

1 ON MY WAY

Sitting at the terminal, waiting for his plane to board, Steven rushed through the code on his laptop as quickly as he could. His friends all came to see him off, and he just wanted to get back to hanging with them before his flight departed. His girlfriend, Jessica Tighen, was snuggled up against his right side. Even though Steven was busy debugging code, she wasn't letting him go any sooner than she had to. Steven of course didn't mind. When it came to Jessica, he still couldn't believe that someone that smart and beautiful was actually going out with him. So he made a conscious effort to appreciate every moment they spent together, even the moments like this one, where they couldn't give each other their full attention.

Sitting to Steven's left was James Slictini, aka Jimmy Slick, Steven's ice hockey teammate and best friend. Jim was always Steven's primary go to person to help him out when he got in a jam, which was surprisingly quite often.

Sitting across from them was Steven's other best friend Kyle Whalen, the wealthy, obese, and obnoxiously loud son of Henry Whalen, the owner and president of Whalen Networks, a successful computer networking company in the city. Kyle drove them all there to the Islip MacArthur airport in his red Chrysler convertible, which was a present he received from his dad last year for passing his road test.

And then you had the newest member of their group sitting next to Kyle, Bret Walker, star of the hockey team and rehabilitated school bully. A year ago, Bret wouldn't have been caught dead hanging out with Steven and his band of dweebs as he used to, and actually still does, call them. But after last year's traumatic events, they all became very close and since have been practically inseparable.

On their way to the airport, Kyle had asked Steven if he could look over some code for his dad's business when they arrived at the terminal. Steven

couldn't believe Kyle was springing this on him now, but he never wanted to say no to helping out one of his friends when they needed him, especially not after all they did for him last year. I mean they literally put their lives on the line for him, and he would never forget that. So via the airport WI-FI, Steven connected to Kyle's private Amazon server in the cloud where the source code was loaded and struggled to follow the unfamiliar logic. Albeit a little annoyed that he couldn't trace the code faster, it actually wasn't bringing him down at all. And that was simply because nothing could bring him down at the present moment. Yes, Steven was on his way to what he considered to be the opportunity of a lifetime, an invitation only weeklong visit to the number one technical high school in the country, Kilby High, in San Jose, California.

"I still don't know why you want to go to a school full of nerds," Bret stated, out of the blue.

Steven peered up from his laptop and explained, "Because if I do well there, I'll have my choice of any technical college in the country. And some of the graduates don't even go to college. They start their own business's right out of high school and make millions."

Bret shook his head. "They probably don't even have a hockey team there," he muttered.

Steven chuckled. "You're probably right," he replied as he looked back down at Kyle's code. "I'll have to find out."

"I just can't believe you're gonna be leaving Islip Bay High," Jim said. "You just got back."

It was only October, and Steven had missed the majority of the previous year due to his arrest and trial.

"I was just invited to visit," Steven replied without looking back up this time. "It doesn't mean I'm in."

"Yeah, but you said the main purpose of these visits is to recruit talented new students," Jim reminded him.

"That's just what I read online," Steven responded.

Jessica snuggled in closer. "Well, a part of me hopes it's not true. I don't know how I'm gonna go a week without seeing you, let alone a whole year."

Steven turned to her. "I would be back every break, and we would Skype every day," he assured her.

Jessica frowned. "I guess."

Steven gave her an apologetic look but then just went back to Kyle's code.

"Can you at least put that away and spend some time with us before you go!" Jessica insisted.

"No, no, no!" Kyle argued. "He has to figure that out!"

Steven could see the sincerity in Jessica's eyes and decided to honor her request. "You're right. I'm sorry," he said and immediately closed his

laptop. "Ky, I'll get the WI-FI on the plane and continue it from the air."

Kyle frowned but understood. It wasn't a good time. "Okay, that's cool. E-mail me what you find out."

"No problem," Steven told him as he slipped his laptop into his backpack. Trying to appease Jessica, he put his arm around her and slouched down into his chair to cuddle in.

