

# TWELVE

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Buckeye's is a popular lunchtime dining facility located in the heart of downtown Malorett. Sarina wondered if that sentence, written at the bottom of the menu at Buckeye's, was composed during a time when there was a heart of downtown Malorett. Judging solely on location, if this was the heart, then The Developers' office must be approximately the liver. That is, of course, assuming the Malorett man is lying on his back, facing the east. Also, according to these same coordinates, Sarina determined she must be sitting either at the edge of the left ventricle or somewhere in the middle of the aorta.

You guessed it! Sarina was extremely bored. She had been waiting for more than 20 minutes to meet Rex Burns. Surely he hadn't forgotten about the meeting. Surely he had read his email since the day before. Then again, Sarina didn't know where the guy lived, which bank he was manager at or really much of anything other than his similarities to Richard Simmons. Sarina had seen approximately 25 guys since arriving at Buckeye's, and not one even had an ounce of Simmons.

Sarina decided that if he didn't come off like the real one in person, then she had better things to do, like finding the heart of Malorett.

At least the water at Buckeye's was excellent, Sarina thought. Serving Malorett since 1922, Buckeye's offers a variety of items on the menu, from fresh fish to burgers to speciality salads. Buckeye's also offers a selection of wines and spirits for your dining pleasure. Reservations are welcome. She had read that part of the menu 32 times just today, and plenty of other times as well. But she hadn't read it enough that she could recite it during her morning run or even as a prayer.

Finally, just as Sarina had had enough, and had turned to grab her purse to leave, a man approached the table. He knocked lightly on the table top, and Sarina saw only his knuckles. They were hairy, but not too hairy. Then

she gradually looked across at his stomach, up his shirt, and she immediately noticed sweat beads frolicking through his visible chest hairs.

“You are Sarina, right?” said the man, looking as if he wanted to sit down, but never actually making the move.

“And you must be Rex,” Sarina said. “Have a seat! Where have you been?”

“Oh, I had to run a few errands for work,” Rex said. “I thought I could still make it here in time, but then I remembered I had to do another favor for someone at work. I mean, it was no big deal, but I told Susie I would give her my recipe for Chicken a la Burns before she took off for the weekend. And I’m a man of my word.”

“But wait a minute, if you’re a man of your word, then why were you late?”

“You got me, Sarina. You got me.”

Even though she waited for almost 25 minutes, Sarina could tell her wait was worth it. Rex was exactly how he described himself, exactly how he appeared in his picture and exactly what Sarina anticipated. After she ordered a chicken sandwich and fries, Rex ordered a chicken Caesar salad with light salad dressing and no croutons. When the waiter left, Rex leaned over the table and grabbed Sarina’s left hand.

“Sarina! Fries? You can’t eat fries and keep that great figure of yours,” Rex said. “Would you like me to wave him down so you can get a baked potato?”

“No that’s all right,” said Sarina, taking another drink of water. “I like fries, and I want to eat fries. If I have to run a little more tomorrow, then so be it.”

“Well, if you’re OK with it ... then I am too! I’m sorry, I’m just extremely health conscious. Please don’t take it personal.”

“No problem, Rex. But speaking of personal — and I don’t even know how to say this, but — has anyone ever told you that you look like Richard Simmons?”

Rex released his hand from Sarina’s and folded his hands in his lap. He stared down below the table for an instant.

“No, Sarina, no one has ever told me that,” Rex said. “But that is quite

possibly the best compliment someone has ever given me!”

Rex stood, walked over to Sarina and kissed her on the cheek. Sarina turned away, then sat motionless, smiling and blushing. Rex returned to his seat, still beaming from Sarina’s comment.

“Richard is my idol!” Rex said. “I wish I could be just like him. But I know that is impossible. There is only one Richard Simmons. Did you know he was born on July 12?”

“Actually, yes, I did know that,” Sarina said. “I am a big fan of his as well. That is so odd. I never really thought I’d actually find something like that in common with a man.”

“Well believe it, sister!”

Lunch went extremely well. Rex and Sarina sorted through each other’s life stories, job duties, favorite pastimes, etc. By the time they had finished their meals, both wished there was more time to stay and chat.

“I really hate to cut this short, Rex, but I have to get back to the office,” Sarina said. “We are in the process of trying to tie up all loose ends before the weekend.”

“That’s understandable,” said Rex, dropping his napkin on his plate. “I, too, must get back before all my employees wonder where I am. Can we do this again sometime? I had a great time.”

