



Bob Stone is a young marketing professional until he is recruited into a startup dot.com by the lure of quick wealth. All is well until he suspects that things are not what they seem. Will he and the business survive or crash.

Web of Deceit

By Frank St. Onge

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OF
DECEIT

FRANK ST. ONGE

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Chapter 1

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It was a brisk May morning as Bob Stone made his way toward the office. It was one of those midspring mornings in Massachusetts that made you think you were still experiencing winter. One would think having grown up here would prepare him for this weather, but by nature, New Englanders are optimistic. They think that spring will come in April, the Sox will win the World Series, and that they'll have a white Christmas.

Bob was driving east on Route 128 North, one of the unique aspects about driving in New England, heading toward his office in Revere. Bob thought it was comical that each day he drove along the "Technology Highway" heading toward his job at an old-world business. Not that he had problems with technology, because he didn't. However, Bob liked marketing and advertising and really enjoyed selling a tangible item. His company, Boston Veggies, was a local frozen-foods manufacturer. Their food products were sold mostly to small and midsized grocers, and many of the products sold were private labeled for the supermarkets. At thirty years old, he was the director of marketing, pulling in six bills a year. He loved his job, his car (a '92 Honda Accord), and his family. His wife, Melissa, was an ex-BC cheerleader and had graduated one year ahead of him. He still believed she was beautiful enough to be a cheerleader, even after birthing their two daughters—Jennifer, age five, and Margaret, age two.

Both Melissa and Bob grew up near Boston. She grew up in Newton. Bob grew up in Reading, which was where they currently lived. Their house was a cozy starter home with three bedrooms and two and a half bathrooms, but it was sufficient for the young family. Melissa worked as an executive secretary until their first child, Jennifer, was born. They were figuring that once Margaret went to school, Melissa would start to work again. Bob figured that if he

could continue to grow his income and do some aggressive investing, they might be able to move to a larger home within the next couple of years. Thanks to the sudden emergence of Internet businesses, Bob's investment portfolio was looking good. The information superhighway was giving way to the e-business generation and spreading wealth everywhere. His job might not have been part of the revolution, but he was happy to reap some of the benefits of the boom.

For Bob, he was happy developing magazine ads with slogans like "Nature's Best frozen peas are better than homegrown." He was creating ads to promote their brand with consumers while developing promotions to entice grocers to buy Boston Veggies' brand over their competitors. Bob's boss and the business's owner, Frank Mangione, an Old-World northern Italian, was a great guy to have as a boss. He had seen something in Bob eight years before when no one else had, and Bob wanted nothing more than to see Frank's business continue to grow and thrive. And their business was very healthy.

As he squinted to see the traffic through the blinding sunshine, Bob was in a particularly good mood. It was Friday, it was May, and he had plans for a great weekend. Melissa's sister Jodi and her two children were coming over for a day, and he and the kids were going to his parents' house for dinner on Sunday. He had a couple of meetings this morning with the sales force, a lunch with his boss, and a planned early exit home.

Boston Veggies' sales, warehousing, and offices were all housed in the same low-profile brick building just off Route 1A, a few miles north of Boston. The building extended a half block and had tractor trailers permanently spread across the parking lot. Bob parked in his assigned space, grabbed his briefcase (the old-fashioned hard case with no computer), and headed into the small office area. It was only seven thirty, so the receptionist wasn't in yet. Frank believed in personal attention, so all of his staff had secretaries, and they still had a manned receptionist area. Bob's secretary, Dorothy, was your typical spinster professional. Never married, midforties, and tremendously thoughtful and efficient, she made Bob's life organized at work and even helped him to balance work with his family.

One benefit of the '90s was the advent of casual dress. They had been business casual for three years now, and Bob even enjoyed dress-down day on Friday. It was great being able to wear jeans and a golf shirt to work. But Dorothy was a throwback and greeted Bob in his office promptly at eight o'clock, decked out in a knee-length green dress, with her hair perfectly coiffed in a bun. Dorothy was not a looker. She was tall, angular shaped, and big boned, but not fat. Her smile looked more like a frown, but she wasn't paid to smile.

Dorothy placed Bob's coffee down on his desk and sat attentively in the chair directly across from him. His office was nothing special, about ten feet by twelve feet, and he kept his desk so cluttered you couldn't tell if it was made of oak or cardboard. (For the record, it was metal.) Bob's computer hung unnaturally at the edge of the desk, and his keyboard was on top of the desk, which had been in service for about twenty years longer than desktop computers.

"So what's up for today?" Bob asked while sipping his hot, acrid coffee.

"You're meeting with the Northeast sales team at nine and the Southeast team at eleven. You have lunch with Frank at the new deli down the street at twelve thirty. And you need to leave here at four to get home by five," Dorothy rattled off Bob's day as if she had been rehearsing for hours.

"Great. Anything on e-mail that requires my immediate attention?"

"Just a couple, but they're all routine. I've printed them out for you to read. Just jot out your answers, and I'll send them."

Dorothy made Bob's life so simple that he could be efficient on e-mails without ever turning on his computer.

Bob was sifting through yesterday's snail mail when his phone rang. He waited to let Dorothy answer it. Seconds later, Dorothy was on the intercom to his office.

"There is a Mr. Banks on the line. He says he's an old friend from college."

"Thanks. I'll take it," Bob responded. Joe Banks was one of his frat brothers at Boston College. Joe had been a great jokester at

school, but he was also short, overweight, and without much luck with women. Since college, he had been working for a career placement firm in Boston. At a recent party, Joe mentioned that start-up companies were paying him big bucks to find professionals to fill job openings. The two men kept in touch and usually got together about once a month, but this was the first time he had ever called Bob at his office.

“Bob Stone,” he answered, mustering up a professional-sounding voice. He had once made the mistake of answering the phone thinking it was his wife, only to find a customer on the other end. He no longer took such chances.

“Bob, it’s Joe. How’re things goin’, man?” Joe sounded bubbly.

“Fine, fine. Couldn’t be better,” Bob answered truthfully.

“Great to hear it.” Joe suddenly sounded less enthusiastic. “Actually, I’ve got quite an opportunity sitting in front of me, and you’re the perfect guy for it, pal. Interested?”

“Not a chance. I’ve got a great job here. I’m not interested,” Bob responded quickly and decisively. Bob couldn’t have been happier with his current employer or life, and he wanted nothing to interfere with it.

Joe, however, would not be letting Bob off the hook so easily.

“I’m telling you, bro, this is an opportunity of a lifetime. And the guy even asked specifically that I talk to you about this job.”

“How would this guy even know about me?” Bob asked, becoming suspicious.