"I can't believe you even asked him to look at that now," Jim said, shaking his head.

"He's leaving for a week," Kyle defended himself.

"What is it anyway?" Bret asked.

Jim laughed. "Kyle's dad's in house developer quit last week, and he asked Kyle to handle any code issues until he hires a new one."

"The accountant thinks there might be a bug with the FIFO costing logic, whatever the hell that is," Kyle tried to explain. "But he's not sure because he doesn't understand the logic completely, so that's why I'm analyzing the code."

Bret gave him a confused look. "You're analyzing the code?"

"With Steven's help!" Kyle defensively responded.

Bret laughed. "Can't you just read the manual or something?"

"It's our own proprietary in-house software. There's no manual," Kyle laughed.

"Then just ask your dad how it works," Bret told him. "He should know. He owns the company."

"He would be the last person to know," Steven spoke up.

"Why?" Bret asked.

"That kind of stuff is beneath him," Steven explained. "I mean, come on, he's not gonna know exactly how the FIFO costing logic works in his ERP software. When it comes to stuff like that, you can't go to the higher ups for answers."

"Then where do you go?" Bret questioned.

"You gotta get down low!" Steven comically emphasized. "You gotta get into the code, baby!"

They all laughed.

"You're such a geek," Bret told him.

"Boarding rows one to twenty," the stewardess announced over the loud speaker.

"That's me," Steven said.

Jessica frowned. "I'm not letting you go," she played and hugged him tighter.

"It's only a week," Steven reiterated from before.

"Fine," she grimaced and reluctantly let him go.

Steven stood up and flung his backpack over his shoulder. "Thanks for the lift, man," he said to Kyle.

“No problem, thanks for helping me out with the code,” Kyle responded.

“Thanks for seeing me off,” Steven then told both Bret and Jim.

“See ya next week,” Jim said.

“Have a good trip,” Bret replied. “I’m expecting to hear some good stories when you get back, if you know what I mean.”

Steven looked at him. “I don’t.”

“You know, California girls,” Bret grinned and raised his eyebrows.

Jessica gave him a dirty look before moving in between them. Not verbally responding to Bret’s comment, she put her arms around Steven and whispered in his ear, “I’ll miss you.”

“I’ll miss you too, Jess,” Steven told her.

After a long hug followed by an even longer, most definitely inappropriate, public kiss, Steven and Jessica finally released their embrace.

“I’ll see you in a week,” Jessica said.

“See you in a week,” Steven replied.

With that, Steven said goodbye to the group one more time and headed off on his next endeavor.

2 WELCOME

“On behalf of all the faculty and students here at Kilby High, we extend the warmest of welcomes to all our guests. We have a very exciting week planned for all of you.” The principal, Dr. Simmons, stood at the lector giving his introductory speech with the aid of a forty foot high Power Point presentation behind him.

The auditorium was jammed packed to the point where some of the staff had to stand along the back wall and down the side aisles. It looked like the entire school was there plus the sixty guests visiting from across the country. They were all grouped together in the first few rows toward the center of the auditorium. Steven got a chance to briefly speak to a couple of them as they waited for the seminar to begin. From what he could tell, everyone seemed pretty cool so far. His whole trip was going quite well, actually. When he arrived at the school the night before, he was greeted by a Mrs. Gordon at the front desk, who personally escorted him to his guest dorm room in the next building, across the quad. Everyone he met so far was really nice like that. If they actually invited him to attend, it seemed like it would be a great atmosphere to work in. Now he just couldn't wait to start auditing some of the classes and see what this place was really all about. Unfortunately, however, if he did go here, his curriculum wouldn't be entirely technical as Dr. Simmons was just now explaining in his speech.

“Even though we are known for technology and that's certainly where our focus lies, we still have to adhere to the State of California's official high school curriculum. So don't think all the courses here are technical. Students still have to take the minimum in Math, Science, History, Literature, and yes folks, I'm afraid they still need to take,” Dr. Simmons switched to a somber tone, “P.E.”