“I did as well, Rex. So do you want to go skiing with us tomorrow? I don’t normally try to go on dates with new guys on back-to-back nights, but the people at work are getting together the trip and ...”

“That is fabulous! I haven’t been in a month, but I love to ski!”

“Great! We’re going to Ski Frenzy, and as far as I know, we’re going to try to leave Malorett in the morning. Will that work for you?”

“I’ll make it work, Sarina. I would definitely enjoy spending more time with you.”

As they walked out of Buckeye’s, Rex scribbled his home number on the back of a business card and gave it to Sarina.

“Call me there, or call my cell number, and just let me know what time to pick you up,” Rex said, “if you want me to pick you up.”

“Yep, that sounds fine,” Sarina said. “I should know this afternoon what the plans will be. I’ll definitely be calling you.”

Rex leaned over to hug Sarina and gave her another kiss on the cheek. When he started to let go, Sarina was still holding him tight and pulling Rex back toward her. She lurched up and aimed a kiss on his lips. Rex gave Sarina a quick glance, held firm and then backed away.

“That was nice, Sarina,” Rex said. “I can’t wait to see you tomorrow!”

With that, Rex got into his SUV and drove off.

Sarina wasn’t sure exactly what to think about that kiss. Rex seemed somewhat abrupt in getting away, but then again, it was the first time they had ever met. Even still, Sarina had already fallen hard for Rex Burns.

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Matt squinted at the address just above the door in front of him. It read 3216, which is the address Doug Morris gave him to Foundation Technologies. Matt turned around and checked the road as well. The sign definitely said Ohio Street. He turned back around, still unsure if he was where he was supposed to be.

Not that Matt had conjured up an idea of what Foundation Technologies was supposed to look like, but for some reason, this is not what it was supposed to look like. This building, 3216 Ohio Street, reminded him of a small dentist office, or a diner that seated 20 people and was frequented by passers-by in the wee hours of the morning. The place was one story, but it would be classified as a half story, if that were possible. There couldn’t have been more than four rooms in the place, and if there were that many, at least one would have been smaller than a closet. The building was somewhat part of a strip mall because on the left side, Matt noticed a carryout Chinese restaurant, a dry cleaners and a liquor store. But this building did have 10-15 feet between it and the others, so it wasn’t necessarily connected. They just shared a common parking lot, where Matt’s truck sat with just one other vehicle.

Matt hesitated to even knock on the door, even though he finally noticed a sign beside the steps that read Foundation Technologies. This must be the place, he thought, even though there was no one around, and Doug said to be there by 11:30 a.m. Matt knocked, and almost immediately, a young man answered the door.

“You must be Matt from The Developers,” the man said. “Please enter now.”

Matt obliged, only to be led into what appeared to be a waiting room.

“Doug will be up in a minute to see you,” said the man, scurrying back to a different room.

Matt sat down in a large wooden rocking chair and picked up a copy of *Time* magazine, although it was from seven years ago. Maybe people don’t come in here and wait that often, he thought. Or maybe people don’t come in here at all. Or maybe people who wait often feel nostalgic and enjoy the old issues of *Time*. Or maybe ...

“Long time, no see! Have you been waiting long?” Doug walked over to Matt and shook his hand. “Are you ready for the tour?”

“Sure, I guess,” Matt said. “I mean, the tour won’t take that long, for the size of this place, will it? I thought you said this building was renovated?”

“Ah yes, I knew you would think that. We didn’t do too much to the upstairs. But the downstairs, that is a different story.”

Doug opened a side door, which actually was a large stairwell entrance. Matt looked down at what had to be at least two large flights of stairs, and he was flabbergasted.

“Yeah, the upstairs used to be some little diner that stayed open like 24 hours,” said Doug, leading the way down the stairs. “Their speciality was breakfast, and some say there’s still a ghost shaped like an omelette upstairs. Regardless, they had a large cellar that was originally built as some sort of fallout shelter. When I found out about it, I took a look, and sure enough, it was exactly the type of place I knew would work for us. Plus having an omelette ghost guard the place, you just can’t beat that.”

Doug reached the cavernous entrance and unlocked the doors. He yanked the handle hard and the door finally gave way.

“When the funds for this project start flying in, I need to get this fixed,” Doug said. He gave Matt a nod to enter, and the two made it inside.