“Remember the piece that *Boston* magazine did on you and your company last year? Well, my client read it and was impressed. He asked me about you. Of course, I had to tell him that you were a no-talent lug. But he still wants to talk to you,” Joe said with a laugh.

Bob could almost see his friend’s big, wide grin as Joe made the comment.

When Bob was at Boston College, he had been the star of his frat’s basketball and softball teams. Joe was an overweight guy with an eating problem. He also liked to tip the bottle a bit. Joe marveled at his friend’s athletic prowess and lived vicariously through Bob. Joe was also bowled over by Bob’s ability to bed the coeds. There

was a particularly attractive blonde in Joe's accounting class that he was afraid to approach. He told Bob about her and challenged him to ask her out. Bob did ask her out, spent the night with her, and even brought Joe a souvenir of the evening. The red lace panties made Bob an instant icon to Joe. To this day, Joe told that story at every party. Melissa didn't enjoy it but had heard it enough times so that she became numb to it.

"Joe. I have a great job, and I'm not looking to make any changes."

"You could at least let me explain the job," Joe pleaded urgently and then waited for a response. Bob knew Joe wouldn't take no for an answer. So, after a short pause, Joe continued, "Okay. It's a VP of marketing job for an Internet start-up company. It doesn't have a name yet, but it has lots of seed money. The guy running the company came from CIG, a venture capital firm in New York. His name is Steve Manto. He was a real stud for that company and knows how to put on deals. He'll pay big bucks and give you a piece of the action, and you'll be a star, because he's going to make the company a success. Their product is to provide home-cooked dinners over the Internet to people wanting gourmet meals but too busy to cook them. He already has a famous chef—Jacques Binet. I mean, how can you go wrong with a French chef? I'm telling you, this is the real deal. And it means a lot of money to both of us. Just promise me you'll talk to him."

Bob had to admit that Joe touched his ego a little bit with the idea that this Manto guy requested him. And maybe talking wouldn't hurt. Still, Bob really didn't need this.

"Joe, when would he want to meet?" Bob asked, trying to sound disinterested.

"Tonight. You could meet him after work."

"Tonight? I can't do it tonight. We have dress-down day on Friday, and I'm wearing jeans and a golf shirt. And besides, I have plans."

"No prob, bro. I'm sure he won't care how you're dressed."

“I don’t want to insult the man by wearing blue jeans. I might consider a brief meeting with him, but not today,” Bob answered firmly. But his curiosity started to win him over to Joe’s side.

“How ’bout this? I’ll call him and explain your situation. If he still wants to meet today, I’ll call you back.”

“Sure. Fine. Whatever.” At that point, Bob would have said anything to end this call. His simple day was getting complicated.

Less than five minutes later, Joe called back. When Dorothy buzzed in to announce the second call, Bob could detect a slight bit of confusion in her voice. After all, she had been his secretary for three years, and Joe had never called. Now he called twice in ten minutes. If she had known what Joe did for a living, she really would have been suspicious.

After a few minutes negotiating, Bob agreed to meet Steve Manto at his Burlington office at five o’clock. This was certainly going to affect his family plans for the evening, but if he could get out in an hour, the disruption would not be a big problem.

The morning passed uneventfully. Once Bob’s meetings started, his mind focused in on the current business issues. He really didn’t give the interview any thought again until he got back from lunch. As much as he didn’t want to consider the possibilities, his mind kept wandering as to how things could work out. But he couldn’t imagine himself working in the world of the bits and bites, even if the product was tangible.

Bob also kept wondering why this guy who didn’t know him could be so interested in him. He also wondered how this Manto guy managed to find the perfect headhunter to find him. It seemed like an awfully big coincidence. But, hey, Bob thought he was pretty good, and who was to say that others didn’t think the same thing?

Promptly at four o’clock, Bob left the office, just as he had planned. Certainly, his plan for an early exit looked fortuitous now. Bob had planned to surprise Melissa and the girls by getting home early, having worked late several Fridays in a row. But at least they

wouldn't be expecting him for a few hours. With a little luck, he could talk to Manto and get home at about his normal arrival time.

The drive was the usual snarl on Route 128. At least the days were long this time of year. Some days, you got the sun glare coming and going. Today, the ride home was bright, but the sun was high enough in the sky to be tolerable. The other drivers, on the other hand, were doing their best to make contact with Bob. He dodged in and out of the left lanes, trying to keep his pride-and-joy car safe from the Massachusetts drivers he knew all too well.

Bob had a rough idea of where he was going, but not exactly. He took the exit before the Burlington Mall and drove for about a mile before taking a right into a new office park. At the far end of the complex was the largest building and his destination. The parking lot had been paved within the past few days, and the landscaping must have been hours old. There was wetness from the sprinklers on the new grass that had been rolled in rather than blown on. Bob could smell the fresh scent of pine mulch and see the seams in the sections of grass. The building was made up of red brick and glass and stood seven stories tall.

Bob parked his car in one of the thousand or so empty spaces. In fact, there was only one car in the parking lot. It was a Mercedes E300 turbodiesel, and it looked brand-new. He figured that had to be Manto's car. He walked through the main entrance and felt entirely alone. The lobby was bright and massive and empty. Each step he made with his cheap, discount-store shoes echoed on the marble-tiled floor. The echo from his steps made him self-conscious and prompted him to tiptoe to the desk in the center of the open lobby. In the midst of the counter for the receptionist's desk sat a piece of paper taped to it. The note simply read, "Meet me on the seventh floor. Turn left off the elevator, second door on the right." The note wasn't addressed or signed, but Bob assumed it was meant for him.

Bob followed the instructions and walked into an office that put all other offices he had ever seen to shame. It must have been twenty-five feet long and twenty feet wide. Windows ran the length of the far wall. The desk and accompanying furniture were dark wood—cherry, perhaps. There was a sofa and two very soft and comfortable-

looking chairs around a coffee table. There was even an area that looked like a bar setup, complete with a small refrigerator and a cabinet filled with glasses.

Bob was just absorbing his surroundings when he heard someone coming. He turned just as a tall, impressive-looking man came through the office door with his hand outstretched and a broad smile across his face. Bob noted that the man's longish blond hair made him look to be in his twenties, even though Bob knew the man had to be older than he.

"Hi. I'm Steve Manto, and you must be Bob Stone. Great to meet you," Steve's voice projected like that of a TV anchorman. His blue eyes were deep, friendly, but at the same time penetrating. The man had Bob immediately sucked into his aura.

"Ah, yes. Ah, nice to meet you too," Bob coughed out, suddenly feeling in over his head. He chastised himself for feeling intimidated. After all, he wasn't looking for a job.

