

The Support Technician Tango

by

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One:

By its nature, a self-help book is written by someone who thinks they know what to do and read by someone who doesn't; there hasn't been a better setup for the pompous to fleece the credulous since Rome stopped selling indulgences. The saving grace is that the bad advice of the authors is almost always ignored, misunderstood, or abandoned by readers who go ahead and do whatever they would have done anyway. Some people knit lace, some people improve themselves; self-help is a pointless hobby but harmless.

There are, however, exceptions.

In among the hatchet-faced, unhappy women who advise on matters of love, the avuncular sports nutrition PhDs who advise on matters of love, and the Jungian analysts whose advice on love may perhaps pay off their divorce lawyers, there is a deadlier breed.

The covers are just as cheerful, the promises just as bright and insincere, the quotes of grateful, imaginary supplicants just as breathless. But some few in this school of spiritual mackerel are actually sharks.

Some books are quite literally alive, conscious of the hands that hold the pages, and ready to present just the wrong idea at just the right time. They stalk the places that books lie forgotten—waiting rooms, dusty ledges between wall and mattress, Hastings—waiting quietly for the right moment and, more importantly, the right person.

Two:

"David Osgood, sir. He came in as soon the software company released the patch," Mr. Elms' secretary said. She always had a military air about her, like the Secretary of Defense reporting to the President. It was why Mr. Elms trusted her. "I think Teddy helped too."

"And the virus?"

"We didn't get it, sir, but a lot of the other law firms in town did. Libby and Meyers. Sudder, Belle, and Caffé. Cawdor and Glamis.

The Robert Correy Firm. And Clarence Musslewhite isn't answering calls, so my guess is he got it too."

Mr. Elms nodded, suppressing a grin. He was a dignified man, old-school, who considered it bad manners to gloat openly at the misfortunes of others once he'd made partner.

"That's too bad," he said. "Very bad. And it was destructive was it? People lost a lot of data? Ah. What a shame. I wonder if Libby and Meyers will have to ask for a continuance."

"They already have, sir."

Mr. Elms made a sound at the back of his throat that managed to be both non-committal and cheery. He

tapped his wide, sausage-like fingers together. In the distance, he heard the phone ring, and the new receptionist pick it up. Someone down the corridor asked peevishly where the good printer paper was kept. The computer on his desk hummed quietly to itself, uninfected and ready to serve. The sounds of an office at peace. The sounds of an office *not* presently dealing with a massive computer failure. He found them oddly beautiful.

His secretary cleared her throat.

"I've heard a rumor, sir. Nothing I could swear to."

"Yes?"

"I think Robert Correy fired his technician over this."

Within the space of a heartbeat, Mr. Elms had taken in the guarded tone, the disavowal of certainty, the fact that his competition was about to be hiring just the sort of person who Peabody, Plummer and Elms had in pocket. He nodded to his secretary.

"Mr. Osgood must have worked very long hours on this," he said.

"All night, sir."

"Perhaps a little performance bonus is in order. Where is our man David, anyway?"

Three:

The whirr of the air conditioner made the darkened storage room seem quieter than it actually was. The couch, tucked back behinds three rows of cheap metal shelving, smelled slightly of cat, but it was soft and comfortable and long enough for all six lanky feet of David Osgood to stretch out. The coffee was just starting to wear off, the hours of sleep debt leaving his body heavy as a soaked towel. His mind drifted contentedly through the network, half recalling and half dreaming. The fact was that nowhere on the system was there any of the seventeen documented variants of the BLDSKR virus. The browsers and email programs on each desk were immunized against it, and the security hole in the mail server was patched and tested. In the world outside, chaos might reign and nations might fall, but *his* network was fine.

He didn't recognize the click of the opening door until the fluorescent lights above him flickered to life. David grunted, sat up, and met the surprised expression of Daphne the paralegal. Annoyance at being disturbed slunk quietly away, replaced by the powerful awareness that he was sleeping in yesterday's clothes.

Daphne was pretty the way that competence is pretty. Her clothes were simple with just enough pattern to hide stains. Her hair was pulled back in a ponytail that suited her face. Her shoes looked comfortable. David had known boys in high school who wore more makeup.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I didn't know anyone was in here. The printer's out of paper."

"Okay," David said, unable to keep his head from bobbing like a pigeon. "I'll get that."

"Actually," she said, plucking a fresh ream from the shelves, "I think I can handle it. You put the thing in the thing and it goes, right?"

She smiled at her own joke. He grinned at it.

“Right,” he said.

“You want the lights back out?”

“No,” he said, “that’s okay. Break’s over.”

Daphne hesitated in the doorway, as if there was something more she was going to say. Something red as fresh blood caught David’s eye.

“Oh, hey!” he said. “You dropped your book.”

He scooped the little volume up from the floor and held it out to her. She looked at it and cocked her head.

“Sorry. Not mine,” she said. And then she was gone.

David sighed and dropped back to the couch, rubbing his eyes with his free hand. On his knee, the book glittered white as cut marble with bright letters: *30 Steps to Your Best Self*. And in the same font, but smaller and black: *How To Become The Person You Want To Be Without Even Trying*. He flipped the book open to a random page.

STEP FOUR (the book said) Branching Out

Once you have mastered your core abilities, it’s easy to stagnate and leave the things you most desire just out of reach. Instead, be open to opportunity. Try something new! Use that unexpected bonus for ballroom dance lessons, and let the sense of being “just that computer guy” fall away. You’ll find yourself becoming the kind of man that women are drawn to and men admire.

It was the stupidest advice he’d ever seen. What if the person reading it was a professional dancer? And what was that thing about an unexpected bonus anyway? He knew people who’d never get a reward in their lives, but went around acting like they deserved one.

And yet the fantasy wasn’t unpleasant. Dancing. He remembered a movie where Al Pacino had been dancing with a young woman who was almost but not quite Uma Thurman. David tried to imagine himself in the role, moving with grace and certainty, his arm around a beautiful woman’s waist, his clothes not looking slept in. For a moment, almost-Uma looked a lot like Daphne the paralegal.

“Um. David?”

Teddy stood in the doorway, thin moustache echoing thick mono-brow. His smile apologized for itself.

“Hey,” David said, letting the book close.

“Elms is looking for you.”

“What’s up?”

“Nothing bad, I don’t think,” Teddy said. “Just a postmortem on the patches and upgrades last night, probably. I’d tell him all about it, but you’re better with that, you know?”

David stood, combed his fingers through his hair, trying to make it lie straight. His sense of peace and accomplishment was gone. He tried to get it back by smoothing the wrinkles out of his shirt.

“How do I look?” he asked.

“Good. You look good,” Teddy said, nodding anxiously. “Rugged, kinda.”

“Yeah, well. Thanks for lying.”

“Welcome,” Teddy said as David walked past him and out of the storage room, and then a moment later, “Dave! Hey, you forgot your book.”

“It’s not mine,” David said.

Four:

STEP FOUR: Accepting Your Limitations

Most of us aren’t number one. Accepting that you are second rate is, however, the first step toward success. When the Good Book said that the race goes not always to the swift, it was talking about you. If you keep an eye out for the moments when the Top Dog isn’t available, you could still find yourself in positions you hadn’t dreamed of.

“Well,” Teddy said to himself. “Huh.”

Five:

“Um,” David said.

“Now don’t object,” Elms said, his puffy hand palm out in a *stop* gesture. “This is something I’ve already spoken with the other partners about, and we’re adamant. Good performance deserves its rewards.”

David looked at the check in his hand—it was as much as he would have made in a week—and wondered if he had been expected to argue against taking it. The thought hadn’t crossed his mind.

“We appreciate our employees,” Elms said, leaning forward over his desk. “We think of the firm as a community first, you know. Like family, really. And people who do well by us...well, David, we do well by them.”

“Um. Yeah. Thank you.”

“Think of me as a resource,” Elms went on. “Working together. That’s what we do best. We work. Together. If there’s anything you need—”

“Could I take the afternoon off?”

Elms blinked, thrown off stride.

“It’s just I was here all night,” David said. “And I could really use a nap and a shower.”

“Of course,” Elms said with an air of having been outmaneuvered. “Absolutely. Take the afternoon.”

“Thanks,” David said. They both stood and shook hands awkwardly across the wide desk. David folded the bonus check and turned toward the door, but he stopped, pulled up by a half-articulated thought.

