

THE LADDER

Greg frowned. The body slumped over the keyboard in his cubicle was still warm but stiff. The letter opener from his desk protruded from the base of the back of her head. A trail of blood darkened her blue blouse and highlighted the wound. He hoped she had not suffered much.

So the corporation intended to frame him. They evidently were uncertain of his involvement, which was good, but he would have to work fast.

Greg sat down his satchel and jiggled the computer mouse until the screens came to life. A PowerPoint presentation of the Bogota facility report filled the first monitor, and the corresponding Excel and Word documents competed for attention on

the second. Greg cursed softly. If only the Mogadishu facility report had greeted his eyes, he would have had several angles with which to work, but he would have to make due with what he had been given. He toyed with the idea of simply pulling up his preferred documents but decided against it. The company probably logged what was opened and when. They were not going to make it easy for him.

Bogota. Greg recalled the details of the report as he located the number for security on his cell phone. Revenue was up. Expenses were down. In spite of the loss of one wing of the facility to a fire the year before, the numbers from Bogota looked good, even better than anticipated. The numbers hid the suffering of the workers there.

"Security. Jeff speaking."

Greg pushed back his fears and anger and kept his voice steady. "Hey, Jeff, this is Greg Barton from Finance."

"Yes, Mr. Barton."

"There is a dead body in my cubicle." Greg knew her, but he would let them determine her identity.

"Sir?" Greg heard the sound of chair legs scraping against wood flooring.

"You may want to review the overnight video feed, but I suspect it has been tampered with." Greg knew they would not be careless about that. "You'll need to call the outside

authorities, but send someone now to secure the area before others arrive." He glanced at the bottom right corner of the closest monitor and thought how fortuitous it was that he had come in early that day. "You should have a couple hours, unless someone else arrives early."

"Right away, sir."

Greg ended the call and stepped away from his cubicle. He spent only one short moment to determine his next step. He was good with computers, but even he could not force evidence to align with his wishes. He would have to see what was present and construct the desired context from it.

Gillian Moorehead had been his co-worker, sharing ambition and talent that spurred him on to greater and deeper challenges at work. She had known that he was researching their corporation's unethical practices at the factories outside the US, but she had not known how much he knew. And she had not been aware that he had covered his trail by dispersing his actions amongst the workstations in their department, primarily hers. Greg had anticipated the likelihood of his or her eventual release one way or another. He had not expected her death in his cubicle. That was rather inconvenient.

Security would expect Greg to be there, but he had a few moments before they arrived, and he trusted that the video feed was still compromised. With methodical precision, yet as

rapidly as he could, Greg rummaged through the other cubicles, stealthily opening and closing drawers and bumping keyboards and optical mouses. Most of his co-workers kept their computers on when they left, but screen savers protected the workstations from unauthorized entry on many. A few showed the work from the previous day, and Greg clicked through e-mail accounts and notes for anything of use but found nothing worthwhile. Even though his task would be made easier, he purposely avoided Gillian's desk, knowing the proper authorities would much more carefully scrub there.

"Mr. Barton?"

Greg heard the call while in a room adjoining the one where his cubicle stood. He immediately left the desk he had just shut and walked through the door to greet the newcomer. "In here. Just trying to figure out where I might be able to work while my cubicle is unavailable."

The security personnel, one man and one woman, stood together looking at Gillian's lifeless form. The man was younger and unfamiliar to Greg, but the woman--black and frowning and glaring--was a staunch and seasoned officer. Rumor had it she was holding on to her position until she could retire in a few years. Greg could already see the change of color in the young man's face. The woman addressed Greg with pompous formality, asking what was his business there.

"I found her like this," Greg replied. "I touched her on the back before I realized what I was doing, and I moved the mouse to see if she may have been working on something--"

"At your workstation?" Her tone and eyebrow rose, and she cocked one fist on her hip.

Greg glared back but remained calm. "I don't know why she was here instead of at her desk." He challenged the guard with a stare. Her gaze never wavered. He flicked his eyes to the side. "I went by her desk but saw nothing out of the ordinary." The black woman's eyes hardened. "Don't worry. I didn't touch anything."

Greg heard an exhalation of breath to his right. He turned and saw his boss, Jeremy Cobbin, standing at the entryway to the room. His face grew pale, and he had dark circles around eyes that bulged and flicked from the body to the security guards. His mouth gaped several times. "What happened?"

The black woman glared at Jeremy. "Mr. Barton claims he discovered her earlier this morning like this."

Greg chose to let pass the implied affront to his veracity.

Jeremy spoke in hurried phrases and with vague gesturing. "We were working late last night. I left about one this morning. She said she just had a few things left to check and then she would lock up afterwards." His hand groped in his pocket, and he pulled out his cell phone and glanced at it.

"How long ago did this happen?" He glared at Greg. "Why is she at your workstation?"