"I guess this whole thing comes as a bit of a shock today. I told Joe that I needed to act fast, so I'm glad you were able to fit me in," Steve said while motioning for Bob to sit at the sofa. He sat on one of the chairs facing Bob. Steve was modestly dressed with khaki slacks and a white golf shirt that had Apple Tree Country Club stitched onto it. Apple Tree was one of the most posh clubs north of Boston.

"So what do you think of the office here?" Steve asked, seemingly knowing the answer from Bob's look of awe.

"This is quite a place," Bob answered while looking around.

"This probably doesn't compare to your current digs, but do you think you could imagine yourself working in such an office?"

"It's a little rich for my tastes. I'm a rather simple guy," Bob said. He could feel himself sweating through his clothes. As nice as the surroundings were and despite Steve's casual manner, Bob felt uncomfortable and intimidated.

"I don't know about that. I've done some checking. You've been very successful with your present employer. And according to Joe, he says you've always been a go-getter. Something tells me that you've always thought of yourself as being successful and of someday being on top," Steve spoke and then smiled, further putting Bob on edge.

“I guess I do have those thoughts, but I’m not in a rush to get there. After all, I’m only thirty years old.”

“Age has nothing to do with being driven to success. How old do you think I am?” Steve asked.

Bob gave him the once-over and then answered, “Thirty-two?”

“That’s not a bad guess, but I’m thirty-six. Just five years ago, I was sitting right where you are now. One of the senior partners from CIG approached me just the way I am approaching you right now. He had run across me doing the office grunt work on projects. Within two years, I was leading big-business takeovers and investments, making a half mil a year, and with an office that makes this room look like a broom closet.”

“Wow,” was the full extent of Bob’s response. He was trying to stay focused. He didn’t need this job and was determined to get home on time for his planned weekend.

“Maybe you’d like to know a little about this company I’m starting?” Steve asked.

“Sure,” Bob answered, wondering why Manto wasn’t asking him any of the normal interview questions.

“As you know, the e-commerce business space is the hottest thing in the marketplace today. The dream of an information superhighway has given way to capitalism. I’ve already been involved with several successful IPOs, and those companies are worth billions of dollars right now. All you need is a good plan and a compelling service to get investors interested. They’re looking for creativity and a potential market that is addressable and winnable. Take Amazon.com. They had a plan to be the world’s foremost Internet bookstore. They’ve created a brand, and they’ve captured an audience. They’re the market leader in the field, and the investors have flocked to it like vultures on a carcass.

“Just imagine—a few initial investors, a good marketing plan, good execution for a year to prove that the idea has merit, and then a payday that’s unimaginable. On top of that, the financing gives us the money you could only dream about at Boston Veggies. Just think about it. As a marketing professional, what do you think you could

do to build brand awareness and a large customer base with unlimited financial resources?” Steve asked.

Bob had been mesmerized by Steve’s rendition of the Internet but suddenly realized it was his turn to speak.

“This sounds exciting, but, I’m not an Internet guru. And I’ve always dealt in tangible products,” he inadequately tried to explain. Bob was acutely aware of how poorly he was doing at selling himself to Manto, not that he was trying.

“But you don’t need to be an Internet guru. We have someone for that. What we need is a plan to grow our business model: delivering homemade gourmet dinners to the many families across the country that have the financial means to eat well but not the time to prepare or the energy to eat out. It’s a market ripe for picking. Think about it. You and your wife both work. You realize you’re going to work late tonight. You’re stuck. But maybe you can log on to our site and get something delivered on time. You don’t mind heating it up. You just don’t want to go to the market and then still have to cook. We sign these people up as members so they don’t have to download personal information each time. They make a few clicks, and they’re done. Food will be there,” Steve finished with a flourish, throwing his arms outward to illustrate his point. His deep stare seemed aimed at both enticing and possibly scaring Bob.

Bob was momentarily flustered again. The approach made sense, but it also didn’t.

“How could you deliver food across the country in a matter of hours? Wouldn’t you need to have warehouses set up in every major area?” Bob asked.

“Great question. We would have to start off slow, maybe even work in only one market for home delivery or limit it to several large metropolitan areas. That decision would be your job to determine along with our logistics and IT staff. We could still deliver food across the country in other zones to arrive in a few days. It would be just like Omaha Steaks, only on a larger scale. I’m sure with the million dollars we secured for the first-year marketing plan, you could get us some good exposure. If you want a challenge and all the

rewards that come with it, this is the job for you. What do you think?"

Bob was becoming intrigued, but he needed to slow things down.

"It's all rather overwhelming, I'm afraid. I mean, I like what I'm hearing, but I do have a great job and a secure future. I've never actually considered changing companies," Bob said, seemingly turning down an offer that hadn't been made.

"But do you think you would be interested?" Steve asked.

"Are you offering me the job? I mean, you hardly know me."

"I know everything I need to know about you," Steve said, never wavering in his stare down of Bob.

Bob was really sweating now, despite a cool breeze from the air conditioning. He needed to buy himself some time.

"Before I could even consider making a change, I would need to discuss this with my wife," he said dutifully.

"Sure. I understand. Well, let me tell you what I'm offering you for this position. First of all, I could only pay you \$150,000 salary the first year. You would be given a twenty-five-thousand-share option in the company at a face value of \$10. I'm projecting that we'll sell about two million shares at \$20 per share next May. That would make your share worth a quarter mil, and the price could easily quadruple, making you an instant millionaire. Not bad after one year of work, is it?" Steve asked with a wide grin and a penetrating stare.

Bob didn't say a word. He just nodded slightly. His mind was blown. He was no expert on IPOs or most of what Manto was telling him, but this seemed all too good to be true. But he also knew the value of money, and he was having a problem dismissing Steve's offer.

"I can see that you need some time with your family. Why don't you talk to your wife, and both of you join my wife, Joan, and me for dinner at my club tomorrow night?"

Suddenly, Bob's weekend plans were going up in smoke. How could he not at least let this man entertain him? For a million dollars, he could suffer through a formal dinner at a posh golf club. Still, he didn't want to move too fast.

“I do have plans for tomorrow night, but I’ll see what I can do.”

“Great. Then I’ll see you tomorrow?”

Bob nodded, shook Steve’s hand, and got up to leave. Before Steve let go of Bob’s hand, he blew Bob’s mind one more time.

“By the way, would you like to see my office before you leave?”

“I thought this was your office.” Bob said.

“No. I need more space. I thought it would be neat to chat with you in your office.” Manto’s smile was broad and knowing. Bob took another look around the office and tried to imagine working in this place every day. He was beginning to fall under the spell of this charismatic man and the snake oil he was selling.