“Mr. Elms?”

“David?”

“You’re successful. I mean, you’re a lawyer and you’re partner in the firm and like that. Do you...do you ever wonder if it’s enough? You know, if maybe there’s something you’re missing out on?”

“No,” Elms said, his face going a little grey. “Never.”

“Oh. Okay. Thanks.”

David stepped out into the calming, professional blue-green hallway. The hum of the business day was all around him—the low voices of distant conversation, the ring of telephones, the truck-backing-up beep of the microwave in the breakroom. He pushed his hands deep in his pockets, frowning.

The partners had noticed him, they’d given him money and time off and a handshake. By all rights, he should have felt delighted. He kicked all the ass, and everyone knew it. He took out the check and looked at it again.

You’ll find yourself becoming the kind of man that women are drawn to and men admire.

The lights were still on in the storage room. The couch was still pressed down where he’d rested his head. The book, however, was gone. He looked between the cushions, in the small, dusty space between the couch and the floor. He made a long, slow circuit of the room in case Teddy had shelved it with the pens or legal pads, but the thing simply wasn’t there.

He thought about going through the whole office, asking Teddy, maybe Daphne, if they’d seen it or, failing that, if they remembered the title. 30 Steps to Something Generic was the closest he could come. But it was pushing noon, and it wasn’t really important.

Six:

Mr. Elms didn’t consider himself a weak man. He had clawed his way to the top of a profession where clawing was *de rigueur*. He’d honed the plowshare of his mind into a sword with which you could shave an ant. When something was even the slightest bit off, he was sure could tell. And something had been off about David Osgood.

For the rest of the day and into the first few hours of the night—he, unlike Osgood, wasn’t the sort of man to go home early—Mr. Elms found his concentration divided. There was the deposition of a woman who claimed to have seen Mr. Elms’ client accepting a bribe, but there was also David Osgood asking if he was missing something. There was an angry letter from opposing attorney that required an equally scathing reply, but there was also the computer consultant calling him successful. Had there been just the hint of a sneer in his voice?

The fact was the firm constituted very nearly the whole of Mr. Elms’ world. He had never married because he’d never found a woman who didn’t want him around. He had no particular friends outside the profession because he found other pursuits beside the point, and no particular friends within it because it wasn’t that sort of work. The firm was as precious to him as his own arms. It was a part of him. The mere suggestion that he might find something lacking in his life put his back up.

And that might have been all it did, except for the book he found in the break room when he went to microwave his dinner.

STEP FOUR: Watching Your Back

The weak council patience, but men of power know better. The only way to protect yourself is to be vigilant. If someone under you begins to behave oddly, you would be a fool to ignore it. Don’t fall into that trap! Watch with the eyes of a hawk! Act boldly and without restraint! It is your total commitment to your work that makes you who you are.

The microwave beeped, startling him. Mr. Elms put the slim volume back beside the coffee machine where he’d found it. He was fairly certain that no one else was still in the office, but he certainly wouldn’t

want anyone to see his reading a self-help book, not even one as wise and well-considered as that. A partner such as himself should show no weakness, ever.

Back at his desk, the glowing lights of the city his only companion, Mr. Elms ate his dinner slowly, unaware of the greasy steak and flaccid potatoes. He grew more and more certain that his reaction that afternoon had been more than merely a bruised ego. Something sinister was going on at Peabody, Plummer, and Elms. He would watch Osgood with the eyes of a hawk. He would act boldly and without restraint. Already, the prospect filled him with a carnivorous joy. In a moment of decadence, he slipped off his shoes and rubbed his stocking feet over the carpet like an ancient hunter tamping down the grass of the savannah, spear, metaphorically speaking, in hand.

When he heard the cleaning crew arriving, he hastily slipped them back on.

Seven:

Sarah Ellington sat at the receptionist's desk trying very hard to be friendly, open, and efficient while bored off her nut. She had a Masters in cultural anthropology and folkloric studies, and with it, she was taking messages and transferring calls. She'd spent two years doing fieldwork in Africa. Now she wore pantyhose. The world was a thing devoid of justice.

The problem, of course, was Bobby. Six years married to Junior Silverback didn't leave a girl with much of a resume. But the temp company had placed her here, and she'd leveraged that into a permanent position. Next up, office management. Or maybe paralegal.

Until then, clean desk, fake woodgrain, cheap coffee in a black cup. And anything to keep her brain from rotting.

The phone chirped.

"Peabody, Plummer, and Elms," she said, smiling so that she'd sound like she was smiling. "How can I help you?"

"Bernard Lawton. Lookin' for Mark," a man grumbled.

"Mark who?"

"Mark *Peabody*," the man said. Clearly no one else in the history of man had ever been named Mark.

"I'm sorry," Sarah smiled. "Mr. Peabody is out of the office, may I take a..."

The line clicked and went dead. Sarah sighed, released the call, and silently wished a particularly nasty bloodworm on whoever it had been. People might be her species, but that didn't mean she had to like them.

"Um, hey," a voice said.

It was the computer guy. David something. Decent sort, so far as she could tell. Sarah raised her eyebrows.

"Do we have a yellow pages around here?"

"Sure," she said, reached under her desk and pulled out the phonebook. He accepted it with a strangely furtive nod. It piqued her interest.

"I thought you guys just looked everything up on the web," she said.

“Not always.”

“What’re you looking for?”

“Um. I was thinking about taking a class. But I need to find prices and schedules and stuff.”

“Oh. Like computer programming?”

He smiled. He had a nice smile, even if it didn’t last very long. His eyes were the same shape as her little brother’s.

“I’m already pretty good with writing code,” he said.

“So what then?” she asked, and the phone chirped again.

She took the call—the emotionally fragile husband of one of the junior partners calling to ask advice on some domestic crisis—and David took the opportunity to sneak off without answering her question. She finally scraped the husband into voice mail, picked up a pen and tapped it on her leg. The boy was up to something. Something he was ashamed of.

None of her business, granted. And yet...

Besides, he’d taken her phonebook.

She found him by the photocopier, talking with Daphne the paralegal. The phonebook was still in his hands. Sarah hung back a little, pretending to check her pockets for something. They were standing just inside appropriate social distance for Americans, and neither of them was backing up or moving forward. Daphne’s hips were just a little canted and her hand fluttered once like a little bird that considered perching on David’s arm but thought better of it. David was swaying just slightly in toward the girl every time he spoke and held the front desk phone book behind his back as if he were hiding it. His smile was exaggerated, his chest puffed out just the smallest bit.

So that’s how it is with them, Sarah thought. Poor bunnies.

She turned away. There were other phone books other places, and she didn’t have the heart to interrupt flirtation that was so tenuous, so unsure, and so blazingly obvious to everyone but the two who needed to see it. She didn’t have to like everyone, but she didn’t have to hate them all either.

Eight:

“I was thinking about maybe taking a class or something,” David said. “Like b-ballroom dance. Or something. I don’t know though. I probably won’t.”

“I like dancing,” Daphne said.

The photocopier hummed as if nothing had been determined.

Nine:

Niko Samuel’s Academy of Dance was in strip mall; its stylized logo of an elegantly dressed man and woman competed with a cell phone store to one side and a barber shop to the other. Music floated out to the grey concrete sidewalk like perfume. David stood for minute, looking at the pictures in the front window—men and women in gaudy outfits and dance poses. Some of them looked serious in a smoky, sexually tense way, others grinned at the camera, showing off. He couldn’t decide if the place seemed squalid or exciting.

He glanced out to the parking lot, half-expecting to see some unwelcome familiar face, before pushing his way through the door. Inside, the atmosphere was equal parts *Casablanca* and *A Chorus Line*. The music was louder, trumpets and drums and a voice singing in what might have been Spanish or French. A steady clapping punctuated the song, and another voice shouted out instructions David couldn't understand.

An overhead fan dragged wide faux-rattan blades through the air, and a desk sat empty, sleek European chairs before it where clients like himself could sit. More pictures lined the walls of dancers, some of them holding trophies or ribbons. David sat.

"Good evening," a voice said over the sounds of the class. David twisted in his seat. The man behind him was small with styled black hair, a thin moustache, and a dark blue, well-tailored suit. "Can I help you?"

"I don't know," David said.

"Then I probably can," the man said. He walked forward with studied grace and took a seat on the far side of the desk. "I am Mr. Samuel, but call me Niko. All my students do. You are here for the classes?"

