

The Fortune Cookie Mystery and espionage



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CHAPTER 1

I found a message on my answering machine when I got home. I had just come back from Walmart on my weekly forage for groceries, and any personal care supplies I might be running low on. Being a “techie”, I would usually pass through the electronics section, just to see what useful new ‘toys’ were discounted enough to make them an impulse buy for me. Also, I always thought of my weekly shopping visits to a huge superstore like this as an attempt at getting some of the physical exercise I desperately needed.

The message was from someone who needed computer help. They were calling because I had a computer service and repair business that I continued to work at part-time, after years of performing these duties on a full-time basis for various large companies. I had worked as a contractor for various kinds of projects. From upgrading entire businesses like hospitals to new systems, to changing them over to using network printers that served entire departments, which allowed each employee their own individual printers on their desks. The difference in productivity for the users was incredible.

My very first contract was memorable! I traveled around the country, visiting a different city each week; installing software and network connections, and training therapists on a wireless system. This system could allow them to figure out a patient’s needs, set up a program, and carry it out using a wireless tablet that they carried with them throughout the clinic. The 1st week I worked on this project, I got to leave a cold snowy winter’s day in my hometown, and fly to Fort

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Lauderdale for five days. Hotel, meals, rental cars; all paid for! I enjoyed having the time each day to sightsee, and to enjoy the view of ocean liners lining up to take or bring back their lucky passengers. And, the job was fun, and there was great satisfaction in setting up a whole facility with this new technology.

The blinking of the answering machine again grabbed my attention. I pushed the play button. The message left on the machine was from someone named Joe who needed some sort of help with his laptop. He honestly didn't sound like he was very computer savvy. That's always great for me, because it often means the job is easy, the client doesn't mind paying for the help, and they're always grateful. The triumvirate of job security and success! Joe had left a number to return his call. It was around 5:30 in the evening and he had left the message at 3:10. My computer office was in my apartment, and when at home I preferred using my landline. It was actually a VOIP (Voice Over IP) phone, meaning it worked through my internet connection. I liked the quality of sound better than my cell phone.

His phone only rang twice, and he answered in a monotone voice with no particular affectation.

“Hello”.

I said, “Hi, Joe? This is Bill. You called me about your computer.”

His voice seemed to perk up a bit, like he might have been taking a nap and became more energized when he realized who was calling. Either that, or his normal voice was just not that exciting.

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“Yeah, thanks for calling back Bill. I have a problem with my laptop, and I need someone who knows what they’re doing to take a look at it.”

“Sure,” I said. “What kind of problem?”

“I don’t really know much about computers,” said Joe. “So I can’t really explain it. Could you come and take a look?”

I’d had experience with users who had no clue before, so what he said didn’t really sound that unreasonable. I couldn’t believe the number of people who would spend thousands of dollars on computers and equipment, then had to call me to show them how to turn them on.

“No problem, Joe. So you know up front, I charge \$75 per hour, as long as you live a reasonable distance from me. Otherwise I charge a bit more for travel.”

“That’s fine,” he said.

He gave me his address, and it turned out to be only a couple of miles away. I told him I would be there in a half hour. I put all his info into my phone and opened up the GPS on it to find the best route. It occurred to me that I hadn’t asked his last name, but I’d get that once I met with him.

CHAPTER 2

The clouds put a bit of a damper on being outdoors as I drove to the client's house. Funny how it can color your spirit with translucent gloom, regardless of what you're doing. The drive actually took a little longer than expected. The address ended up being located in an area where homes were spread out and secluded. A part of town I didn't recall ever noticing before. As the GPS began to show that I was getting close to my destination, I found myself on a narrow road that probably no one used except for the immediate inhabitants. As the GPS announced "You are here," I saw a drive just ahead to my right. The tight turn took me down a nicely paved drive that wound between tall thick bushes; almost like a tunnel with the top open. A few minutes later I saw the house. This was no middle class home or farmhouse. The stone and bricks looked like they had been placed a hundred years ago, and the windows were of some design that was probably popular back then. One side of the house that I could see was covered with thick ivy.