Chapter 2

Bob's mind spun as he made the short drive home. He was now an hour later than his usual Friday arrival, and he had so badly wanted to get home early. Not only was he late, but now he had to explain to his wife why the weekend plans needed to be changed. Melissa spent a lot of time planning family functions, and she took these events very seriously. Her own family was very close, geographically and spiritually, and she thrived in a nurturing environment. And despite her family's wealth, she enjoyed living in a modest home in a middle-class suburb of Boston. Bob's experience growing up in a close family that lived on the edge of middle class made him long for earning enough money so he might make it easier for his kids. Bob remembered how tough it was at times for his parents, especially in paying for his college education, and he wanted to be a better provider for his daughters. This opportunity had the potential to make things easier. But he had also seen many others leave Boston Veggies for greener pastures, only to end up unemployed or groveling to come back. He never wanted to be in that position. Would this new company be around for the long haul? Or could he make enough money to make it worthwhile even if it did?

Bob pulled into his driveway, happy to finally be home. His house was located in a nice, established neighborhood, which was to say that the houses and the neighbors were old. Most of his neighbors were blue collar with grown children, and many had lived in the neighborhood at least twenty years. For Bob and Melissa, it was like having ten sets of grandparents. The neighbors doted on Bob and his family, helped them, and seemed to live vicariously through them, as if they were reliving their early years. For them, Bob and Melissa were rock stars, making it big at such an early age.

The house could have used a new paint job, but it was otherwise neat and clean. Melissa had made up for it by lining the front of the house with fragrant, colorful flowers and deep-green bushes. The lawn was plush, green, and in need of a mowing, a job Bob enjoyed

and planned to undertake in the morning. The yard itself wasn't huge—the same as the house—but it served its purpose for a young, small family.

Bob gently pulled the car into the driveway, careful to avoid Jennifer riding her bike. He parked the car at the end of the driveway to give her plenty of space. She looked to be dressed for winter, with mittens, hat, and a heavy pink jacket. He could barely make out her smiling face and a few strands of her long brown hair beneath the white ski cap. He jumped out of the car and bent down for a kiss.

“How are you doing, darling?” Bob asked.

“Fine, Daddy. I'm riding my bike, and we're having pizza for dinner tonight!” Jennifer shouted out excitedly, showing her perfect mouth full of white teeth.

“Great. How was school today?” Bob asked, referring to the day care center Melissa took Jennifer to three days a week so she could interact with other kids her age.

“It was fun. I drew you a picture. It's on the fridge.”

“Are you warm enough?” Bob asked with a smile. He didn't think the weather warranted the heavy attire. She smiled, stuck out her tongue, and pedaled away. He wanted to ask her more questions about her day, but she was already heading to the other end of the driveway. He decided to let her continue unfettered.

Melissa was feeding Maggie in her high chair as Bob stepped into the house. The pizza box was sitting unopened on the kitchen counter. Melissa was dressed in a black turtleneck and gray slacks. She wore her slacks high with a belt, helping to accentuate her thin waist and strong hips. The black turtleneck accentuated Melissa's pleasant curves. Her perpetually tanned skin, long sandy-brown hair, and bright smile melted Bob every time he saw her. When he was young, he had watched the Ivory soap commercials and their references to women who qualified as Ivory girls. Melissa had that mom-and-apple-pie, all-American, Ivory soap girl appearance.

Despite not currently working, Melissa believed in always looking presentable, and she believed in the family eating together. It was one of the reasons why Bob didn't want to be late for dinner. And since he was, he knew everyone would be eating cold pizza.

Another reason for wanting to get home on time was for her greetings. Melissa believed Bob deserved a nice greeting after spending all day earning a living for her and the kids. When she heard the door close, she turned, smiled, and made her way over to her husband. She put her arms around him and kissed him passionately. The joys of Bob's life were numerous, but this was one of the best benefits.

"So how was your day?" she asked as she made her way back toward Maggie.

"It was interesting," Bob understated. "And how was your day, Maggie?" he asked while bending down to kiss his youngest daughter. Maggie's response was mostly a gurgle.

Bob waited until the end of dinner before broaching the subject of Steve Manto. Maggie was playing in her playpen in the living room, and Jennifer was watching TV. Bob and Melissa finished cleaning up the mess and sat down at the table to finish their coffees.

"I got a call from Joe today in the office," Bob started.

Melissa was stirring her coffee.

"Joe Banks?" she asked, a slight lilt in her voice.

Bob nodded.

"How's he doing?" Melissa asked. Bob knew she had never really cared for Joe. She thought he was always trying too hard to be one of the guys and that he was almost a stalker the way he hounded Bob in college.

"He's fine. But he didn't really pay me a social call. He called because an Internet company is looking for a marketing executive."

"Really? I hope you told him you already had a good job." Melissa said, a slightly perturbed look crossing her face.

"Of course I did. But you know Joe. He can't take no for an answer."

"Are you saying you're considering changing jobs?" she asked as she stood up and dumped pizza ends into the garbage disposal.

"Actually, I already interviewed for the job. Or, more correctly put, I was recruited."

“What are you trying to tell me?” Melissa quickly spun around from the sink. She walked back over and sat at the table, again making intense eye contact with her husband.

Bob spent the next ten minutes explaining his encounter with Steve Manto.

“Before I left, he asked that we join him and his wife for dinner tomorrow,” Bob finished.

“You know we have plans to spend the day with family tomorrow. And Jodi’s coming here in the afternoon.” She didn’t say it angrily, but rather like they couldn’t cope with this overloaded situation.

“I know. I know. I was looking forward to tomorrow too. But how could I say no?” Bob asked pleadingly.

Melissa bit her lip in thought.

“I don’t trust this ‘new economy’ and these fly-by-night companies. I don’t think this is a good thing.”

“I agree. I’m not looking for a new job, but I think it would be rude not to at least hear what he has to say,” Bob answered and then stared his wife down.

She returned Bob’s look but then softened.

“Okay. I’ll call Jodi and have her watch Jennifer and Maggie,” Melissa responded. Jodi was Melissa’s younger sister.

Jodi was divorced with two kids. Tommy was seven years old and Rachel eight. Even though Jodi’s ex was a good father and provided for Jodi and the kids, it still meant that Jodi didn’t get a lot of free time for herself. Occasionally, when her husband took the kids for a weekend, Jodi might go out, but she actually liked spending time with her kids and those of her older sister. As a result, she spent a lot of time with Melissa, and her two kids got along great with Jennifer and Maggie.

Saturday night, Melissa got decked out in a flowery spring dress that hugged her slender body and highlighted her spectacular shape. It was knee length, making it dressy but not overly risqué or modest. Bob donned his charcoal-gray suit, atoning for his attire at the interview. The Apple Tree Country Club was about thirty minutes

north of their house, and it was a place where jeans and sneakers didn't cut it. Even though the weather was warmer than Friday, it was still a bit chilly when Bob and Melissa headed out. As a result, they both donned overcoats.