Matt was instantly in awe of the massive room. It was approximately the size of three high school gyms, minus the bleachers, the concession stands and unfortunately, the cheerleaders. But there was only a small portion of the room that was being used. The center of the area contained 12 spacious

cubicle-like areas, and all of the walls faced outward toward the rest of the room. It was like a cubicle castle, and the rest of the floor on the outside was a moat. Matt could see through to the center of the castle, which had a meeting room, equipped with chairs, a table, a projector and a large screen.

“This ... this is pretty slick,” said Matt, walking closer toward the entrance into the cubicle castle. “But where is everyone?”

“Oh it’s Friday,” Doug said. “Everyone goes to eat up at Dave’s on Friday. I had to stay behind to show you the place, so there would be no interruptions. I brought lunch with me. Would you like a pear?”

“No that’s all right Doug, I’ll eat later. So should we get down to business?”

“Of course, Matt.”

They walked to the center area and took seats at the long meeting table. Matt still had the original folder that Doug had dropped off a few days ago, and Doug had a small briefcase, which he opened at the table. Most everything was still a mystery to Matt, so he decided to just shuffle some papers around until Doug started speaking.

“OK Matt, I see you are shuffling papers around,” Doug said. “I’m not sure why because you basically have no information.”

“That’s why I am,” Matt said. “I thought by shuffling papers, I could conjure up some knowledge.”

“Good try! I have the info here. I’ll give you a little more detail about the project, then you can ask questions, give opinions or juggle; you decide.”

“Sounds good, Doug.”

“Here it goes: We have won a bid from the United States government, a combined project from the Department of Commerce and FCC, to produce a loose backbone of Internet service, within the US, that will overlay the chaotic routing schematics that currently exist.

“The objective behind this routing technique is a little complex. OK, it’s a lot complex. First, it’s important to continue to allow all major and minor Internet service providers to continue, uninterrupted, from now until eternity. But these providers will, in turn, have to pay a fee to the government for usage. This could be equated to a universal connectivity charge for phone service. The charge hasn’t been determined yet, but it will probably be at least

\$1 a year per connection.”

“But why would major ISPs like AOL or Earthlink want to do this?” Matt said. “They already have their own systems set up. They can just keep them the way they are.”

“That’s the thing, Matt. They won’t be able to keep their lines the way they are. They are being phased out.”

“Phased out? How so?”

“I have to stop for a moment, Matt, because this is classified information. I’m not even at liberty to say how this will be occurring, but as a main player in this system, you have to know this information.”

“What information?”

Doug pulled out a piece of paper from his briefcase, and he also pulled out a pen.

“This is to protect us both,” Doug explained. “This is a confidentiality agreement between Foundation Technologies, The Developers and the United States. This agreement will allow me to discuss in detail the rest of the plans. They have already run background checks on you, your employees and your company, and everything came out just fine. I trust you, Matt, but involving an outside business is no different, whether we’re dealing with the Chinese carryout next door or the American government. Take a look at it.”

Doug handed Matt the confidentiality agreement. It explained that what was discussed between the two organizations regarding this project would remain confidential and not be talked about with the general public. The client — the US government — would be in contact directly with Foundation and any additional companies used in outsourcing. Matt read over it thoroughly and signed, without asking questions. He handed the paper back to Doug and reluctantly grinned.

“OK, now tell me what the hell is going on here,” Matt said.

“Now I can, with your trust on paper,” Doug said. “There hasn’t been an exact timeframe established, but the current connections used by all service providers will become virtually extinct five years from now. The engineers who have fortified the connection lines through the World Wide Web have been gathered to build what will be called the Super Information Portal, or SIP. All current routes will be absolved into the SIP and then improved and/or

replaced by new lines. This is how the government will basically be able to place a toll on the use of the SIP.”

“Damn the government!” Matt said. “Wait a minute, how do you pronounce this? Is it ‘sip’ or ‘s-i-p’?”

“Say it as one word, of course. But we can’t damn the government here. We are going to be getting some of the funds earned from this.”

“Oh yeah, never mind, good job government! But what are we getting out of this?”

“First off, the only way this is going to make everyone satisfied is if there is still a free market in the business of providing Internet service. Luckily, this system doesn’t take away from that at all. For instance, Company A and Company B can still compete freely even though they are paying for their electric from the same company, or paying the same state taxes.

“Secondly, five years from now, after SIP has been fully implemented, every Internet connection will have this charge associated with it. I would assume that for AOL, the charge will basically be built into a monthly statement. This might not even be directly announced to the public in a large fashion. I mean an extra dollar a year won’t be much to complain about.