"Yes."

"Excellent. What experience do you have in dance?"

"None. I mean, I've gone to some clubs, and if I got drunk enough...but nothing..." He struggled for the word. "Nothing real. I saw *Strictly Ballroom* once, though."

"Of course you did," Niko said. "That's very good. The less you think you know, the better. We don't have to spend time un-learning bad habits. We can begin right away with the good stuff. What kind of shoes do you have?"

"I can get whatever's best," David said. He hadn't even thought about shoes.

"I have a catalog you can look through. Very reasonably priced. They do the shoes for the whole academy, so we get a very good rate. And what is it you want to learn?"

"To dance?"

Niko smiled.

"You want to learn to rhumba? Cha-cha? A little of everything?" he asked.

"Did you ever see the Al Pacino movie where he played the blind guy?"

Niko nodded, his eyes half closing as if at some lovely memory. The music shifted to something slower with more piano and less trumpet.

"Argentine tango," Niko said, tasting the words as they came out. "Soft, not so militaristic and sharp. It's a beautiful way to dance. Not easy, but very beautiful."

"Do you have classes in that?"

"For someone who dances at clubs when he's drunk enough? No," Niko said. "For him, I have introductory classes. We can teach you about rhythm and grace and how you direct a woman where to move. Then, once you have the tools, certainly."

"I don't have a lot of money," David said.

Niko seemed to consider something, then looked at his watch, frowned, and held out his hand across the desk, fingers twitching in a gesture that demanded something be given to him. David reached for his wallet.

"Your shoes," Niko said. "Let me see your shoes."

David unlaced his sneakers and passed them over. Niko turned them in his hands, nodded to himself, and vanished into the back room. David sat in his socks. A round of applause came from the back room—the end of class, he guessed. And a few seconds later, people came filing out. They were of all ages, all sizes, and none of them looked as glamorous as the pictures. David smiled and nodded, and wondered what was being done to his sneakers.

After the last of the students had gone, Niko reappeared with a pair of black leather shoes in one hand and David's sneakers in the other. He handed David the leather ones.

"Three kinds of lesson," he said. "One, group lessons; one teacher, many students. Two, group practice; no teacher, many students. Just to keep in practice. Third, individual lesson; one teacher, one student."

"Okay," David said uncertainly.

"Put the shoes on. Individual lessons are like drugs. The first one's free."

The back room was a single space with a wood floor, mirrors along one wall, and a stereo with stacks of CDs. A young woman in a black leotard and something more like the idea of a skirt than the actual thing itself was putting the disks in order.

"Angelica," Niko said. "We have a new student. First lesson."

"Um," David said.

The girl smiled and left the disks. Niko went to the stereo.

"We'll begin with the meringue," Niko called. "It's very easy. Two step. Just step and slide. Angelica will show you."

Angelica was a full head shorter than David, her face perfectly made up. He felt himself start to blush.

"I don't know what I'm doing," he said.

"Put your hands out like this," she said. He did, and she slid into them. The spandex felt strange on his fingertips. "You'll start with your left foot. You always start with your left foot, and I'll be your mirror you. It's easy to remember."

"It is?"

"Just tell yourself that the *lady* is always *right*."

The music started.

"Now," she said. "Step out a little with your left foot and then slide your right foot over. Like this."

David watched her and tried to imitate her movements.

"So dance like Igor?" he said.

“General Meringue was lame,” she laughed. “You’re doing fine.”

After half an hour, Niko took him back out to the front room and they went over the different plans for study programs. David also looked through the shoe catalog. The prices were higher than he’d expected.

He put it on a credit card.

Ten:

“I don’t know,” David said. “I mean, it seemed like the right thing to do at the time.”

“Buyer’s remorse,” said Teddy, nodding sagely. “I do that too. There was this one time I bought a car from a cousin of mine...”

“I don’t mean the money,” David said.

“Then what?”

David sat back, his gaze flickering over the break room as if there might be an answer written between the microwave and the coffee machine. The walls and appliances offered him no counsel.

“I’m just not sure it’s *me*,” David said at last. “I mean it’s not like what I do.”

“That’s the point, though, isn’t it?”

“I guess.”

David ran his thumb across the woodgrained plastic table top. Teddy might not have been the right person to talk to about this, but he didn’t know who might have been the right one.

“Just do it like you were learning a new operating system,” Teddy said. “If Elms came in today and said we were going to switch over to Windows on the servers, what would you do?”

“Talk him out of it,” David said.

“I mean, if you had to?”

David shrugged. The coffee machine gurgled and spat, but didn’t start beeping.

“You’d *do* it,” Teddy said with a grin and a wide, sweeping gesture of his hands. “You’d go home and you’d build two or three systems from scratch, just to see how they worked. Then you’d read up on the security issues and talk to the folks on bitmines...”

“Who would tell me to quit,” David said, “and find someplace where they let me run real servers.”

“But you see what I’m talking about. You want to learn it, *learn* it,” Teddy said, and his smile faltered. “Why do you want to learn it again?”

“To be the sort of man women are drawn to and men admire.”

“Ah.”

Teddy seemed to mull this over for a few seconds. A misty look came to his eyes, and for a moment he looked a little like Freddy Mercury.

“That sounds really nice,” Teddy said. “You know, maybe—”

“Hey,” Daphne said, stepping into the room. “Here you guys are. The file server’s not letting me get to Mr. Plummer’s documents again.”

Teddy glanced at David then Daphne then the exit, eyes growing wide with panic.

“Did you cycle power on the switch?” David asked.

Daphne smiled and shook her head. She had the prettiest smile.

“You’re the computer guy,” she said. “I’m not touching that stuff.”

The computer guy. Yeah, that’s what I am, David thought. Not a human. Just the computer guy.

“I can go cycle the power,” Teddy said. “You want to go check the server? You know, in case it’s a routing problem...”

“You hang here and bring me some coffee when it’s done,” David said. “I went through this last time, and I think I know what needs doing.”

The relief on Teddy’s face was profound.

“Well, you take this one, then,” Teddy said. “Just call me if you need help.”

Daphne led the way to the back office. He could hear Mr. Plummer’s voice nattering in the conference room, the placid chirp of the phone. The almost-inaudible sound of cloth against cloth of Daphne’s dress as she walked. He could feel what it would be like to take her hand in his, his other palm pressing against her shoulder, pulling her just slightly toward him, her fingers gently on his own. He could almost move with the first little swaying motion as he stepped out with his left foot, she with her right.

Except, of course, that he was just the computer guy.

Eleven:

Sarah frowned at the screen, moved her mouse pointer and clicked again. The email message still didn’t open. Outside, the thunderstorm that had been threatening all afternoon was finally beginning—thick angry drops tapping against the wall-high lobby windows. And just in time for the drive home. Sarah was displeased.

“Did it show up?” asked David’s voice. She looked up, thinking that he must mean her email, before remembering the context.

“Yes,” she said, reaching under her desk for the package. “The fed-ex guy came an hour ago. Here you are.”

It was a cube, maybe six inches by six, and David’s eyes lit up when he took it.

“It’s music,” he said. “Mostly tango and cha-cha, but there’s some rumba too. I had them overnight it to me.”

“That’s lovely,” Sarah said. “You know, I’m glad you’re here. My Outlook Express hasn’t been working right. When I try to open this one message...”

“Reboot the computer,” David said. “That’ll fix it.”

“Well, I tried that, and it didn’t help. In fact, now I can’t open any of the messages in my inbox. Do you

think you could...”

“Sure,” David said, “first thing in the morning.”

Sarah felt *The Smile* come to her lips. She liked David, and he’d usually been as pleasant to her as he was to everyone. He had never provoked her to *The Smile*, and yet there it was, pulling at her lips until air touched her teeth but never quite warming her eyes.

“I was hoping I could have someone look at it today,” she said. “There’s still half an hour to go, and I do need to answer some of this mail.”

“Teddy’ll have to do it,” David said, apologizing with a shrug. “I skipped lunch so I can take off early. Group class.”

He held up the fed-ex box of music as if it was a hall pass and she was a particularly intimidating gym teacher. Sarah forced *The Smile* back into its cage. She was being selfish because it was the end of the day and she was tired and annoyed. There was no reason to take it out on David, even if he was leaving when she had to stay.

“Well, have a good time, then,” she said.