A round of boos and disapproving sentiments sprawled throughout the auditorium. Steven laughed. I guess that answers the hockey team question,

he thought to himself. No chance.

After the seminar, the guests were broken up into groups of six and a volunteer senior took them on a tour of the school. Steven's tour guide was Todd Ericson. He was a dark-haired, five-foot-eleven kid with a solid build but had a bit of a belly. Personality wise, Steven thought he was the perfect combination of knowledgeable and outgoing, which is why they probably chose him to be a tour guide.

So far they had only seen the library and the cafeteria, but they were now entering the computer lab. This should be good, Steven told himself, but to his complete surprise, the room was empty.

"Welcome to the Ghost Lab," Todd said to the group.

"Ghost Lab," Josh, the most vocal member of the group, repeated. "What, is it supposed to be haunted?"

Todd chuckled. "No, it's just that there's never anyone here, so we call it the Ghost Lab. You know, like a Ghost Town. Deserted."

"Oh," Josh replied, nodding his head, "but why is there never anyone here?"

"I know it's the opposite of what you would expect at a school like this, but the fact of the matter is everyone here has their own equipment, which is always top of the line."

"I see," Josh understood as he looked over one of the PC's. "Yeah, this looks pretty old."

"Yes," Todd agreed. "The equipment in here is, get this, over two years old."

The group practically gasped. "Are you kidding!" one of them cried out.

"I know," Todd responded as he ran his finger across the dusty top edge of one of the computer monitors. Raising his eyebrows, he repeated, "Ghost Lab."

The group laughed.

"Seriously though," Todd continued, "all the servers and backend equipment here are all state of the art. You'll never have a problem finding resources needed for any project. But when it comes to individual workstations, however, the school's philosophy is that everyone prefers to use all their own equipment anyway, so they don't heavily invest in it,"

"What about group projects?" one of them asked. "At my school, the computer lab is where we would all go to work together."

"That's a great question," Todd complimented the guest. "Although this isn't the place for it, there's a huge emphasis on collaboration here. There are four official common areas that are heavily used for team projects. They all have full conference room tables with HDMI imports in the middle, connected to sixty-five inch touch screen monitors on the walls. I show you all four of them later in the tour, and I believe later in the week, we'll be using one of them to participate in a scheduled round table."

Even though the topic wasn't even mentioned, everyone seemed pretty excited about that, including Steven.

"But really the entire campus is used for this purpose," Todd continued. "Students are collaborating in the quad when it's nice out, in their dorm rooms, in the cafeteria, wherever they're comfortable."

Everyone nodded.

"Cool," Josh said.

"Come on," Todd stated as he headed for the door. "The next stop is far more impressive."

Two rooms down, on the other side of the hall was the Server Room. As they entered, the group saw three racks of servers along the left side wall and four along the right. They were all setup a few feet from their corresponding wall. There was one terminal in the center of the back wall that connected directly to each server through a KVM switch. Currently, there were two students and a teacher utilizing it.

"Good morning, Professor Dotson," Todd greeted him as he entered the room, primarily to announce their presence.

All three turned to the group. "Oh, good morning, Todd," Professor Dotson replied, "and good morning everyone."

"Good morning," the group replied.

"Don't mind us," Todd said. "We're just taking the tour."

"Of course," Professor Dotson replied with a hand motion gesturing him to carry on.

Todd nodded and addressed the group. "In this room there are over twenty two hundred terabytes of storage. Everything from the smallest file to the largest database is stored and backed up on these servers. We have an MSDN license and educational versions of practically any software you may require. Test sandboxes are setup on the servers for all your individual and group projects."

"Nothing is backed up offsite for fire and disaster purposes?" Josh asked, trying to sound knowledgeable.

"No, everything stays here," Todd answered. "I know it's not fool proof, but the walls and door to this room are industrial grade fire retardant, so hopefully, if something does happen, the servers would be protected."