When they drove up the long driveway to the circular country club entrance, Bob was struck by the majestic look of the old estate serving as the main building. He pulled up to the valet and handed him the keys to his old Honda. The car looked a little out of place among the hundreds of luxury cars around.

Bob caught sight of Steve and a woman standing at the bar. Steve was dressed in a blue blazer, golf shirt, and khaki slacks, but the woman next to him was dressed to the nines. She had her dark hair coiffed in a swirl above her head and wore a full-length, sequined black dress. She appeared to be older than Steve by several years. She had a pouty face and a shapelessly lean body, and she wore enough makeup and eye shadow to sing with KISS. She actually looked like a combination of the Wicked Witch of the West and a character from *The Jetsons*.

Steve spotted Bob and gave him an enthusiastic wave. As Bob and Melissa approached him, Steve addressed them.

“Bob, I'm glad you could make it! And this must be your lovely wife, Melissa. It is great to meet you.” Steve leaned over to shake Bob's hand, and gave Melissa a quick kiss on the cheek. Then he introduced them to his wife, Joan. Joan, not to be outdone by her husband, gave Bob a hearty hug and kiss. She also did the same for Melissa, who seemed a bit uncomfortable with this greeting from strangers.

The room buzzed with fancily dressed people, mostly older couples, all dripping with money. The room was elegantly adorned. The lights from the massive chandeliers were turned down low to create an elegant and intimate setting in an otherwise large ballroom. A band was on stage, playing soft dance music. The melody fit perfectly in the background and helped mask conversations without preventing them.

After a drink and some small talk, the two couples were escorted to their table. Steve made sure there wouldn't be any awkward silence.

"So, Melissa, I hear you have two young daughters."

"Yes. Jennifer and Margaret. They're great girls," Melissa answered quickly. Bob thought she looked nervous and uncomfortable. Of course, that was how he felt during his first encounter with Manto.

"Do you have any pictures, dear?" Joan asked enthusiastically.

As any mother would do, Melissa instantly produced photos. She handed them over and listened as both Joan and Steve fawned over them.

"Do you have any children?" Melissa asked.

"No, just Steve," Joan answered with a devilish smile while squeezing Steve's hand above the table. "Actually, we do have a lovely four-year-old daughter."

As Melissa engaged Joan in small talk about their children, Bob gazed down at the expensive and exotic menu. There were a lot of items on the menu that he couldn't pronounce or understand. As he tried to figure out what to order, conversation stayed light. Along the way, he learned that Joan's family was from old Boston money. She didn't say it, but Bob assumed that their membership in this club had to be spawned from her family, because Steve and Joan had been living in New York until recently, and you needed contacts as well as money to get into this place.

After a hearty dinner of food Bob couldn't identify but tasted okay, talk turned to the job. Steve first broached the subject casually.

"Well, have you had a chance to discuss my offer?"

"We've talked about it, but I can't say that we've reached a decision," Bob responded while glancing over toward Melissa. He thought she was beginning to enjoy the meal and company, but he didn't think she was prepared for such a direct question.

However, Melissa recovered quickly and asked, "Yes, I'm a little concerned. My husband has built himself a nice reputation

where he works now. Do you really think these Internet companies can make it long term?"

Steve smiled, as if anticipating her question.

"The Internet *is* here to stay. Years from now, people will wonder how we survived without it. And brand building will be important in this medium. Your husband has a chance to use his skills to build something remarkable. Market share will be everything in this business sector. The first one into any market has a distinct advantage, and if your husband is as good as I think he is, we'll dominate and build something special."

Joan listened intently to her husband and then reached out and touched Melissa's hand.

"You know, my family would never allow Steve to take on something they weren't willing to invest in. My father has faith in this concept, and he put up some of the seed money. My husband knows his way around a boardroom, and with my family's backing, he'll make it work," Joan explained, her voice soft and reassuring.

"What do you think of this place?" Steve asked Bob, easing some of the tension and diverting everyone's attention from the uncomfortable topic of the job.

"This place is a marvel," Bob answered, gazing around. "I've never been to such an upscale club before."

"Do you play golf?"

"Yes, but you know how it is. You work all week, and it's hard to find time on the weekend. On public courses, it takes six hours to play a round. And I don't want to be away from my daughters that long."

"Well, I didn't tell you this yesterday, but the job includes a membership for you and Melissa here," Steve announced.

"Yes. Melissa, why don't you join me here on Monday? I can show you around. You don't have to play golf to enjoy this place," Joan said and winked.

Melissa stared at Joan, something akin to unease painted on her face.

"I'll tell you what. Joan and I are going to dance. Why don't you two discuss things while we're gone?" Steve suggested and then

grabbed his wife's hand and whisked her away. Bob and Melissa watched them leave. Bob was struck with the thought of how the Mantos ever became a couple. Steve looked like he could charm the pants off any woman he wanted. And while Joan was obviously no slouch, she was not a catch either. On the other hand, she was from wealth, and that may have provided some of the allure.

During their earlier conversation, Bob had learned that Steve and Joan had been married seven years, coinciding with when Steve was approached to join the venture capital group CIG. Their daughter, Anna, was four years old. And it sounded like Joan spent most of her time at the club. They had a nanny and two housekeepers living with them. From the way Joan talked, it did not seem like she had ever held a job in her life, something she was not planning to do in the future.

"Well, what do you think?" Bob asked Melissa.

"I'm torn, Bob. Something tells me you shouldn't take this job. What sounds too good to be true usually is. But it certainly is tempting."

Bob gazed into his wife's eyes, searching for what she was thinking. He wasn't even sure what he was thinking. But his host was wearing down his resistance.

"As much as I love my job, it's hard to say no to this. I think I should take the job. For the next year, anyway, we'll live frugally and put away money. Even if this whole thing turns out badly, we'll be okay. I'm young, and I'll still be young in a year."

Melissa nodded. Bob sensed uneasiness on her face, but she also seemed to be thinking the same way as he was about this rare opportunity. Still, he could tell she was deathly afraid of the potential disruption to their family routine.

In their way of consummating the decision, Bob and Melissa joined hands, and Bob took her up to the dance floor. Swaying to the soft jazz sound, they bumped up against Steve and Joan. Steve leaned over close, and Bob whispered in his ear.

"I'll take the job," he said.

Steve smiled and kissed his wife. Then he shook Bob's hand and kissed Melissa. The odyssey had started.

Chapter 3

On Sunday, Bob and Melissa decided to invite both sets of parents over to help reconcile their decision for Bob to take the job working for Manto. They did not reveal the actual reason for the urgent invite but were persuasive enough to get them to accept.