David grinned, nodded, and almost bounced out the door toward the elevators. As it closed, Sarah thought she heard a sigh. She turned in time to see Daphne the paralegal vanishing into the file library, an oddly forlorn expression on her face. Lightning flashed and thunder grumbled.

Sarah clicked the reluctant message one more time for luck. The inbox went totally blank. Sarah sat back in her chair, and very quietly said something very crude.

Twelve:

The music began—drums and then trumpets, a woman’s voice singing low in her throat. David looked into his partner’s eyes. She was a heavy woman in her late forties who, despite solid efforts, hadn’t conquered her moustache problems. David didn’t care. No doubt she was a very nice woman with a good personality. He didn’t care about that either. The moment came, and he stepped forward on his left foot, then forward and to the side with his right, and then stepped in to meet it. Gently, his eyes locked on hers, he signaled with the pressure of his hands where he wanted her to move next. When he raised his arm, she turned in a slow spin, and he stepped in to meet her.

David’s peripheral vision was filled with other couples shifting to the music, some graceful, some awkward. Angelica—the teacher with the leotard and the very short skirt—called out corrections to students, sometimes clapping her hands to help them find the beat. She never spoke David’s name, and he found it hardly mattered. He was able to navigate from one corner of the floor to another, shifting forward and back. The dance made *sense*.

He’d been working on it at home, of course. In the living room, he’d tipped the sofa on end and pushed it into the corner so that the floor space was clear. He’d listened to rumba music and tracked down video clips to watch. He’d even popped out his old synthesizer and played the bass lines along with the music. Spending three of four hours a night at it for the last month had brought him to a place where he understood it perfectly.

Which, as it turned out, hadn’t been enough. Knowing and doing weren’t the same, and the whole time he’d practiced, he’d been watching his feet to be sure they were in the right places, matching the motions of the professional in his fireplace. Now he had a habit of dancing with his head bowed down, and he

fought against it, looking into the woman's eyes with a ferocity born of really wanting to just glance down, just be sure. He imagined this was what not smoking was like.

The singer's voice growled, rose and fell. The final chords were struck, and David and his partner came to a halt.

"Much better," Angelica said. "Most of you are getting the hang of this, but I'm still seeing some confusion on the spins. Here, David..."

She motioned to him, and he stepped over, putting his arm around her almost by reflex. She counted out the beat as he raised his arm, let her spin, and then stepped in to meet her again. She smiled a little. She had a very thin face and dark lipstick that made David think—in a non-judgmental way—of hookers.

"Like that," she said to the class. "You all understand? Okay, we'll try it again. Watch me and David, and try to do what we do, all right?"

Angelica went to the stereo and began another song. He also got through this one without looking at his feet. It was a pretty good night, so far.

After class, David walked out through the lobby with the other students. But Niko was there, cutting David out of the crowd with the grace and competence of a sheepdog.

"David," he said when they were in the back office together, "I've been watching your progress. You are doing very well."

"Thanks," David said.

"I was thinking. The drive you have. The concentration. I admire it. It seems to me that you may be suited for something more than this. And I have need of you. The school has need of you."

David blinked.

"My best bronze level in International Latin doesn't qualify any longer," Niko said. "He reached the semi-final last year, and it earned him the proficiency point that put him in silver. His old partner Mariella is still three points short. Technically, you'd still class novice, but everyone dances up sometimes. The competition is on Topeka, and you would have to take care of the travel. And it's USABDA, so you would have to register. I know it's asking a lot of you, but..."

Niko held out his hands, eyebrows raised as if he had asked a question. David went over the words again, as best he could remember them, hoping that something would make sense. Niko seemed to take his silence as reluctance.

"You are the best we have, David," Niko said, his voice low and serious. "Mariella has seen you, and she agrees. With your dedication, it would be easy for you two to take the category."

"You want me to be in a dance competition?" David said.

"Will you?" Niko asked. He was a short man, and the passion in his voice made David feel like Rudolph when Santa asked him to pull the sleigh.

"Um. Let me think about it," David said.

Thirteen:

"So it works," Teddy said.

David ran his finger down the screen, reading the green-on-black lines of the routing table one by one as he went. The electrostatic charge of the old video monitor crackled and pulled at the tiny hairs on the back of his hand.

There was the default path, and the subnet defined anything on 192.168.3.x as local network. But the printers in the front office were set to .45 and .46, and nothing was reaching them, so there had to be something else going on. Dimly, he realized that Teddy had spoken.

“Huh?”

“That guy Niko. He said he admired you. And me, seriously Dave, I admire the hell out of you.”

“Thanks,” David said.

“And this girl. What’s her name? The new dance partner.”

“Mariella.”

“So she saw you. And she got drawn to you, right? So it works. That’s so cool.”

David sat back in his chair and rubbed his eyes. He’d been up late listening to music. It was like having a second life. No one at the studio thought of him as the computer guy. No one at the office thought of him as a dancer. He had a secret, another world he was part of that no one really understood. Except that he’d let it slip to Teddy that they’d asked him to get really serious about it now. If he said yes, he was going to be one of those pictures on the wall, smiling and holding a trophy. In retrospect, he should have kept it closer to the vest.

“Yeah,” he said. “I guess it worked.”

“Is she...y’know. Is she cute?”

“Mariella? I guess so. Yeah, she’s all right. I told them that I’d go ahead and practice with her. I mean maybe we just won’t work together right, you know? I wouldn’t want to spend all that time and money when I’m not even the right guy.”

“What about that scanner we put in at Daphne’s desk?” Teddy said.

David frowned.

“What about it?”

“The DHCP server was being reprogrammed when we put those in, right? The scanner’s got an IP, and the box that goes with it’s got one. I don’t think she’s had to use them much since. But she was talking about some evidentiary thing coming on Friday and how she had to scan in the old documents. Maybe you gave the scanner stuff .45 and .46. That’d screw things up, wouldn’t it? If the printers up front have ‘em too.”

David closed his eyes. They felt gritty.

“Yeah,” David said. “You’re right. That’d do it.”

The receptionist—Susan, Sarah...something like that; he could never remember—appeared at the machine room door.

“There’s someone here to see you, David” she said. The disapproval in her voice was probably just his

imagination; he got a little paranoid when he was too tired.

Mariella sat on the couch, looking out the window and eight stories down to the street as if it was a mildly interesting television show—something on the Discovery channel. She was in a tight dress, her blonde hair in a halo artfully arranged to make it seem like she'd just risen from bed. Her makeup was perfect as a mask. To his dismay, Mr. Elms and Daphne were standing at the front desk pretending to have a conversation while they both stared at her. Probably both thinking that he'd hired her to be seen with him.

"David. Sweetheart," she said as he came into the room. "I was just downtown, and I wanted to drop this off for you."

She held out a plastic CD case. A fat man with a thin moustache, a thin tie, and thinning hair was crooning into a microphone on the cover.

"I was thinking track eight," she said.

"Cool, thanks," David said. "I'll give it a listen."

"I won't keep you," she said, rising and smoothing her dress against her body. She leaned in, whispering into his ear, and gesturing toward Mr. Elms. "Don't want to get you in trouble with the boss. But tonight?"

"Same as always," David said.

Mariella made the little kissing sound that she used instead of handshakes or waves and glided out the door. David turned the disk over in his hand, reading down the playlist. Track eight. Rumba in the Bronx. Oh, this wasn't going to be good.

When he looked up, Mr. Elms was gone, but Daphne was there, looking at the closed office door with an odd expression. David glanced over toward it, in case there was something interesting, but it was just the same tasteful dark wood finish as always.

"Who was that?" Daphne asked.

"My ballroom dance partner. Mariella," David said, embarrassed. "She's been at it longer than me. She's pretty good."

Daphne reached up, apparently unconsciously, and touched her fingers to her ponytail. She seemed almost dazed.

"Are you okay?" David asked.

"No, I'm fine," she said. "Sorry. I'm fine."

Fourteen:

Mr. Elms sat at his desk, quiet, calm, and consumed by fury.

Had he not been more than fair, more than *kind*, to David Osgood? Had he not put out the hand of friendship? What firm in the city would have shown the grace and charity to have a partner—an actual *partner*—offer a performance bonus to the computer guy? And this was how Osgood repaid him.

"Mr. Elms?" the secretary asked. He realized she'd been speaking for some time, but he didn't recall anything she'd said.

“I have a headache,” he said, though he didn’t. “Bring me a cup of coffee.”