Professor Dotson turned back around to interject, "You see many of the students and faculty here are working on sensitive proprietary applications, so most people are more comfortable with the data remaining onsite. However, you can choose to back up your own stuff offsite if you wish. The backups here for your development projects only last two days anyway, so backing up your own code is primarily your own responsibility anyhow."

"Why only two days?" Steven asked.

"There's simply too many terabytes to practically be able to keep long

term backups,” one of the two students working with Professor Dotson explained. “We only backup at all for quick retrieval when someone does something stupid, and of course to study the backups during LOH.”

“Group, this is Bernie,” Todd introduced the speaker. Bernie was short and pudgy with rough skin and curly black hair. “Bernie is practically a permanent resident of the Server Room,” Todd announced. “You get your mail delivered here, don’t ya, Bern?”

Bernie smirked. “E-mail,” he murmured.

Todd chuckled. “Riiight.”

“What’s LOH?” Josh asked.

“Log Off Hour,” Professor Dotson explained. “After last period, the servers are taken offline for backup and maintenance purposes for one hour. I know what you’re thinking. That stuff is usually done overnight. But it’s not here for two reasons. One, like Bernie referred to, it gives the students an opportunity to administer and study the routines with a professor. All students get a chance to participate. Three at a time are rotated in daily. And the second reason is we encourage the students to take that hour and do something active. It’s not healthy to be logged in all day and night with only breaks to sleep. They’re encouraged to go swim in the pool, play basketball in the gym, or simply just take a walk. Whatever they want, really. Just something to get a little exercise in.”

It seems like the kids around here would rebel against that, Steven thought to himself. But he was more interested in something else. “When you say sensitive proprietary applications, are you saying students here are already writing commercial apps?” he asked.

“Oh, yes,” Todd replied. “Here you get all the support and encouragement you need to not only write your own production software but to also bring it to market.”

Steven liked the sound of that, and as he looked amongst the group, he realized he wasn’t the only one. He wouldn’t go so far as to say that any of them actually smiled, but that one statement sure put a glimmer in the eye of each and every nerd in that room.

3 GEEK IS THE NEW CHIC

Later in the afternoon, the whole school was back together in the cafeteria for refreshments. After the tour, Steven was finally able to audit some classes. One in particular stood out. They were interfacing a mobile android application with a cylindrical robotic arm. It was some really cool stuff. He absolutely loved this place.

He was currently at the drink table. He just popped open a coke and was pouring it into a glass when he heard someone call him from behind. He turned around and saw it was Todd. He was standing there with a group of friends, waving him over. Steven gave him a nod and headed right over.

“Stevens!” Todd emphasized his greeting.

“Hey Todd, how’s it going?” Steven said.

“Good, I would like you to meet a few people.”

“Sure,” Steven replied.

“This here is Keith Young,” Todd said, introducing his friend to his immediate left.

“Hey Steven, nice to meet ya,” Keith greeted him with a hand shake.

“Same here,” Steven responded.

Keith was almost as tall as Todd but much thinner. He was Chinese but had no trace of an accent.

“And this is Yong Lin,” Todd introduced the kid standing next to Keith.

Steven shook his hand as well. “Nice to meet you,” he said.

“Ni to meet you,” Yong replied. Yong was about Steven’s height and build. He was Chinese also, but unlike Keith, he had a heavy accent.

“This is Sharon Grey,” Todd continued down the line.

Steven put his hand out and said nice to meet you again, but Sharon only nodded her head and kept her hands clenched around the tablet she was holding firmly against her chest. She was short with long dark oily hair that covered most of her face. Not to be rude, but Steven couldn’t help but

think she kind of resembled a witch.

Todd quickly moved to the last member of the group, noticing the awkwardness of Steven still standing there with his hand extended. "And finally this is the famous Marvin Goldman, web developer extraordinaire."