While waiting for their parents to arrive, Bob was struck by some of the similarities between himself and Melissa and Steve and Joan Manto. For one thing, Bob and Steve were both from modest upbringings, while their wives were from the more financially established families. Based on what Bob had seen of Joan last night, the similarity ended there. Joan seemed to reek of money, and there was a pedigree about her that made him uncomfortable. On the opposite end, Melissa had no pretention about her. Not that Melissa's family was supremely rich, but they had never lived paycheck to paycheck like Bob's. He felt pressure to be a good provider for Melissa and the girls, fearing that he would let her parents down if he failed to secure financial wealth. But that pressure came from within. Melissa's parents had neither placed any expectations on Bob nor had they shown any disappointment in his present job.

Bob's parents were typical middle class, working their whole lives for their children. His older brother Mike had never matured and was currently traveling the country, picking up odd jobs and calling occasionally for money. At thirty-five, it didn't appear that Mike would ever mature and deliver any grandchildren or even obtain financial independence. Because of this, it made them revel in Bob and Melissa's children all the more. Talk about having a lot of babysitters. Between Melissa's two siblings and both sets of parents, Bob and Melissa had not paid for babysitting since Melissa stopped working. Of course, up to now, they hadn't spent any appreciable time away from their children either. They both wanted to experience their daughters growing up and therefore did not go out that often without them.

Melissa baked a ham with all the trimmings while Bob tried to set up the card table and put it at the end of the rectangular dining room table. It made him feel poor to be setting up the auxiliary table like this, but he also knew that both set of parents would not find fault. As he draped the tablecloth over the tables to disguise the appearance, he tried to imagine the reactions they would get to the news about his new job. He figured that his parents would act more like Melissa had, while Melissa's parents would probably be more enthusiastic. Even though they never pushed, Bob figured they would be relieved to see him earning more money with the promise of moving to a more upscale neighborhood in the next few years.

First to arrive were Melissa's parents. They drove up in their Lincoln Continental. It was a stately car, matching the personalities of its owners. John and Marie Stanton presented a good appearance anywhere they went. In their midfifties, they dressed in a casual elegance that came from a concentrated effort to fit into their surroundings. John was tall with fair skin and well-trimmed white hair that had a little brown hue in the corners as a reminder of what color his hair had once been. He looked like a lawyer, but in actuality, he owned a small chain of jewelry stores that had been in the family for sixty years.

Both parents were of English descent, with Marie's family tracing back to the *Mayflower*. Marie had a look of an English teacher. Her auburn hair was short and her build petite. She wore bifocal glasses that always hung low on her nose. She had great taste in clothes and always found something that was appropriate and chic. Melissa had inherited that trait from her mother.

Bob's parents, Bill and Barbara, arrived a few minutes later driving their Buick Century. The car was ten years old and was usually driven by his mother. His father had his own car, a Dodge Intrepid that his construction company had given him for twenty-five years of service last year. But when they traveled together, they preferred the old car.

Bob's father was short and squat. He had patches of gray hair on the sides but just a few strands on the top. His appearance reminded

his friends of Jonathan Winters. He also possessed a similar sense of humor to that of the comedian.

Luckily for Bob, he inherited his looks from his mother. Standing taller than his father by three inches, Barbara stood at five ten. She still had blonde highlights and wore her straight hair shoulder length, long for a woman in her early sixties. She could easily pass for fifty. Over time, Bob's father had become a bit bent over in posture, but his mother continued to walk tall. And although his mother did not look like an English teacher, she had been one for thirty years in Reading. And she was a good teacher, liked by most students. Bob could remember back to his school days and how great it was to have a mother teaching at the school and having his friends tell him how cool she was. He never felt intimidated by her being at the school, but then again, he had been an athlete and was well liked himself.

Wine and beer were served as Melissa and Bob finished preparing the table and the food. Jennifer and Maggie provided entertainment for the adults. Jennifer talked about her newly found success riding a bike, while Maggie mostly bounced around the room excitedly, having four different laps to jump in and out of.

Dinner started with a lot of typical conversation. Despite the disparate life trails, Bob's and Melissa's parents all got along well. And since they saw each other often, there was not a lot of personal news to catch up on, so local politics, sports, and the children formed the basis of conversation. Bob had decided to keep conversation light until after dinner. Once Melissa began removing items from the table, Bob finally broached the subject that triggered the invitation.

"I had an interesting day at work on Friday," he began. "I got a call from Joe Banks."

"The boy we thought had a crush on you?" Bob's mother asked with a snicker.

"That's the one. Well, he's a headhunter in Boston now, and he called to ask me to interview for a job with an Internet start-up company."

“Internet start-up?” Bob’s father asked, his face suddenly exhibiting a lot of worry lines. In fact, everyone had a concerned look, except the girls, who were fighting over a Beanie Baby.

“Yeah. There’s a company just starting out in Burlington. They have a business model to sell home-cooked take-out meals to people over the Internet.”

“But you’re not a computer geek. What do they want with you?” Bob’s father was no fan of the “new economy.” He believed in working with his hands and creating things. He even struggled to understand Bob’s job at Boston Veggies. Even John Stanton, with his old-money business, believed in honest hard work. It was no wonder that he had trouble understanding the Internet too.

“Just because they do business over the Internet doesn’t mean they only hire computer programmers, Dad. They need people to market the product, just like Boston Veggies does.”

“You’re saying that this company is just starting up?” John asked. Bob expected that John would look at things the most analytically.

“Yes. They have financial banking from a venture capital firm in New York that the owner used to work for. They expect to go public in the next year, and they want me to develop their marketing strategy to get investors in and to make the business grow.”

Melissa came back in the room and sat down.

“Bob and I had dinner with his prospective boss and his wife last night at the Apple Tree Country Club.”

“Wow. That’s quite an exclusive place,” John voiced, impressed. “I’ve only been there a couple of times, but they only cater to old money. Start-ups don’t get in there,” he said pointedly.

“Yeah. I think Manto’s wife’s family got them into the club,” Bob surmised.

“I’m confused. You’ve already interviewed for the job?” Barbara asked.

“Yes. I interviewed Friday night, and then Melissa and I had dinner with them last night.”

A bit of chaos broke out at the table as everyone began to talk at once. Bob looked over at Melissa, who shrugged. Unable to stop the

melee, Bob waited until they settled down, and then he attempted to tell the whole story.

For the next hour, Bob was interrogated from all sides by both sets of parents. He couldn't tell if they were testing his thoroughness in understanding the situation or if they just wanted to be sure of all the facts before issuing their opinions. But the questions just kept coming. Finally, after answering the last lingering question, the room fell silent.

"Well, what do you think?" Bob asked, breaking the hush. He studied their faces but couldn't read anything in their expressions. The only thing he could be certain of was that they were shocked.