His secretary put down her notebook and left without word or comment, because that was how it was meant to be. His world ran on quiet efficiency, good grace, trust and loyalty. What did it matter that he hadn’t asked for an aspirin but coffee? Coffee he wanted, coffee he’d get. And none of this double-dealing, ham-handed, petty strutting. Unlike David Osgood.

To bring a woman of that stunning beauty and superb quality here to the office was, as Mr. Elms saw it, as good as boasting aloud. She had lit the waiting room just by sitting in it. Her voice had been a mixture of music and vice that would wake men from the dead. There was no question in Elms’ mind. David Osgood had been suborned into some act of corporate espionage, and the attentions of this goddess were the boy’s promise and his reward.

True there was no evidence yet. Not the sort he’d take before a judge. But Osgood had underestimated him, oh yes. Mr. Elms had been watching the boy like a hawk, and when the time came to act, he would be bold and unrestrained.

His secretary came back, a mug steaming in her hand. When he took it from her, it was almost white with cream and sweet as victory. He smacked his lips, nodded, and turned his laser-beam attention to his secretary, newly returned to her chair.

“It is my *total commitment* to my work that makes me who I am,” he said, not remembering where he’d heard the phrase before.

“Yes it is, sir,” she agreed.

Fifteen:

Two weeks before the dance competition, David still hadn’t quite brought himself to commit to the meet in Topeka but everyone kept treating him like he had. The studio was officially closed, the lights in the front rooms dimmed, the door locked. The back room, on the other hand, was bright and full. Six other couples from the school were entered to compete, and all of them were there, sitting on chairs or leaning against the mirrors watching with cold, judgmental expressions. Niko and Angelica passed among them like hosts at a party.

The music ended as David twirled Mariella into his arms. They froze for a beat, David staring into her eyes. She wore colored contacts. That explained a lot, actually.

“I don’t know,” the American Rhythm man said. “I think it needs a little more...” He rolled his hips. David thought he looked a little like Elton John when he did it.

“You always think that,” an International Style woman drawled.

“Children! Children!” Niko said, clapping his hands. “We don’t have time to squabble. David and Mariella have worked very hard on this, and it is our job to help them, not drag out old differences of opinion. Now the first passage...”

David’s cell phone went off.

“Sorry,” he said, trotting over to his work clothes. “Really sorry.”

He looked at the screen. The number was Teddy’s. David scuttled to the front room. He could feel disapproval following behind him like a cold fog.

“Hello?”

“David!” Teddy said. “Where are you, man? Did you see the thing on Slashdot?”

“I’m not at a computer right now.”

“They just announced a new exploit that hits sendmail on BSD platforms. There’s a patch, but the mirror sites are getting hammered. I’m heading into the office now, but if you want some pizza, I could...”

“I can’t. Teddy, I’m booked. I can’t come in.” The line went so quiet, David thought the connection had dropped. “Teddy?”

“You don’t want...what about...”

“Look, why don’t you take this one. Just swing by the office, get the patch and try installing it. If there’s a problem, we’ll sort it out in the morning.”

“In the morning?” Teddy echoed.

“Sure. But there won’t be a problem. You’ve handled this kind of thing before, right?”

“Right?”

“Great. See you tomorrow,” David said and cut the connection before Teddy could say *tomorrow*? Back on the dance floor, Mariella and Angelica were in close conversation. Two pairs of eyes fixed on him as he came back in. For a moment, David had the powerful memory of being ten years old and watching *The Brides of Dracula* on late-night cable.

“Sorry,” he said, turning off the cell. “It was work. Won’t happen again.”

“Emergency?” Niko asked. Even *his* voice was cold.

“No,” David said. “Nothing important.”

Sixteen:

Sarah was transferring a call to Mr. Elms’ voicemail when the door opened, so she didn’t actually see anyone come in. When she looked up, the arrival was still as a movie’s promotional photo. Red-brown hair curled softly over one eye; soft, high cheekbones gestured down to full lips curved in a small, shy smile. The dress was quality too; creamy muslin that showed off the woman’s hips and breasts without mentioning that thighs might exist.

“Can I help you?” Sarah asked politely, wondering how Sam Spade’s receptionist would have handled the moment.

But then the woman moved and spoiled the effect. All the glamour needed was confidence, but when she walked it was like seeing a teenager ready for her first prom.

“*Daphne*?”

“Hey, Sarah,” the paralegal said, pushing the artfully placed hair back from her eyes. “So. What do you think of the new look?”

“I’m amazed,” Sarah said.

“Thanks.”

You poor thing, Sarah thought. You poor stupid bunny. How ugly did he make you feel? She felt a surge of anger for David Osgood, wherever he was at the moment.

“You *always* look beautiful,” Sarah said.

The blush looked odd with the layers of makeup over it. No one with that much foundation should be capable of blush-inducing emotion.

“I just thought I’d try something different. You know?”

“I do,” Sarah said. She did.

Seventeen:

Most men in their hours of crisis seek solace in a trusted friend or bartender. David went to bookstores. Big bookstores. The kinds with coffee bars in them. Cheap, acidic coffee flavored with unlikely fruits and overpriced, stale pastries shipped in from Ohio.

“Anything else?” the barista asked. He was about David’s age with a thin beard, a quick smile, and an ear cuff with what looked like a wolf’s tooth hanging from it. He looked cool. Even if he spent his time away the espresso machine configuring firewalls and writing shell scripts, no one was going to mistake *him* for a computer guy.

“No thanks,” David said.

He took his comfort food to one of the tables in the back. Bach viola concerti murmured as he poured sugar into the blackness of his coffee cup.

He’d called the studio and Mariella, swearing that he was sick. He wanted to be there, but he was afraid of getting everyone else sick, and then where would they all be? Mariella hadn’t believed him, but she hadn’t come right out and called him a liar either. Niko probably hadn’t bought it either. Not that it mattered.

His mind spiraled around Daphne. She had come into the office today looking like she’d never looked before. It was obvious that she was dressed to impress someone. She’d clearly been going out after work, going to the kind of place you went dressed like that.

He sipped his coffee. It was still mostly bitter, only just a little sweet. He started to put more sugar in, but stopped and drank it the way it was.

The worst thing had been the way he hadn’t been able to avoid her. No matter where he’d been in the office, it seemed like bad luck had brought her there too. And every time he saw her, he’d wanted to ask her what was up, who the guy was.

But then she would have told him. There was nothing in the world he wanted less than to hear about how wonderful Jason or Brad or Robert was, where he had a degree from, the summer he’d spent touring Europe.

He took a bite of pastry. It was dry and left a coating on his tongue. He took another bite.

What was the point, he thought, in men admiring you and women being drawn to you when the men were Teddy and the women were Mariella? He thought about all the time and effort he’d spent trying to get

her to see him as something more than the computer guy. And maybe he'd managed. Maybe she saw him as the computer guy who took ballroom dance classes. The image of Al Pacino and not-quite-Uma Thurman was gone too. All he had in its place was Mariella and the constant reminder not to look at his feet.

It was dumb. He'd wasted his time and his money, and probably his shot with Daphne if he'd even had one. He'd call the academy in the morning and tell Niko he was out. They'd find some other bronze to partner Mariella. And when that was over, maybe he could get Teddy to find out who Daphne was seeing and how serious they were...

David used the last swig of coffee to wash down the last bite of the pastry of affliction. Nasty stuff all the way around. The music changed, Bach giving way to Ella Fitzgerald. David looked out over the bookshelves and shoppers and felt better than he had when he came in. It was almost a relief, really, to shrug off the dancing. It was fun stuff in a way, but as a lifestyle, kind of weird. He rose, put his hands in his pockets, and headed over toward the computer security section. Maybe something new was out.

"Hey, bud," the barista called. "Did you want the book or should I put it with the reshelves?"

David turned. The words *not mine* were on his lips, but they stopped there when he saw the blood red letters on their field of white. *30 Steps to Your Best Self*.

"Thanks," he said, took the book, and sat back down.

STEP 15: The Will to Commit

Weak-willed people are like flags that shift with the breeze. Any time things seem to turn against them, they abandon their focus and wander away. It never occurs to them that they themselves may be the source of the problem.

The solution is commitment. When the one job or girl or award that we thought meant everything slips away, it's commitment that carries us through. We persevere until we see why we want what we want, and how we can reach it.

