of the boss’ neck. Cody pressed in at the sides, just long enough to give a warning jolt.

Mr. Tendros went limp and Cody grabbed him by his collar and pulled him close. There was no fight left in him. The electric shock had taken the last from him. “Just one last question and then I’m going to make sure you never have to hear my name again. Why, Mr. Tendros, why are you doing this?”

“You were part of an experiment. You don’t remember any of the last eleven years because the memories you have are false. They were implanted into your program as part of a test, to see if it might ease you from your erratic behaviour. Over the years you’d become dissatisfied and were starting to show signs of a natural curiosity and we were hoping with these artificial experiences, we might refocus you on the task at hand.”

“Which was?”

“A study. You are the first of your kind.”

Cody yanked him up out of the chair so their faces were pressed together. “First of my kind? What the hell are you talking about?”

“A worker drone. You were born in a lab in the basement, your DNA specifically strained to

give you the best attributes needed. We've successfully cloned people for specific jobs but you were the first to learn multi-tasking. Only, it proved too much for your system and a number of glitches have appeared."

"So you were just planning on shutting me down?"

"What else could we do? We can't exactly just let you run free in public. If the general population were to find out what we're doing . . ."

"Oh, I don't think you'll have to worry about that," Cody said. He tightened his grip, using one hand to clench the coarse material of the suit and pulled Mr. Tendros even closer. "When I'm done with you, there won't be any memory of the company or me. I've got a little reprogramming of my own in store for you."

"No! Please don't!"

Cody thrust the device into Mr. Tendros' shoulder, pressing firmly on the sides and letting a full blast shake his body. He shook violently in the chair, so hard his teeth clicked together in a rum-tum-tum drumbeat. When Cody finally let go, he sank to the floor unconscious.

Who knew what would happen when he woke up? Cody planned on being well on his way to creating new memories. The company may have taken his and given back false ones, but from here on out Cody would make his own dreams.

Before leaving he stopped by the office to remove his name from the filing cabinet. For all he knew, his name was contained in the files on the floors below him, but there wasn't much he could do about it. This was the folder with his most current address and once he'd moved on from there, there would be no way for them to track him down.

Cody took the elevator he discovered in Tendros' office down and it deposited him in the lobby. In his eleven years, Cody had never seen this part of the building. The main entranceway was a bustle of activity as people hurried back and forth, most stopping at a security desk set in the middle of the room. He did his best to blend into the crowd as he strolled through the lobby, trying hard to stay calm as he took it all in.

A banner above the security desk read:

Lemley Genetic Research Labs

The place Cody had called home for the last eleven years. But not anymore. There was a whole world out there to discover and his search for adventure was limited only by his own imagination.