Marvin quickly moved in and shook Steven's hand. "Great to meet you, Steven Stevens. That's a funny name, you know. You must really hate your parents."

Steven chuckled. Marvin was even shorter than Sharon. He had scruffy, dirty blond hair and spoke in a fast, high pitched tone.

"Famous, ah," Steven said.

"Well, not yet but one day, you know. Yeah everyone's gonna be like Mark Zucker-who. Oh, yeah, he was that guy who had that website before Marvin came to town."

Everyone laughed.

"Well, now I get to say I met the famous Marvin Goldman when he was still just in high school," Steven played along.

"Yeah and we all get to say we met the E-Killer in high school," Marvin replied.

"Suspected," Steven corrected him.

"Yeah, yeah, that's what I meant," Marvin responded, matter of factly. "So Steven, I heard while trying to clear your name, you hacked over a hundred systems in one night. Is that true?"

Steven chuckled and shook his head. "No," he simply replied. Steven was used to this. As unbelievable as his adventure last year was, it couldn't hold a candle to all the crazy rumors that surfaced afterwards.

"Oh," Marvin said with a hint of disappointment.

Yong chimed in. "I heard that you hacked into the prisoner transport schedule and had them take you to a place that your friends setup to look like a small holding facility."

Steven gave him a look. "Maybe that would have worked on Scooby Doo," he snickered. Regrettably, he now began to see the disappointment in all their faces.

Keith tried his. "Okay, well, I heard you hacked a corporate system with absolutely no incoming access to the outside world, located on the fiftieth floor of a guarded lower Manhattan building."

"That one is actually true," Steven was glad to say, hoping that would cheer them all up.

It did. Everyone's faces brightened and Marvin continued, "I heard you hacked into a secure government site and redirected a satellite from your smart phone."

"What!" Steven laughed. That one being completely ludicrous, he had to ask, "How in the world would I have done that, and why would I have needed to?"

Everyone laughed. Marvin didn't know what to say.

"Marvin has seen too many movies," Todd said, trying to blow off his ridiculous comment. "So Steven, Keith here is the one who discovered you."

"Whadda you mean?" Steven asked.

"Well, you didn't actually apply to school here."

"No, I just got a letter in the mail inviting me to visit."

"That's right. You see at the beginning of each year, the board of admissions look for potential students across the country that should be going here but aren't," Todd explained. "Then they invite them here for the week, so they can see what we're all about, and we can get to know them, and if it's a good fit, they're invited to attend. We call it recruit week. That board, like most things around here, is made up of a mix of students and teachers and Keith is on it. He's the one who recommended you."

"Wow," Steven responded. "Well, thank you."

"Don't mention it," Keith replied as he casually sipped his drink.

"Actually, when he told us about you, we were all very excited," Todd added.

"Why?" Steven asked.

Todd looked around at all the people nearby. "Let's just say, we didn't need the visit to know you'd be a good fit," he said with a smile.

"Well, thanks," Steven said again, trying to sound gracious.

Todd nodded his head.

"So Steven, whadda ya think of the school so far?" Keith asked.

"Oh, it's amazing. I really hope the rest of the board agrees with you. This is an incredible opportunity. I mean, not to geek out too much, but this place is a developer's dream."

They all laughed.

"You don't have to worry about geeking out too much around here," Todd told him. "Here, the nerdy you are, the cooler you are."

Steven laughed. "Get out."

"I'm not joking. You got a girlfriend?" Todd asked.

"Yeah," Steven replied.

"Too bad, we would have taken you out Friday night, scoping for chicks."

Steven didn't want to sound rude but had to ask, "You guys get a lot of girls?"

"Oh, yeah," Todd confidently replied. "You see in this town, the girls know we're just a few years away from being millionaires, so we get the hottest ones around."

"Really?" Steven suspiciously responded.

"Let me put it to you this way, we're like football players in a Texas town," Todd explained. "We get into bars, we get girls, we get anything we

want.”

Steven gave him a suspicious look. He just wasn't buying it.