Commitment is the step you never stop taking. If you fail in your commitment, you fail in everything, always. Only by staying on your path will you be rewarded by the discovery of who you are. Be strong and you will find what you really want.

Good luck. It's your game to lose.

David closed the book and pressed his palms to his eyes, pressing until colors bloomed in the darkness.

Commitment. He didn't want to be a weak-willed person, after all, and what else would he be if he just dropped the studio? And the thing about what to do when the one girl you wanted slips away, about finding out what he really wanted... Maybe he only *thought* that Daphne was the right girl. Maybe there was some deeper something going on with him, something psychological. And if he just went back to being who he was, he might never figure it out.

Just being himself had never done the trick.

He took out his cell phone, considering it like Romeo looking at his vial of poison. When he thumbed in the number, the phone on the other end only rang once before she answered it.

"Hey, Mariella," David said. The last film of coffee was like ashes in his mouth. "I'm feeling a lot better. Tell Niko I'll be over. And tell him I'm in for Topeka."

Eighteen:

“Peabody, Plummer and Elms. Can you hold?” Sarah said, forcing herself to smile. This was line four. Lines two and three were already on hold. Lines five and six were still ringing. Line one had the only solid red light—Mr. Plummer on the line with Judge Christiansen, explaining the situation. The clock on her computer screen flickered from 10:23 to 10:24.

“No, I can’t fucking hold!” a man shouted. “You tell Peabody that this is Bernard Lawton. *Lawton*, you got that, sister?”

“Thank you,” she said, and put him on hold. She repeated the procedure twice more, then pulled off the headset, placed her hands palms flat on the desktop, and breathed in deeply, letting the air escape slowly through her nose the way all the relaxation tapes said she should.

I can do this, she told herself. They’re just people.

She put back on the headset and clicked on line two.

“Thank you for holding. How may I direct your call?”

“Sarah? This is Robert Correy. Robert Correy Law. What the hell’s going on over there?”

“Good morning, Mr. Correy. Yes, we’re having a little trouble with the mail server,” she said. “I don’t know all the details.”

“So what? You folks aren’t getting mail and it shuts the whole office down?”

“Oh, getting mail isn’t the problem. We’ve gotten several hundred thousand messages in the last few hours. And apparently we’ve also been sending mail out,” she said. “Several *million* pieces of it advertising a porn site in Yugoslavia. People seem to be taking some exception.”

“I’m so sorry,” he said, chuckling. “So is that why I haven’t seen Elms’ reply to my counter-offer?”

Line four went black as the caller hung up, then half a breath later started ringing again. Sarah’s finger twitched toward it.

“Very likely,” Sarah said. “It’s backed things up a little.”

“Well, you let me know if he decides he needs a continuance.”

“I’m sure Mr. Elms will be in touch just as soon as he can.”

“Well, I’ll let you go, Sarah. You try to have a good day despite it all.”

“Thank you, Mr. Correy.”

She hung up the line and grabbed for line four, but she was an instant too late. She heard the handset on the other end being dropped into its cradle. Line two started ringing.

10:25

She put the headset down and let the damn phones ring. She made herself knock at Mr. Elms’ door before she went in. It was as close to civil as she could manage. Mr. Elms was running his thick fingers through the space where his hair had been when he’d been a younger man.

“They’re working on it,” Elms said before she could even speak. “As soon as it’s fixed, they’ll get us connected again. But if they put us back online now, we’ll start sending out that junk mail like a firehose again. As soon as it’s fixed...”

“And when will that be?”

“Two or three hours,” Elms said, looking at her directly for the first time since she’d come in. His face was grey with rage.

The phones were ringing in a constant round now. The lines were lit and blinking for her attention like an air traffic controller’s console right before the disaster. She walked past her desk, down the hallway to the machine closet where David Osgood was crouched over a laptop, typing furiously. Teddy, behind him, was literally wringing his hands. She’d never actually seen anyone do that before.

“Maybe there’s some *new* exploit,” Teddy was saying. “I could have sworn the patch went in okay.”

David grunted and kept typing. It clearly wasn’t the first time Teddy had said something of the sort.

“I’ve never done a patch on my own before,” Teddy whined. “I mean, I didn’t get any error messages when I ran it.”

“It didn’t run, Teddy,” David said. “You don’t get an error when something doesn’t run. Don’t worry about it. I can get this fixed.”

“I’m sorry, Dave.”

“It’s my fault. I should have come in.”

It was all she needed to hear. The broken email, the failing file servers, Daphne’s new insecurity, Elms’ lost counteroffer. All of it came back to David Osgood.

She’d stood at the side and watched this train wreck long enough. If no one else was going to fix it, then by God *she* would.

Nineteen:

In the end, David scrapped the altered sendmail files completely, reinstalled them, and then spent several hours working the legion of hiccups and bugs out of the system. It was longer than three hours. And when he was finished, he was going to have to go to the academy for another critique session with Nikos and Angelica and all the others.

He was trying to scrape the spam out of Mr. Plummer’s inbox without accidentally trashing something real when Daphne came in.

“Oh,” she said.

“Plummer’s in the conference room,” David said.

Daphne hesitated, and David looked up again. He couldn’t read her expression; she seemed about to say something.

The silence between them was where he’d been able to make normal human banter before. He hated it, but he didn’t have any way to break it. Daphne smiled, thinly, nodded, and walked away again. David felt his heart go tight and heavy in his chest, but he just went back to defining junk mail rules, the keys under his fingers clicking softly.

He wanted to talk to her, even just to say hello and make smartass comments about putting paper into the printer. Little things, the way people do who work in the same place. He'd had that much once.

He applied the rule set, watched the junk mail pour out of the inbox. And then the test messages he'd sent. And then five messages that he knew should have stayed.

He sighed, opened the junk folder, dragged everything back into the inbox and started over. He only half noticed, twenty minutes later, when Daphne walked past the open door in deep conversation with the receptionist.

Twenty:

Sarah considered the pair of them. Daphne seemed stunned, Teddy nervous. She herself felt a combination of focused anger and relief that she was doing something. There were worse ways for a conspiracy to begin.

"So like...an intervention or something?" Teddy asked. "We all tell him not to fuck up anymore and that we all love him?"

Daphne swallowed hard and flushed a little pink.

"No," Sarah said. "Interventions don't work unless everyone he knows can participate. If we tell him there's a problem and his dancer friends tell him he's fine, he'll shift his social network toward them."

Someone rattled the conference room door, then knocked.

"In a minute," Sarah called. Then, in her normal tone of voice, "He has to face a choice. Either his job and his friends are more important than this hobby of his, or else they aren't. We are going to give him that choice."

"How?" Daphne asked.

"This can't go past us," Sarah said.

Teddy twisted his fingers before his lips in a locking motion. Daphne leaned forward.

"Do we gotta kidnap him?" Teddy asked, clearly excited by the prospect of abduction.

"No," Sarah said. "We generate a crisis and call him in. We make it clear that we need him, and then we see what choice he makes."

The knock came again, harder this time. Sarah ignored it and it went away.

"When is this competition of his?" Sarah asked.

"Next weekend. I mean not this weekend coming up, but the one after it," Teddy said, "He flies out to Topeka Saturday morning, him and Mariella."

"Find out what time his flight leaves. We'll meet here that morning. Just the three of us."

"What if he chooses *them*?" Daphne asked quietly.

Twenty One:

Under normal circumstances, Mr. Elms would have considered standing in the corridor, his ear pressed

to the conference room doors to be beneath his dignity. These were, however, desperate times. Osgood's plans to sabotage the computer system were clearly underway, and given what his brief exploration of eavesdropping had uncovered he was not the only one to have noticed it.

Osgood was going out of town under the pretext of some "competition," and he was traveling with the exquisite woman. Mr. Elms trotted back to his office, his former business forgotten. There could be no doubt that Osgood was going to meet with his new handlers, the unknown enemy that had turned him against the firm. Without doubt, it was the best opportunity to catch the boy in the act. Once Mr. Elms had hard evidence—he had always been a stickler for evidence which explained to a degree his choice of profession—he would merrily litigate Osgood and his new friends into bankruptcy. It might take years, and if so, all the better. Vice deserved punishment.

He could book himself a flight to Topeka, get there before the traitorous Osgood and his divine escort, and shadow them. He hesitated just as his fingers touched the keyboard, millimeters from using his browser to find an online travel site. It occurred to him that he was about to use his computer to act against his computer expert. He lifted up his wide fingers and wagged one at the screen.

