

A knock came from his apartment door. Brian got to his feet, leaving his computer screen unattended for a moment, and went to answer it. A Federal Express deliveryman was on the outside with a letter package for him. Brian signed and thanked the man. His first glance was at the return address. It was from a law firm in the city, a high priced one at that. Brian could not have afforded their services no matter how many operating systems he fixed.

He opened the package and dumped the contents onto his table. A disk made for a zip drive fell out, along with an envelope. Brian's first instinct was to try out the disk, but his curiosity about the sender became paramount. He opened the envelope and pulled out a letter. It read:

*Brian,*

*You may not remember me, but we went to college together. I always thought that you were a nice boy and you were very smart when it came to computers and stuff like that. If you are reading this, then it means that I am probably dead. I had this disk stored and kept at the law firm's office because it contains valuable information and I am not sure who I can trust with it. My husband would not know what to do, and my parents have been trying to put this behind them for years. You once told me that your grandfather worked for the FBI a long time ago. If anyone can figure out what to do, it's you. Please, I don't know who else to turn to.*

Brian read the signature aloud: "Kate Strickland." He mulled it over for a few moments before a thought hit him. "Oh yeah," he said to his empty apartment. "She's the one who never could get the hang of reformatting her hard drive, and she was always opening junk e-mails and downloading viruses." He chuckled to himself. "Her computer would have been a pile of burned wire if it hadn't been for me."

Brian recalled his chance meeting with her a few years ago when he passed through the campus quad. Kate had been sitting on a bench outside the library with a friend. He heard the words "slow computer" and "annoying pop-up ads" and politely interjected himself into the conversation. He offered his services as a Computer Science major to the troubled damsel. She, just as politely, turned down his offer. Her eyes told the world that this dark-haired computer fanatic scared Kate a little. Brian noticed this as well and put his offer out again, this time being sure not come on so forcefully.

After explaining it in economic terms, he told her that having the computer fixed by a professional would cost more than she could afford, Kate agreed to let him help. After that, she was never alone with him in her apartment. One of her friends was always there to discourage any thoughts that Brian might have. Brian hoped she didn't think of him as a violent person, but she had probably heard enough stories about these types of situations to be cautious.

Actually, Brian didn't mind her suspicions. He thought it humorous that someone would think he was a potential closet rapist or murderer. Brian was scrawny when compared with track stars or football players. He could never beat anyone in an arm-wrestling match, not even his cousin and she was six years younger than him. Brian was not a person to be feared.

He fixed her computer with no problem and he left. Brian had not thought that he would ever hear from Kate again, so it came as a shock when she found him at the campus cafeteria. This time she wanted to upgrade her computer and needed his help to do it. Brian was more than happy to help. They remained friends for some time, until they graduated and moved on in life. Brian had not spoken to her since graduation day...

*...and now she is dead*, he thought. For whatever reason, Kate had chosen to keep up on his whereabouts.

Brian took a moment to silently say a prayer for her, and then turned his attention to the disk that had come with the package. He turned it over in his hands a few times. Instinct told him to be cautious about programs that came through the mail. They could have all kinds of viruses and trojans. He loaded the disk into his drive. His system ran a check of the disk before it loaded the information. No viruses found.

He accessed the disk icon. Several folders were on this disk, all with some kind of special code-name. One file was named "Loan" and another had a lot of word documents under the heading "Sightings." He opened the "Sightings" file. It seemed to be a journal that Kate had updated frequently about someone she kept seeing. This person had no description about him, except that he was male, and it seemed that he was following her. Kate wrote about her ways to escape him and the few times that she had confronted him.

One event had taken place at a gala event. It stood out in all these entries because Kate's husband, Alex, had also been involved. Alex had found Kate and this man having an argument, but he had not heard anything. Kate had been shaken by the experience. She did not want her husband to know anything about what the argument had really been about.

Brian left the journal and went over to the "Loan" file. Inside were dozens of spreadsheets and financial documents that seemed to cover just about every business that a person could open. Lines were marked "loaned out" and "paid back." Some files had all the lines marked in a red font with the words "Loan cancelled" at the top. Names that Brian didn't know were on each document. Beneath them, lists of what could only be collateral for the loan were written out. Brian was shocked that some of these lists included people's names.

Brian closed the folders for a moment. "What in the..." He couldn't finish his thought. "What has Kate gotten me in to?" He ran a hand over his brow, which had been coated with sweat after reading through the financial documents. "Why me?" he said.

Brian went over what he knew now: she had a husband and her parents were still alive. Why not send this stuff to them? Why involve someone you hadn't seen since college? Kate had said in her note that she couldn't trust her husband, this Alex, and her parents would probably bury the information. So all that was left was a long lost friend from years ago?

*Kate must have been desperate*, he thought.

Brian went back to the files on the disk. He scrolled through some more and came to one marked "Boss." It intrigued him and he clicked on the folder. It did not open, but

instead asked him for a password. Brian sighed. “How did I know something like this would happen?” He looked at the password prompt for a moment. There was nothing that Brian could think of that could be a possible guess for him. It had been too long since he had seen Kate.

He was about to exit the screen when he noticed a box on the lower right corner. It had a small question mark. “Duh,” he said to himself. “The security question. At least it is something I can go on.” He clicked on the little box. A second window appeared with the words “The Red Curtains.” This was no help to Brian. He knew nothing about any red curtains and he had no way to find out what this could mean.

Brian sifted through the rest of the files, hoping that there might be some kind of clue or reference that might give him some idea where to find the information he needed to get into the locked file. The rest of the folders seemed to be just random thoughts and ideas about various subjects. Art openings, places that she would like to visit and other things like that, but nothing that seemed of any significance when stacked up beside the financial documents and the “Boss” file. There was one folder that had family photos when Kate was a young girl. He scrolled through these photos. Brian made a mental note to print these out and send them to her parents, wherever they were.

He was about to close out this folder, but he was stopped by a single photo. It showed a large room with couches and plush chairs arranged around it and bookshelves in the background. He looked at the timestamp of the photo. It was only four months ago that this photo had been taken. *Must have been at her husband’s house*, he thought. What made him stop was the drapes in the background.

They were red.

Brian went back to the password question, “The Red Curtains,” and he focused on this photo. It was all he had to go on, the only mention of red curtains on the entire disk. He closed out the disk and logged onto the Internet. He accessed a news service and looked up Kate’s obituary. It took some time since he was using her maiden name and not her married name, but he managed to find an article about her that had her home address with it. It was listed in small print as the place to send condolences. Brian jotted it down and stuffed it in his pocket.

He called his workplace and told them he would be taking a leave of absence for a while. They did not ask many questions, thankfully, because Brian didn’t have many answers to give. He packed a quick bag and was soon ready to leave. He put the disk and his zip drive into a separate bag to keep them safe from harm.

Brian locked his apartment door behind him, thinking to himself that he was in way over his head.