“At the same time, think of what an extra buck or two from every computer connected to the SIP could do for Internet-related funding. It would be like setting up a toll booth that everyone has to walk through once a year.”

“But there is a slight problem with that thinking,” Matt said. “For networked computers, you have only one main Internet connection. Then you have wireless Internet and routers, where providers can cluster large groups into one. So how will that affect the cost of these charges?”

“That’s a good question, Matt, and I don’t have all of the specifics. But I’m guessing businesses will be charged the SIP fee based on computer usage or something like that. For networked users within a household, I don’t think there will be an extra charge. I’m not really too concerned with that, because that’s not the part that we will be doing anyway.”

“OK, now I’m really confused,” Matt said. “I thought we were going over the part in which Foundation Technologies won the bid? So what are you doing?”

“Don’t get me wrong, our technicians will be working closely with the

network specialists to determine the best way to lay out the SIP,” Doug said. “Actually, most of it will be wireless, with main hubs near large cities. It’s sort of like when you go to an airport, and they have wireless access, but you have to login to actually use the Internet. What I need from you, though, is your database expertise and your ability to track users throughout various websites and, in effect, the entire World Wide Web.”

“You’re going to track all of these users?” Matt said. “Isn’t that illegal?”

“It is right now, but it won’t be,” Doug said. “This isn’t complex tracking, at least to start out with. It will be, more or less, finding out the number of users visiting sites, the time spent on the site, that sort of thing. We won’t be examining individual times; we’ll be looking at grouping these users based on where they are from and what service provider they are using. It’s similar to what search engines do by tracking how often people hit certain pages. That’s what moves sites up in the listings, more than anything.”

Matt had a stupefied look on his face, even though he understood everything Doug was telling him. Matt didn’t necessarily think this was a bad idea, but he wondered just how this would help the Internet in general. Having a unified, central service would be good if there wasn’t a chance of the system ever being down. But if there was a problem, would that mean everyone in America would not be able to access the Web? The tracking mechanism also seemed somewhat fishy, although it didn’t seem as if it would be too difficult to construct, especially with everyone in the same system.

“Matt, I know I’ve left out plenty of specifics,” Doug said. “But I had to start somewhere. The basic concepts have been laid down, and now, it’s just a matter of putting the pieces together. Our contact from Washington will be in Wednesday, so I’d like you to come back and sit in on the meeting.”

“Does he know that we could be involved?” Matt said.

“He is aware that The Developers are Foundation’s first choice to code-solve some of the work here,” Doug said. “He has looked over some of your work, and he is impressed with it.”

“Well, that is a good sign. I’m always looking for the best thing for our company. If a partnership with you and the government could pay off big for The Developers, then I am all for it. I’m sure the guys and girls back at the office would agree.”

“I guarantee you two things,” Doug said. “First of all, your employees will agree with you because they will see how big this project can be, and will be. You have hired smart people with great work ethic. Secondly, and most importantly, there’s no doubt in my mind that this will pay off big time for both of our companies.”

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Although keeping the lights off could have been an option, Katy thought it was in the best interest of everyone involved that the lights should be left on. Not only was it difficult to hold a meeting in a pitch-black room, but it was possible the electricity could generate at least a little bit of extra warmth.

None of the rooms on the second floor had names like the first-floor LAB and WAB. In fact, there were just five total rooms on the second floor. The meeting room, as Katy and the others called it, was obviously the most spacious, and it was slightly larger than the WAB. Of course, four of the rooms upstairs were once used as bedrooms, while the fifth was, and still is, a bathroom. The other rooms were most likely empty, although for all Katy knew, they could have been used to store Butch’s used cheese puff canisters.

“Ladies and ... ladies. As president, I will lead us, just as we do in every meeting, by reciting our mission statement.”

*“We pledge to uphold the law, as citizens of this great nation and of Malorett, Michigan, to be true to form, display our best efforts and continue to proclaim our keen fashion sense as members of the Black Miniskirt Cult.”*

“Let us now take roll call. Of course, I, Butch Hodges, president and club founder, am here. Now, please say ‘aye’ if I call your name.”

“Sarina Metcalfe?”

“Aye.”

“Patty Benningfield?”

“Aye.”

“Katy Terrill?”

“Aye.”

“Ginger Winfield?”

No response.

“Ginger Winfield, are you here?”