"Very close," he said. "You almost got me that time, but not quite. Oh no. I'm cleverer than that, my friend."

"Sir?"

His secretary stood in the doorway with the expression one might expect from a woman of near-military precision and efficiency who had found her employer talking to his computer. Mr. Elms drew himself up from his desk.

"Mr. Berringer is in the conference room, sir."

"Of course he is," Mr. Elms said, "but first, I have an assignment for you. It's very important. I want you to leave the office before you do this, do you understand? No one here must know anything about this. Find a travel agent. Go there in person. I need a ticket for one to Topeka."

He paused, wondering if it would be wise to acquire a gun. Just in case.

Twenty Two:

David drove toward the academy. He was in his costume and he felt like an idiot. Red sequins glittered in his lap and down one leg. His shirt clung to his body, making him suck in his belly even when there was no one around. The rush hour was just ended, only the last stragglers limping home. He'd had a snack at home. He'd eat again later. And then sleep a few hours. And then go back to the office again, feeling less rested than he did now.

They were talking about him. The crash had technically been Teddy's fault, but even he knew better than to take comfort in that. Teddy was a good guy, and he could run wire and configure simple applications, but he was no more a network admin than David was a movie star. Asking Teddy to do stuff that was over his head was just dumb. No one was going to blame Teddy, and he wouldn't really want them to.

The sense of disappointment and dislike was new to him, though, and he didn't enjoy it. The whole office knew he'd screwed up. They were talking about it, and about him, and knowing that made his shoulders feel heavier. He didn't want to go back in tomorrow. Any more than he wanted to go to practice now.

If you fail in your commitment, you fail in everything, always.

He turned the car into the strip mall parking lot. He could recognize the cars of the other couples.

Mariella's white Lexus with the "My Lawyer Can Beat Up Your Honor Student" bumper sticker. He pulled into a space a little way down, killed the motor and listened to the car tick as it cooled.

It would be so easy to turn the key, reverse back out, just go home. Go home with his cat and his music, sit on his couch and watch his television, and just let all of it go away. He could skip work tomorrow too. Take the phone off the hook, and not check email, and not answer the door if anyone bothered knocking. He closed his eyes.

But that wasn't what he really wanted. However pleasant it sounded now, the sense of being alone there had been what brought him here in the first place. When he'd spent his nights at home by himself, he'd felt alone. Now that he was here, he felt alone. The difference was that one of them was moving him out in the world, and he was more likely to find what he really wanted out here than back in front of the TV.

Be strong and you will find what you really want.

He got out of the car, trudged past the cellular phone joint, and knocked on the academy door. Angelica let him in. The others were in the back. Mariella frowned at him, Niko smiled. The room smelled of shoe leather, sweat, and expensive perfume.

"Good," Niko said. "We're all here again. Let's see how our bronzes are progressing, shall we?"

David stepped out into the middle of the floor, folding his arm around Mariella, taking his hand in hers. She smiled, her body soft and supple under his touch.

"Try not to screw up," she said.

"I'll try," he said.

The music started. David turned through the routine with certainty and precision. His legs knew where to be, his arms, his body. The whole thing had about as much joy as reciting the pledge of allegiance. He twirled Mariella into his arms as the music ended. She was breathing hard, and there was a glittering excitement in her eyes. David supposed he hadn't screwed up.

"Excellent," Niko breathed. "That was...that was perfect. There's no way you can lose if you dance like that at the competition."

"Don't you think he could smile a bit more?" the American Rhythm woman asked.

Twentythree:

The week passed in unspoken tension, each day before the competition bringing the offices of Peabody, Plummer, and Elms one step nearer the breaking point. Sarah left Friday at five o'clock with the sense of finally slipping her leash. When she returned in the morning, it was like entering a different world.

With the overhead fluorescents off, the hallways and offices were dim. Sarah had never really understood how much background noise a lawyer's office could generate until now that it was gone. It was a little eerie.

The lock clicked, the front door opened, and Daphne came in. She was dressed in old jeans and a sweatshirt; her hair was pulled back in its ponytail. She smiled when she caught sight of Sarah and raised a plastic sack.

"I brought bagels and schmear," she said. "No dark cabal should be without."

“Excellent.” Sarah said, motioning her over. “Have you seen Teddy? If his flight leaves at nine o’clock...”

“He was pulling into the parking lot when I got the elevator.”

“Even better.”

Sarah had a fresh cup of coffee in one hand and an everything bagel with lox schmear in the other when Teddy arrived. He grinned nervously. Sarah couldn’t tell if it just idiomatic for Teddy to look vaguely frightened, or if he was having second thoughts. But he wasn’t so distressed that food was beyond him. He had the cinnamon-raisin with honey butter while Sarah explained her plan one last time.

“But how would Daphne break it?” Teddy said when she was done. “I mean if she’s really here doing just normal stuff, how would she break the system?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Sarah said. “Maybe she didn’t. maybe the system just...broke.”

“Well, it’s a computer. They don’t just stop *working*, you know,” Teddy said, and then a moment later. “Ok. Never mind. I don’t know what I was thinking.”

“And why am I calling him?” Daphne asked.

“Because you can’t find Teddy,” Sarah replied.

“Yes, but...why am *I* calling?” Daphne said. “You could have done this without me in on it. You could make the call.”

“Sometimes men will do things for paralegals that they won’t do for receptionists,” Sarah said, smiling gently. Daphne blushed slightly. Teddy looked confused. The clock hummed and with an audible click shifted its minute hand to exactly the hour, and Sarah rose.

“Shall we?”

Teddy led the way to the machine closet. The three of them huddled around the laptop as it chirped and whirled, booting up. Teddy cracked his knuckles and started typing, green letters glowing on the black background. Sarah understood none of it. She didn’t need to.

“I really never dreamed I’d be doing something like this,” Teddy said.

“Desperate times call for desperate measures,” Sarah said.

“Yeah, okay. So, I’m not doing anything tricky, since I want to be able to put this all back the way it was. You know. I mean, in case.”

“That’s wise,” Sarah agreed.

“So I’m just gonna come in here like this. And then I’ll become root. And I’m just changing the permissions on this one folder here. That shouldn’t...”

The machine chirped and spooled through a long list of gibberish. Teddy leaned forward, squinting. He hit a few keys, and the laptop beeped loudly as he touched each one. He giggled. It wasn’t a good sound.

“That’s...ah...funny. Lemme just...ah...”

He touched a few keys together and the screen went flat black and featureless. The server’s hard drive

whirred and started grinding.

“Well,” Teddy said. “Huh.”

“Daphne? You should call him now.”

Twentyfour:

Daphne put the phone’s handset back in its cradle, plastic clattering in the silence of the office. Her gaze wandered for a moment before she found Sarah.

“He’s not coming.”

Twentyfive:

STEP TWENTY: Protecting Yourself

Who among us hasn’t sometimes gotten in over his head? Overextending is a natural part of testing your personal limits, and nothing to be ashamed of. It is critical, however, that you deal with the consequences gracefully. If someone else in the office is on his way out anyway, it does him no harm to carry some of your burden. Shifting responsibility isn’t an act of...

Oh shit. It’s her. Put the book down.

Put the book down, Teddy.

Put me DOWN!

“What are you reading?” Sarah asked.

“I don’t know,” Teddy said, holding the book out to her. “I thought it was a self-help book, but then it gets into this free verse thing.”

Sarah took the book and skimmed a couple of pages. Then she made a noise and read it again, her eyebrows rising toward her hairline. Teddy thought it was weird the way she held it on her fingertips, like she was trying not to touch it.

Twentysix:

The “competition” was in fact a genuine ballroom dance competition. Mr. Elms had to give his invisible enemies credit. They had covered themselves well. To a less penetrating mind, this grand hotel ballroom with its colorful lights and transporting music, vaulted ceilings speaking of a gentler age, and genuinely decent snacks might have appeared innocent. Mr. Elms sat by himself, watching the dance floor. His jacket, folded on the chair beside him, concealed the handgun.

It was early in the evening, but Elms was a patient man. The program, open on his knee, outlined the course of the night’s entertainments. David Osgood and Mariella Demidain were listed together in the International Latin, bronze level. It was Mr. Elms’ intention to wait him out here, and then follow them, cat-like, from the ballroom to whatever nefarious meeting they had planned. If necessary, he would confront them. He could feel a rising excitement at the prospect.