"It sounds like a challenge and a risk," John spoke up. "I don't really trust these new businesses coming out of the woodwork. I believe in the established companies with tangible assets. In this medium, everything is based on future potential that no one can honestly predict. Still, if you make it work, you'll certainly make a lot of money."

"In fact, since they have funding to pay me now, I figure that I'll make money anyway. And the experience, combined with my age, will do me well if I have to look for another job in a few years," Bob pointed out.

"Of course, you know we'll support you, Son, but I'm with John in worrying about you giving up a secure job with a good company to work for a company with no past and an uncertain future," Bob's father said as he tried to sound more analytical like John. Inside, Bob was sure his father wanted to tell him to wake up and go back to work at Boston Veggies.

After that, each member of the family chimed in. Bob's mother sounded the most supportive, agreeing that he would most likely land on his feet, regardless of how things went. It certainly wasn't a rousing thumbs-up, but there was some level of support for the decision.

Marie summed things up at the end of the evening, "You two are very responsible parents, and I know you'll do everything that's right

for our two lovely grandchildren.” With that, everyone retired to the living room to watch the girls play.

Monday morning arrived, and Bob found himself struggling to get out of bed. Frank Mangione had been more than a terrific boss to him. Frank had been his mentor. He had believed enough in Bob to give him a chance fresh out of college. Bob believed that Frank saw in him the qualities he was looking for in a successor. Bob knew that his leaving would be devastating to Frank as much for personal reasons as for business.

Bob arrived at work at his usual time. When Dorothy came in at eight, he asked her to get a meeting on Frank’s schedule. Frank was not an early morning person. He was the old-school type that did a lot of work through dinner meetings, so his day started and ended late. Bob was thankful that today was no exception. Dorothy returned after a few minutes to tell him that Frank wouldn’t be in until ten, but that he could see him then.

Bob spent most of his waiting time trying to answer e-mail and snail mail. As much as he tried to concentrate on his current job, his mind kept drifting. He was consumed with thoughts about his upcoming encounter with his boss, his timidity toward leaving, and his sudden concern over his future. Doubt continued to creep into his mind. Was it the usual cold feet one felt, or was it truly a bad decision to leave?

Finally at ten, Bob ventured up to see Frank. He walked into his boss’s office, which didn’t compare to his own new office, and closed the door. Frank looked up and grinned the way he always seemed to when he saw Bob. Frank was not a sturdy man. In fact, he was short and frail looking but with a wistful smile that made him look a little like a leprechaun—an Italian version with dark clothes and olive skin.

“So I hear you need to see me. It must be important for you to close the door,” Frank observed. A little of his smile dissipated when his eyes met Bob’s. “What’s the matter, my boy?”

“Frank, it’s hard to describe the way I feel. You’ve been great to me, and I have nothing but the greatest respect for you and admiration for the way you run this business ...” Bob struggled with the words.

Over the next twenty minutes or so, Frank listened to Bob’s retelling of last Friday’s interview and of his weekend of soul searching. All during the story, Frank’s face betrayed little of what he felt. He didn’t seem upset or happy, just intent on listening to every word.

Finally, after Bob had said all he could think to say, he stopped and looked Frank in the eye. Frank kept staring ahead, seemingly reading Bob’s mind.

“You know, Bob, I was about your age when I told my father I was leaving the company. It was a tough thing for me to do. I loved him, and I loved the business, but I had a chance to make a name for myself, and I took it. If you feel that this is what you want and need to do, then I wish you the best of luck.” With that, a small, painful smile replaced the wide grin that Bob saw when he first walked in. As usual, Frank was thoughtful and engaging. “But after a few years, I realized that my place was back here in the business. Just make sure you’re doing the right thing.”

Frank and Bob stayed in his office for the rest of the morning, plotting out the last two weeks, discussing replacements, even planning on how to break the news to the rest of the employees. They finally agreed that Bob would tell Frank’s staff first. Afterward, they would talk with Bob’s staff. Finally, they would broadcast a message throughout the company.

The first person Bob needed to tell, however, was Dorothy. He called her into his office and closed the door. She had been regarding him with trepidation ever since the call from Joe on Friday. Now he was going to confirm her suspicions. When he told her, she looked at Bob like a scolding parent.

“But I thought you liked it here. I thought you wanted to stay here for the rest of your career?” Dorothy asked rhetorically. She was

stunned and acted betrayed. Bob was thankful that Frank had taken the news better.

“You’re right, of course. I really don’t want to leave. The offer is just too good and the challenge too great not to take it,” Bob tried to explain.

Unlike with Frank, Dorothy and Bob did not spend time chatting. She abruptly got up and left. Bob couldn’t tell if she was going to cry or throw a rock through his car window.

Fortunately, the rest of the announcements were greeted with congratulations and “We’ll miss you” statements. Each announcement got easier to make, and since grapevines worked more efficiently than memos, most people already knew by the time they heard it directly from Bob.

By the end of the day, Bob was so exhausted that all he wanted to do was get home, take a shower, kiss his kids, and go to bed. But his new boss wouldn’t let that happen. Bob’s phone rang right at five o’clock.

“Bob, it’s Steve. Could you run by the office on your way home tonight? I’ve gathered the staff together, and they’d like to meet you.”

Of course, Bob wanted to say no, but he certainly couldn’t refuse his new boss this opportunity.

“Of course I can. I can be over in an hour,” he answered.

“Great. We’ll be in the conference room at the end of the hall to the left of your office.”

With that, Bob’s evening of recovery was gone. He called Melissa and told her he’d be late. Then he set out from his old, decrepit office to head to his new, palatial one.

Bob reached the conference room at the end of the hall and found the door slightly ajar. He pushed it in and found several people sitting at a long, impressive-looking table with some state-of-the-art electronics sitting atop. Steve Manto was sitting at the far end from the equipment and the white screen. He stood up and quickly made his way over to Bob.

“Glad you could make it, Bob,” Steve said while taking his hand enthusiastically. “Let me introduce you to the rest of my staff. This here is Stan Morgan, our VP of HR; Llewellyn Jones, our controller; Makarand Joshi, VP of IT; Jeff Simpson, VP of customer service; and of course, Jacques Binet, our senior VP and gourmet chef.”

Bob greeted them all individually. The names and faces were kind of a blur as he walked around the table. He smiled at each of them and felt some enthusiastic handshakes registered back to him. Bob quickly took an open seat along the side of the table after the introductions. He took out a notepad and acted as though he had entered this staff meeting before.