“Butch, it’s pretty obvious Ginger is not here,” Katy said. “There are only five of us in the room.”

“Good point, Katy. Let’s move on. Last but not least, Ethel McMahan?”

“Aye, sonny.”

“Glad you could make it tonight, Ethel,” Butch said. “I couldn’t remember if this conflicted with bingo.”

“It did, but that’s OK,” Ethel said. “I let Jimmy Dickson take my troll with him, so maybe I’ll get a few bucks off pull tabs or something.”

If only the guy Developers knew about these meetings, they would probably be standing outside, looking through the window with the binoculars. At least, they could look at Sarina, Katy and Patty, who all had gorgeous legs, thighs and butts, especially when nestled inside a black miniskirt. Ethel, well, any lady who would still want to put herself in a miniskirt at age 104 has to be given some credit.

It was generally a tossup as to which was more perplexing: Ethel, the walker and the miniskirt, or Butch, the smiley face T-shirt and the miniskirt. What was even more dumbfounding was that Butch never seemed to show any regret whatsoever that he was showing off his legs, shaved at that. At first, Katy and Sarina suspected he was just in it to see the girls in their skirts. But after five months, they never caught him looking at their legs. He simply liked dressing in women’s clothing.

“OK girls, let’s get down to business,” Butch said. “We are looking at potentially doing some activities in the upcoming months. One idea was a bake sale. Another was Katy and Sarina performing a striptease out on the street.”

“Who suggested that?” Katy demanded.

“It was me,” Ethel said. “I would do it, but by the time I took all my clothes off, everyone would have gone home.”

“Anyway, these are the ideas on the table,” Butch said. “Well, if we had a table, they would be on the table. So what should we do?”

“Hold on a second,” Katy said. “Let’s be realistic here. We are basically an underground club. How can we have a bake sale? How can we do any of

these things? We would blow our cover!”

The others thought about this for a second and nodded in agreement.

“Maybe we need to rethink our policies or something,” Sarina said. “Or maybe we could change our name.”

“No way!” Butch said. “This is the Black Miniskirt Cult! We cannot change our name!”

“Well then we might as well cast ourselves off into oblivion,” Ethel said. “Butch, we all know you and I can’t wear these things in public.”

“Yeah, I’ve tried WAY too many times,” Butch whispered.

“But maybe we can keep the name and not wear it all the time,” Ethel continued. “Plus, we have a few girls who can wear these garments.”

Ethel pointed to the other three girls in the room.

“Another problem is the weather,” Patty said. “When it’s 20 below, and we have to come to the meetings here in this room, with little heat. I think maybe we should change the format somewhat.”

“Not only that, but we have just six members!” Katy said. “Maybe if we could get a few more folks to join, we could do some of these other things.”

“Excellent point, Katy,” Ethel said. “Does anyone know a person or two who could join?”

“What about Drew’s wife, Jessica?” Sarina asked.

“What about all the guys?” Butch asked.

“No way, we can’t get those guys involved,” Katy said. “They would never be able to live by the mission statement. But Jessica might be a possibility. Maybe we can ask her at the ski trip tomorrow.”

“Good idea,” Sarina said. “I could ask Rex if he wants to join.”

“Who is Rex?” Ethel said.

“He’s just a guy I met, and he sort of resembles Richard Simmons,” Sarina said.

“OH MY GOODNESS,” Ethel said. “Let’s get him in here! I just love those *Sweatin’ to the Oldies* tapes! They get my heart a-pumping!”

“There are a few girls at the bank I could ask,” Patty said. “I didn’t know we were opening up enrollment.”

“Yes, the only way we will survive is with at least a few more members,” Butch said. “Once they get in here, maybe we can decide on what avenues we

need to take to make the cult thrive like it once did.”

“I hate to break the news to you Butch, but the cult has never thrived,” Katy said. “I mean, you just started it a few months ago.”

“Good point,” Butch said. “All right girls, then it is settled. We’ll try to find some new recruits and get them in the cult. Now all we need to determine is some sort of initiation into the club. We can’t make it that easy for them.”

“I’ll come up with something really good,” Ethel said.

“OK, meeting is adjourned,” Butch said. “Let’s go out and find some new members! And Katy and Sarina, if you are still willing to do that striptease, just let me know.”

Butch smiled, grabbed a half-full canister of cheese puffs from the floor and bolted toward the door. Before he left, though, he gave his miniskirt a swift tug on the bottom, because it was riding up on him again.