Confounding that, he also felt a rising excitement at the American Rhythm competition presently on the ballroom floor. A man in a gaudy white and gold outfit was twirling a woman in a top and skirt that matched in both color and sheer visual intensity. Elvis Presley assured them all that he was both in love and also all shook up, and Mr. Elms found himself tapping his knee the beat. Man and woman were both

smiling, their joyous, athletic movements both free and restrained in a combination that commanded the eye to follow them.

As he was near the back wall—the better for shadowy skulking, he'd thought—Mr. Elms could allow himself the luxury of standing up for a better view. These two were, he thought, amazing. Much better than the pair before them in red and gold, though he was going to have to track down more music by the Brian Setzer fellow the previous couple had danced to. Mr. Elms caught himself shifting his hips and arms slightly in echo of the dance on stage, felt himself blushing, and looked around to assure himself that no one had seen him.

At first, he couldn't believe what he saw. There, at the edge of the crowd, a familiar face took in the dance with cool certainty. Sarah, the receptionist. Mr. Elms' paranoia fell back upon him like a wave. She had been one of the voices he'd overheard discussing this competition. Was she part of Osgood's betrayal as well? Or was there some other agenda that had brought her here?

Casting his gaze back and forth, Mr. Elms reached back for his jacket and eased the pistol into the front pocket of his slacks. The song came to its end, and the waterfall roar of applause covered him as he moved forward. His eyes didn't leave Sarah as he inched forward. Like a hawk, he thought. Like a hawk swooping down to the kill.

The announcer, following his mandate, announced. There would be a brief open period while the judges for International Latin took their places. Everyone was invited to take a turn around the floor. The people surged forward, flowing around Mr. Elms like a river around a stone. Sarah did not turn, but then, just beyond her, he caught a glimpse of David Osgood, his chest covered with glittering sequins, the inestimable woman Mariella on his arm. Sarah, he saw, had risen from her seat, her eyes on the crowd, on Osgood and Mariella. Seeing her expression, he felt a moment's doubt at his own attempts to cast himself as the hunter. The receptionist seemed quite suited to the role.

While he considered this odd insight, three things happened as if at once. Music began, a low almost compelling beat with a thrill of guitar and strings. The receptionist strode out toward Osgood. And the crowd around Mr. Elms shifted, leaving him suddenly aware that he was standing alone and unpartnered in the middle of a great dance.

It seemed symbolic.

Twentyseven:

It was as graceful and devastating as a cat pouncing. David, his arms around Mariella (the woman least like a young Uma Thurman of anyone in the world), had just taken the first turn of the dance when the receptionist from the office cut in. Without a word, Mariella was detached from David's embrace, Sarah inserted in her place, and he was shifted out into the center of the civilized mosh pit of the dance floor.

"Um," David said. "Hi."

"Hello, David. We need to talk."

It was a little odd, having his arm around her, her face close to his. She was from the office, and this wasn't really the office-approved distance unless the Christmas party was way out of hand. It felt like kissing his sister.

"I can...I mean, what are you doing here?" he asked as she made a slow spin and came back to him.

"I was about to ask the same thing," she said. "I was with Daphne at the office."

“Oh,” David said, his belly heavy as if he’d swallowed a double handful of lead shot. “That.”

“It isn’t like you to ignore an emergency,” Sarah said. “It isn’t like you to leave Daphne in trouble.”

He almost bowed his head, but Angelica’s voice in the back of his mind snapped at him not to look at his shoes.

“I’m sorry about that. Seriously, I am,” he said. “I know it seems weird. But this was just...something I had to do.”

“It was the book, wasn’t it?” Sarah asked. They reached the edge of the dance floor and turned back in, slipping between the other couples easily as an eel through water. “What did it say to you?”

David didn’t answer right away. He felt small, embarrassed, humiliated. And it wasn’t just the costume or the eye liner and blush. His body shifted, the argentine tango moving him through its course, and all he could think about was how he must seem to Sarah. A slack bastard who’d let down people who were depending on him.

A lonely, sad little man who Daphne would never see as anything but the guy who fixes the networking. Who couldn’t face another year sitting on his couch with his cat, ordering pizza and watching cable, so instead paid a third of his paycheck for costumes he wouldn’t wear in public and dance lessons with people who didn’t like him.

Who had fallen so low he was taking advice from a self-help book.

“What did it say?” Sarah asked again, her voice gentler.

“That I need to know what I really want,” he said, knowing how stupid it sounded as he said it. “If I don’t stick through the hard parts of something, I’ll just keep bouncing around like some kind of pinball. I want...”

They turned, sliding gracefully around another couple. David’s feet moved with a grace and certainty he didn’t feel.

“You want this? Professional dance competition?”

“No. I just *want*. And maybe this all goes to the place I want to be. How do I know unless I go there?”

She went quiet; she was leading, but he didn’t object. It hardly mattered, really.

“It promised you that you’d know what you really want?”

“Yes,” he said.

“When do you dance besides this?” she asked at last, turning him out and pulling him back to her. She was pretty good at this.

“I don’t. I mean sometimes when I’m at a club and a little tipsy...”

“No country and western? Never been honky-tonking? No Cotton-Eyed Joe?”

David laughed nervously.

“Um. No.”

“I have,” Sarah said. “Country music knows a lot about finding out what you want. There are a thousand songs, probably, that tell you how to do it.”

“Really?”

“It’s easy. You piss it away. The soul-crushing regret afterward is how you know that what you lost was precious. That book? It’s not on your side. I promise.”

David almost missed a step.

“She’d say yes,” the receptionist said.

David stopped. The other couples on the floor brushed against them, moths passing a lightbulb.

“You mean *Daphne*?”

“She’s in love with you. She has been for months.”

“You’re...I mean, she...”

The receptionist raised her eyebrows, challenging him to disagree. His mind spun like a top for eight beats. He dropped his arms to his sides and looked down at his feet. It was like waking up from a dream.

“Oh,” he said.

Twentyeight:

“I’m really a very important man. Running a law firm like mine is har...hard work.”

Mariella pulled him close as they turned. Her eyes were bright and predatory.

“So,” she murmured, “is that a gun in your pocket, or are you just happy to see me?”

Twentynine:

They had almost missed the flight, and Sarah’s return tickets from Topeka didn’t land them back home until almost morning on Sunday. Teddy and Daphne were still at the office when they got there, along with three stale bagels and half a teaspoon of schmear. David felt a little weird in his sequins and dance shoes, but he’d gotten most of the eyeliner off at the airport, and Sarah promised him that what was left just accented his eyes a little. Nothing anyone would notice.

“I was going to try that next,” Teddy said, shoulder surfing. “Seriously, that was the absolute very next thing on my list.”

David, sitting cross-legged in the machine closet, let himself smile. The keyboard clicked under his fingers, the interface running as fast as thought. In his mind, the systems file structure glowed and shifted, symbolic links relating one level to the next in a cascade that brought the whole half-dead structure back into place.

“It would have done the trick,” David said, hitting enter. “Okay, I’m taking everything down and the restart should put us back in business.”

“That’s great,” Teddy said. His voice reminded David of someone being told the lab had accidentally switched his blood sample with a rhesus monkey’s and he wasn’t actually a macaque after all. “You want

some coffee? Sarah just made some fresh.”

“That’d be great,” he said.

What he really wanted was to go home, change into something grey and colorless, listen to something punk and simplistic with terrible musicianship, and then sleep for a week. Except that Daphne came around the corner and he didn’t want any of that at all.

“Hey,” she said.

“Hey.”

“All better?”

“Pretty much,” he said, patting the keyboard as the monitor sprang back to life, running the startup checksums. Daphne looked down, smiling a little. She had the most beautiful mouth. David felt himself starting to blush. All the things he’d been going to say vanished. The moment was here, the chance he’d been fighting to take all this time, and he could feel it slipping away. In a second, she was going to ask him something about computers or NFS or domain management and this delicate, fragile chance would be blown again. He tried to speak, but nothing came out, not even something inane.

“We should go dancing some time,” Daphne said, looking up at him.

“Dancing?” he squeaked.

“Just social, you know. Like at a club.”

“The kind where nobody wins,” he agreed.

She hesitated, a hint of a blush in her cheeks.

“More the kind where nobody loses.”