“This is great!” Steve announced once everyone was reseated. “We finally have a chance to get together as a staff. Each of you knows why you’re here. You are considered to be the top talent in your areas of expertise, and we are going to build something great here. We have a fine product, thanks to Jacques. We have business savvy on how to handle customers through Jeff. Makarand is stolen from HP. And now we have the man on board who’s going to market us to great growth and market share. Each of you has staffs to hire, and we’ve got to get going quickly if we’re going to get our position in the e-commerce business space. As you know, we’re seeing IPOs being issued every day at incredible opening prices and rising from there, and more are scheduled. Over the next few weeks, we need to establish our business plan and get our business started. That means a lot of long hours. So get to know each other. We’re going to be spending a lot of time together.”

As Bob listened to Steve, he gazed around the table. Everyone was riveted to every word. Bob didn’t yet know how each was recruited, but it was obvious that each of them believed in this man at the end of the table.

Over the next hour, Bob listened to various reports from the individual departments. It was becoming obvious that he was the only member of the staff not to be officially on board.

Jeff Simpson was the first to report on progress. He seemed to be the person in the room most like Bob. He was white and American and appeared to be in his thirties. He was dressed in what looked to

be the company uniform, jeans and a golf shirt. As he explained how the hiring of customer service people was progressing, Bob noticed that no one except for Steve was paying attention. The others were writing in notepads or just staring absently in Jeff's general direction.

When Llewellyn talked, everyone perked up. She was light skinned and striking to look at. With long, straight black hair contrasting with lots of gold jewelry, she was the only person in the room not wearing jeans. She had on a sheer white blouse which seemed to match her pasty white skin, a dark blue blazer and a matching midlength skirt. She explained how the finances were to be distributed by department and the procedures for spending it. She stood for her presentation, which was fine with Bob. She flipped through several PowerPoint slides on the big screen, showing the budget figures.

"You are each expected to spend your money wisely but quickly. As Steve said, there is an aggressive timetable in front of us. We must begin generating revenue by the fall if we're going to build a story for investors for our target go-public date of June 1, 1999."

Nothing Llewellyn said was with emotion. She delivered each point in a matter-of-fact manner. She stared at Bob when she talked about having to work quickly. He could feel everyone else's eyes upon him at that point. He knew then that he was expected to get things moving faster than the schedule he first thought.

Makarand was of Indian descent and looked like a computer nerd. Small, slight of build, and someone who looked like he could be blown over by a breath of fresh air, he certainly sounded confident when he explained how the system's progress was coming. It sounded like his staff was already in place and well on their way to building the website infrastructure.

Stan had little to say about his staffing. He went over most of what the staff needed to know about benefits and paychecks. He was the oldest member of the group, appearing to be in his midfifties. Stan's delivery was informal, and he made several jokes as he talked. Bob thought that, with the right clothes, Stan could make a good Santa Claus. Bob also thought he picked up on an Irish brogue in his voice but couldn't be sure.

On the other hand, it was easy to pick up Jacques's French accent, except that it didn't sound quite genuine. He talked only briefly about the premise for the food. It reminded Bob that he was hungry. It seemed to have the same effect on Steve too.

"Bob, I hope you can join us. We're having dinner as a staff tonight."

Bob hesitated for a moment but knew he couldn't refuse.

"Ah, sure," he said with hesitation, but he knew he was committed.

"Great. Now you will need to get your advertising manager and staff together quickly. I would like to see it done in the next two weeks. I have candidate submittals from our ads and from Joe Banks. You will need to whittle down the list and set up interviews. I'd suggest you start with a secretary, so he or she can help you set things up while you're in transition. We have three interviews set up for you tomorrow night."

Bob could already feel the pressure to get going quickly. He thought he would have two weeks to wind down from his old job, but he now knew that when Steve allowed him to give two weeks' notice that he'd expected Bob to work two jobs. The only good news came when he told Bob that he would be on the payroll starting today. So at least Bob would get two paychecks for the next two weeks. He might not remember what his family looked like at the end of them, but at least Melissa could buy the girls something nice to fill the gap.

Once the meeting ended, the staff reassembled at a small restaurant called the Dandelion Green, near the office building. It was a nice place, one Bob had been to several times before. He was interested to watch the dynamic on how everyone interacted around Steve. He still had no idea when these other people had been hired, and he was interested to find out how far behind he was.

At dinner, Steve sat next to Llewellyn. The two of them seemed to talk a lot about finances and business, nothing personal in their conversation that Bob could discern. He also noticed that Makarand kept mostly to himself. For his part, Bob spent most of his time chatting with Jeff and Stan. He learned that Stan's kids were all

grown up and that he had already retired from Digital. Jeff had worked for a small mail order catalog company.

“How did Steve find you?” Bob asked Jeff.

“There’s nothing to tell. I just interviewed with him for a job and got it,” Jeff answered quickly, brushing off the question like dandruff from his shoulder.

“So you’ve been here how long?” Bob asked.

“Two months. I’ve hired three customer service people and am training them now,” Jeff answered. He took a sip of his Miller Lite and cracked a smile. “Now, all I need is a business and some customers.”

Bob discovered that everyone was fully staffed except him. Altogether, Makarand had a staff of five, Jeff had four, counting his secretary, Stan had just two, Llewellyn had four, and Jacques had six chefs. Counting Steve, his secretary, and his staff, the company employed twenty-eight people. And Bob still needed to hire a secretary, an advertising manager, a public relations manager, and one staff position. That would make the total thirty-two people. Most normal businesses waited to have revenue and profits before hiring such a large staff. But this wasn’t normal business—this was the Internet.

Bob wandered into the house at eleven o’clock and found Melissa watching the news in bed.

“Tired?” she asked, looking up with a knowing smile and a look of sympathy for her warrior husband, a kiss perched on her lips in waiting.

“Yeah. I feel like I’m working two jobs. And you know what? I am,” Bob pronounced as he bent down to get his kiss of reward. Then he quickly threw off his clothes and headed to the bathroom. He really wanted to get to sleep. He got ready for bed and then dropped in next to his wife.

“How was your day?” Bob asked. Suddenly, he remembered that she was supposed to spend the day with Steve’s wife.

“It was interesting. Joan took me to meet her friends, and we had a tour of the club before having lunch. And after two glasses of wine,

I was looped. I'll tell you, it is a different lifestyle for these women who don't work and who don't seem to tend to any children."

"Are you getting together again?" Bob asked.

"Thursday. I'm going with her to a couple of charities she supports."

"It sounds like you two are really hitting it off," Bob commented.

"Yeah, I guess." Melissa sounded less sure. "I'm just exhausted by her. She's always on the go."

"Sounds like she's the perfect wife for Steve," Bob said and sighed. With that, he kissed Melissa again and turned out the lights.



Bob Stone is a young marketing professional until he is recruited into a startup dot.com by the lure of quick wealth. All is well until he suspects that things are not what they seem. Will he and the business survive or crash.

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