Looking cautiously around as I let the car creep slowly forward in front of the stately home, I stopped opposite the front stone steps. Getting out of the car, I grabbed my briefcase of tools and software, and my laptop, and I walked slowly up the steps. I imagined that there would be a long pull chain that would "gong" to alert the occupant, rather than a common doorbell. However, before I could find out, the door opened.

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A man seemingly in his 30's, relatively tall and good looking, said, "Hello, Bill? I'm Joe. The one you spoke to on the phone."

"Yes, hi!" I answered enthusiastically.

He seemed to fit the quality of the home: dressed in green corduroys, and brown crew neck sweater, with a green and white striped collar showing above the sweater. His shoes were expensive loafers. His hair was neatly cut and combed. Somehow I felt like this had become a scene out of a novel, instead of a client call to fix someone's computer.

Nevertheless, he ushered me into the home; into a vestibule nicely appointed with thick plush carpeting, and a long polished carved wooden table. On the table were items that were probably souvenirs from other countries: little carved statues; wood or jade; maybe even ivory. On the walls were a few thickly framed paintings, possibly of Joe's relatives, and even one that looked uncannily like him. Maybe an ancestor that he closely resembled.

"Follow me and we'll go into the library," Joe told me.

I followed him through a set of wooden sliding doors, still taking in the wonders and surprises of the impressive residence. He pointed to a corner where a somewhat newer looking, probably mahogany desk was located, and he told me to take a seat in one of several matching chairs with leather padded seats. He asked if I'd like tea, or any other refreshment. I declined, wanting to concentrate on the job, not to mention to remain professional.

After a few minutes of him asking about my drive over to his place, how long I had been in information technology, the usual niceties... he opened one of the desk drawers, and brought out a new looking laptop. He sat next to me, so that

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I could see the same view as he could, then opened the laptop. An experienced flick of his finger and the laptop started up. Rather quickly I thought.

I studied the image for a minute, trying to look for any anomalies on the typical Windows 7 desktop. I half-wondered why not the newer Windows 10, then settled on the answer that he, and probably much of the world had stuck with the older version because it was more comfortable and dependable for the average user. It was neither here nor there to why I was looking at this screen. So, I eventually moved my glance to Joe, expecting some explanation.

“Let me give you a little background, before we move on,” said Joe. “My family has always been relatively, let’s say, wealthy. We’ve enjoyed the finer things in life, along with some of the best educational institutions in this country. We’ve socialized with some of the most prominent families. With people at the most exclusive levels of society and government. Even with some prominent figures abroad. I won’t bore you with too many details of my own life, but suffice it to say that even at my relatively young age, I’ve been very well educated, well traveled, and I maintain some of the family’s important connections. Outwardly, many think of me as a playboy, living off generations of wealth and privilege, while performing no particular function other than traveling and living well.

“The truth is something I’ll reveal a bit of to you. I look at it as being on a ‘need to know’ basis. I’ve done some checking up on you through my connections, and I feel that you’re an honest, trustworthy person; an independent thinker, and you’re open to new experiences. The choice is yours, and at

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any point you can opt out of this adventure. The truth is, yes I do need help with my laptop, just as I said. Be aware however, that I work for an organization that will require total confidentiality.”

I stared at Joe, flabbergasted by the words he just spoke, even before they began to sink in. His preppy old-school attire jumped out of a Harvard or Yale yearbook, while his features exuded a dignified confidence. On the one hand, I developed a sense of the situation; a tenor of something beyond my mundane life; a mystery; even a possible danger. On the other hand, I was totally confused as to what he was talking about. It sounded like some fictional television movie, with intrigue and larger-than-life characters. Not real.

He had stopped and was looking at me, perhaps with some expectation of a response. He probably didn’t want to overwhelm me with more details before he could gauge how I felt about what he had just said.

I stammered, “I, I... honestly have no idea what we’re talking about at this point, but definitely want to hear more. When I set eyes on the mansion originally, I had a sense that you probably had money, and that we probably traveled in different circles.” I laughed a bit facetiously. “Of course I’m fascinated to hear more details. But when you began to tell me about the life you live, it almost seemed like you were leading me into some kind of revelation... Especially with the question of how the computer fits into the story hovering in the back of my mind. I’m all for adventure though, and can’t wait for more of your story !”

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