"Alright," Todd sighed and took a look around the room. "Hey Samantha, come-merel!" he called out.

A very attractive blond hair, blue eyed girl walked over with two equally attractive friends. "Hey Todd and the boyz, how's it going?" she cheerfully greeted them.

"Girls, I would like you to meet Steven Stevens," Todd introduced him.

"Hello," Steven said, extending his hand.

"Oh, my God!" Samantha excitedly screeched as she shook Steven's hand. "The E-Killer!"

"Suspected," Steven corrected her as well and went on to shake the other girls' hands.

"Samantha is a tour guide this week also," Todd stated. "Tell everyone that really funny story you told me earlier."

"Oh, my God," she started, "one of the guests in my group tried to pick me up literally within the first two minutes of the tour."

Steven didn't say anything. He wasn't surprised at all. She was beautiful.

"And get this," she continued, "his whole play was bragging to me about being a lacrosse player in Missouri."

Everyone there began cracking up hysterically.

Fighting to get the words out through her laughter, Samantha went on to say, "He told me he was all state!"

Everyone laughed even harder.

"I don't even know what that means!" Samantha ended with.

Steven would have explained it but didn't think it would be a good idea. He politely laughed along with the group but all the while was astonished by everyone's reaction. I mean, he's heard of the geek revolution and all, but this was a complete and total reversal of normal high school behavior. It's funny, he himself was on a state championship hockey team, and he always considered that to be the one thing about him that could be considered cool in the classic sense of the word. But here it would be a detriment. As he scanned everyone's faces, internally analyzing their reactions, he stopped when he reached Todd, who was just staring right back at him with an "I told you so" smirk on his face.

"Samantha!" someone shouted from across the room.

"Oh, hey!" she shouted back as her laughter finally subsided. "We'll talk to you guys later, okay," she said to the group.

"Okay, Sam," Todd responded, "talk to you girls later."

As Samantha and her friends walked away, a group of nerds walked past them headed in the opposite direction. "Todd and the boyz!" one of them obnoxiously bellowed.

"Regulators," Todd said, acknowledging them back as they walked by.

"Regulators?" Steven asked.

"It's the name of their team," Keith replied.

"Team?" Steven said. "What do they play?"

The group laughed.

"There a tech team," Keith said.

"What's that?" Steven asked.

"They collaborate on projects together," Keith explained. "We're a tech team too, Todd and the boyz."

"Really," Steven said, now realizing why everyone was calling them that. This whole thing sounded interesting. "You compete against each other?" he asked.

Keith thought about it for a second. "Well, in the market I guess."

"Whadda ya mean?"

Todd explained. "You see, we all like to consider ourselves as teams and we are, but technically, we're companies."

"What!" Steven couldn't believe it.

"Yep, Todd and the boyz is a legal LLC in the state of California. I started it two years ago and now Keith, Yong, Sharon, and Marvin are all ten percent owners. We have eight different apps out there ranging from mobile games to cloud based project management sites."

"That's amazing," Steven told him, "but aren't you all too young to legally own a corporation?"

"Before you're eighteen your parents have to sign some documents saying they're technically the owners up until your eighteen birthday. Then it automatically switches to you."

"Huh, that's incredible," Steven replied. Glancing over to Sharon, he asked, "You don't mind being considered one of the boyz?"

"Not as long as I get my ten percent," she mumbled.

Steven chuckled. "Have you guys made a lot of money?"

"Not yet," Todd regretfully responded, "but our current project looks very promising."

"Really," Steven said.

"Oh, yeah, it's gonna be a whale," Todd excitedly stated.

"What is it?" Steven asked.

Todd took another look around at all the people nearby and replied, "Um, we can't really talk about it yet. It's still under wraps."

"Okay," Steven casually replied while thinking to himself how great it would be to be part of a project with other developers at this level. If he could hook up with Todd and the boyz or another tech team, that would be a major unexpected bonus to coming here.