Greg shrugged, and the black woman took charge before he could respond. "I'm sure we'll get answers to those questions in time, Mr. Cobbin."

Jeremy stepped into the cubicle and jostled the computer mouse. Greg already knew what would appear on the screens, but he smiled to himself at Jeremy's incaution and intently watched Jeremy's reactions. The black woman uttered a warning, but Jeremy ignored her and stared from one screen to the other. His forehead wrinkled.

"Bogota? We weren't even working on anything to do with Bogota last night." Jeremy peered at Greg. "Were the two of you working on a project or preparing a presentation?"

"No," Greg said and shook his head. "I have no idea why she was on my computer." At least no idea that would fit within the realm of their current daily work.

"But here she is," said the black woman, stepping between Greg and Jeremy with her commanding presence. "Please don't touch anything else, and if we could use your office, Mr. Cobbin, I think the two of you can wait there." She ushered them to Jeremy's office after sending her cohort to lock the outer doors.

Greg waited impatiently through the next several minutes as Jeremy complained at the inconvenience and loss of production and as the black woman harried and accused him and Jeremy. Greg kept quiet and allowed them to quarrel. He learned much that might be needed from what Jeremy explained, and he confessed nothing that might in any way implicate him in Gillian's death. But someone high up, possibly even the CEO, was out to get him, and he needed to act soon to divert that course of action.

Finally, the black woman groaned. "I'm done arguing with you." She clutched the door handle. "Stay here until I bring in the county police."

"But I have things to take care of," whined Jeremy. "We were in the middle of important negotiations. I need to ask our clients for more time, given the circumstances."

"Fine," she relented, "but do not leave this area," she swept her arm in a circle, "and do not touch the crime scene."

"I'll stay put," chimed in Greg with a smirk at his cunning. If he had believed in a higher power, he would have thanked that power for such providence; instead, he marveled at his good luck.

Once he had the room to himself, Greg pecked at Jeremy's keyboard and operated the mouse to pull up the e-mail account on the computer. Systematically glancing through the e-mail subjects, Greg spotted some e-mail chains in Jeremy's account

that might be useful. Greg perused the contents of a few of them and smiled. To think that Jeremy's wife would send objections of such a personal and compromising nature to his work e-mail account. Stupid woman! And Jeremy was equally as dense to not have immediately purged these messages.

Greg's fingers flew over the keys as he forwarded a few of the e-mails, adjusted some security parameters, and then repositioned the highlighted entry to Jeremy's first e-mail and returned the desktop on the computer to its original state. He glanced at the time in the bottom right of the screen and noted that he had spent only a little over five minutes finding what he needed. He really did have a talent. He deserved a promotion.

After waiting another five minutes, Greg poked his head out the door and saw Jeremy duck into Gillian's cubicle. Greg resisted the temptation to leave the room to sneak up and view Jeremy at work, but he felt no guilt at alerting the black woman to Jeremy's whereabouts when she returned. Jeremy was unceremoniously escorted back to his office.

"I don't see why it should be a problem that I check her queue," whined Jeremy as he plopped into his chair and sulked. "After all, I'm going to need to follow up on her accounts. I was her supervisor." The black woman simply glared at Jeremy before leaving the two of them.

Another five minutes or so passed. Jeremy continued to complain about not knowing what was going on. Greg felt increasingly impatient dealing with Jeremy's petulance when so much needed to be done. He yearned earnestly for release.

A uniformed officer appeared in the doorway. "Which one of you is Greg Barton?"

Greg raised his hand and felt it tremble. He steeled his body to mask his anxiety. The officer excused Jeremy, who could not leave without expressing his disapproval over the use of his office as an interrogation room. The officer tolerated Jeremy's displeasure but shut the door once he had stepped out.

Greg answered the many questions the detective asked. Yes, he and Gillian were co-workers on many of the same projects. No, he had not stayed the night before and did not know why Gillian was found at his workstation instead of hers. Yes, Jeremy was their direct supervisor and often worked with one of them on reports without involving the other. No, he did not know why the reports and data on Bogota were appearing on his computer; he had not entered or reported on anything significant concerning their Bogota operations for roughly one month.

Greg felt antsy but periodically pinched the underside of his thigh for distraction until the uniformed officer had exhausted all his questions. He asked Greg to stay on the premises and let him go. On his way out the door, Greg spotted

Jeremy seated in another cubicle with the black woman hovering over him. The sight made him smile.

Greg asked if he would be allowed to work at his desk, and the Black woman informed him that the entire section of the floor had been blocked off. The uniformed officer called in Jeremy and let the black woman know that Greg was free to go. Greg recovered his satchel and followed the black woman to a door leading out of the department. Apparently, his work day was over; but, he had plenty of work to keep him occupied.

Later in the week, the police arrested a protesting and belligerent Jeremy Cobbin for the murder of Gillian Moorehead. According to the police report that was later filed, Jeremy and his wife were having marital problems over an affair between him and Gillian. E-mails had surfaced which were construed to reveal that the affair had been growing over the past year, and Jeremy, torn between an obsession he could not pursue and a duty he felt more and more difficult to fulfill, finally broke and lashed out at his lover one night when they were working late. An argument over a situation at the Bogota plant, which was really under the responsibility of Greg Barton, who worked closely with Gillian but was not present the night of the murder, prompted the disagreement and eventual rage that enveloped Jeremy, provoking him to unleash all the frustration

he felt over the past year. His ruse to implicate Greg was easily seen through and added to the severity of the punishment being sought. Clearly, Jeremy Cobbin's pathetic career was over.

Exactly one day after Jeremy's arrest, Greg received a summons from the company CEO, and his heart skipped a beat. Here was his final test. If his resolve cracked, he would be the next employee to exit the company. Greg took the time to tidy his office and secure his workstation before riding the elevator to the top floor of the building. The doors opened to the elegantly paneled halls of the executive floor, and Greg felt light-headed and giddy as he stepped out. He took a deep breath.

The executive assistant to the CEO greeted Greg warmly as he entered the foyer to the corner office. She assured him that the CEO would be with him momentarily and that if he could please have a seat, she would let the CEO know he was there. Greg thanked her and accepted the offer of coffee with a little cream. An intern appeared with his steaming cup of coffee, and Greg sipped it for the few minutes of his wait. The executive assistant welcomed him into the presence of the CEO.

The CEO sat patiently as Greg maintained eye contact and moved to the proffered seat. The assistant closed them in to the silence of the inner office. Greg controlled his heart and

admired the view of the city from his vantage point. The CEO cleared his throat.

"It seems that under the unusual circumstances in Finance, we are left without a supervisor and one of the two associates who worked closely with him." The CEO fixed Greg in his gaze.

Greg remained still and quiet.

The CEO coughed. "I must admit, we were quite surprised that Jeremy was charged with her murder." His eyes did not waver.

Greg returned the challenge in silence.

The CEO let the pause linger before sighing. "Were you aware of the affair?"

"No, sir," Greg replied.

"Were you aware that someone was threatening to reveal to the government authorities that this company was involved in alleged illegal and unethical practices in our international factories?"

Greg watched the CEO's piercing eyes. "No, sir."

The CEO's glare stiffened. "Do you feel our international tactics are illegal or unethical?"

Greg thought about the many lives that were being traded at that moment overseas in order for their company to make a profit. Mogadishu was the worst, but Bogota was nearly as bad.

"No, sir."

The CEO breathed slowly. Greg struggled to hold steady under the CEO's stern stare. He felt the perspiration building under his arms. The strain of maintaining his façade over the past year had cost him sleep, and his eyes burned in their sockets. Even if he survived the ordeal, Greg anticipated a pounding migraine that evening.

The CEO smiled, and the tension eased. "We are prepared to offer you a promotion."

Greg relaxed but kept a benevolent smile on his face. "I'm interested."

"Obviously, we need a new Finance Supervisor." The CEO's intent gaze never wavered. "Do you feel up to the job?"

"I do, sir," answered Greg, keeping his eyes locked on the CEO. "I accept."

The CEO nodded and stood up with majesty from his seat. He strode over to the plate glass window and beckoned for Greg to join him. Greg obeyed the command and joined him looking out at the city below.

"What has happened at some of our international branches is regrettable but expedient," said the CEO. "Our lives here are more complex and involved than anything that goes on over there, and a disturbance there does not magnify like a disturbance here."

Greg listened carefully and matched his physical responses to the cues, nodding his head a bit here, watching the traffic there. His test was not completely over, but he had worked hard over the past few days for this promotion and felt he had most definitely earned it. "You agree with Stalin then."

The CEO smirked but did not turn his watchful eye from hovering over the city. "Stalin understood the nature of global response to the faceless man, but he was a monster." He angled his broad shoulders enough to watch Greg out of the corner of his eye. "The fate of the faceless masses has been the same throughout history."

Greg nodded in agreement. "Just a statistic against the backdrop of the larger achievements of more powerful men."

The CEO chuckled softly. "I didn't realize you had it in you to understand." He turned away from Greg and the window and sat back in his seat. "Please close the door after you." He resumed his work and ignored Greg's departure.

Greg shut the door behind him, thanked the executive assistant, who smiled warmly, and breathed relief. A pang of conscience helped him to feel sorrow for Gillian and for the nameless, faceless others at the corporate factories around the globe, but thinking of Jeremy, Greg felt he could accept that this was the way of the world. He returned to his cubicle,

excited about his promotion, but ready to work on his resume in order to scope out his next job.

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