**Start:**

Valerie had her routine down pat. Wake up, coffee, homemade breakfast sandwich, shower, out the door by 8:30. Get to work by 8:45, lunch in the fridge, say hi to the woman – six years and she never did learn her name - in the cubicle beside her, put on her headset and sign in. If you’d told her ten years ago when she got into University for psychology that she’d end up working at an employee crisis hotline, she would’ve laughed in your face. But then again she didn’t find her job that bad. Sometimes the stupidity of the Compusoft employees even proved to be advantageous to her like the idiot who called worried his boss would find out he was selling company secrets to their rival Lemon Tech.

At 9:03 Valerie’s phone rang. “Hello, Compusoft Employee Crisis Hotline, my name is Veronica, how can I help you today?”

“I- I’m Aaron and I’m really concerned about my co-worker and I don’t know what to do,” a man’s voice stuttered on the other line.

Valerie replied,

Option 1 – “Maybe I can help you sort through it?”

Option 2- “Sometimes it helps to start from the beginning.”

Exposition: Aaron’s Concerns:

“Charlie’s my friend. He gets me into all the parties and clubs and that, and in return I’ve been helping him out with a lot of his work. He’s still getting used to the code language the new program is in,”

Valerie straightened her back and grabbed a pencil and a piece of paper. She began transcribing Aaron’s words down, careful not to miss anything useful. “What is worrying you Aaron?”

“I’m worried that since he was promoted, I won’t be able to help him anymore. See we were working on a project together and he pitched one of my ideas to the project lead, and he liked it, so now Charlie’s my boss. We no longer work on the same projects, so I can’t help him with his work anymore and I’m really concerned that he won’t be able to do it. How can I help him?”

Once Valerie was sure she’d written down the whole story, she replied,

Option 1- “Aaron, you do realize that Charlie is not your friend right?”

“What do you mean?” Aaron asked, puzzled. “Charlie is a great friend. Last week he invited me to his beach party and introduced me to a whole bunch of really great people.”

*How can people be so easy* Valerie wondered. “You said he doesn’t actually know the language that your project uses so you have to do a lot of the coding yes? That he pitched one of your ideas and it landed him the promotion?”

“Yes.”

“He’s just using you. He may seem like your friend but he’s just offering to take you to parties and introduce you to his friends because it means he doesn’t have to do work. I’ve seen people like him before. Trust me as soon as you stop being useful to him, which it sounds like you’re about there, he’ll dump you like a hot potato. Honestly you’re best to just cut things off with him and leave it strictly professional.”

“No, you’re wrong. He’s my only true friend,” Aaron shouted at her before hanging up. Valerie rolled her eyes thinking there just wasn’t any way of helping some people. She continued her routine that week not knowing that Aaron did realize what she said was true, and was so upset that his one and only friend was not even actually a friend that when he got to his apartment that night, he hung himself from the shower curtain rod. It wasn’t until she was sitting eating her breakfast two days later that she came across his obituary in the town paper and realized what she had done.

Game Over.

**Option 2**- “What is this project you two were working on?”

“Well technically I’m not actually allowed to talk about it. The company hasn’t made a release date or announced any of the new features yet.”

“You can talk about anything you want to here Aaron,” Valerie responded. “This is a safe space and everything you say remains anonymous.”

“Even still, I signed a confidentiality agreement and if anyone were to overhear it could get Charlie into a lot of trouble, and I don’t want to do that.”

“I can’t really help you with the situation if you don’t want to talk about it.”

“Actually, you know what Veronica, talking about it earlier really did make me feel a bit better about the situation and I need to start work soon anyways. Thanks.

Valerie could feel the gears in her head turning. She didn’t have much to go one and what with Compusoft being such a large company it would be difficult to track him down, but there had to be a way for her to find out who Charlie was and to use the information Aaron gave her to her advantage. She started by checking the Compusoft news bulletin after she got home to see if anything was posted. When that proved fruitless, she tracked down a list of all the Compusoft employees and made a list of all of the Charlie’s that worked for the company. She was able to immediately rule a few of them out based on their age or position in the company. The rest she cross referenced with the list of recent in house job opportunities. She finally determined that it must be Charlie MacDaniels.

She located his number in the directory and called him. She wasn’t surprised that he wasn’t still at his desk that late in the evening so she left him a message. “Charlie Daniels, I know what you’ve been doing. If you want to keep your fancy new position and its hefty pay raise, you’ll do as I ask and leave $500 in fifties in a small manila envelope behind the large planter to the left of the elevator on the third floor when you leave Wednesday night. If you don’t, I’ll let your boss know that Aaron has been doing all your work for you.”

**Option 3**- “Tell me about Charlie.”

“Charlie MacDaniels? He’s super cool! He’s promised to take me to the gym with him every week once we finish this project. He was just promoted to lead coder of our department. It’s a pretty big deal but I’m not sure how he’s gonna handle the job. It’s really demanding and requires he know the language inside and out.”

“Have you spoken to Charlie about your concerns?”

“I don’t want to make him feel he’s inadequate or come across as being jealous that he got the promotion instead of me because neither of those are true. When we worked together I could stay a few hours late and work on his part of the project as well as do mine but with the workload of his new job, I’m concerned that I wouldn’t be able to keep up.”

“Talking to him might help,”

“I mean he’s my best friend, so he probably wouldn’t but if I fall behind on my work because I’m trying to juggle his as well, he could fire me. It’d look really bad for him as a new lead to have team members that don’t finish their work. I can’t afford for that to happen. Anyways it’s time for me to start my shift. Thank you for listening.

Valerie could feel the gears in her head turning. She shoved her notes in her purse under her desk and continued with her day. When she got home she made dinner. After she’d cleaned up, she located Mr. MacDaniels’ number in the directory and called him. She wasn’t surprised that he wasn’t still at his desk that late in the evening so she left him a message. “Charlie Daniels, I know what you’ve been doing. If you want to keep your fancy new position and its hefty pay raise, you’ll do as I ask and leave $500 in fifties in a small manila envelope behind the large planter to the left of the elevator on the third floor when you leave Wednesday night. If you don’t, I’ll let your boss know that Aaron has been doing all your work for you.”

Charlie accuses Aaron of talking:

Two days later at 1:37, Valerie’s phone rang. “Hello, Compusoft Employee Crisis Hotline, my name is Michelle, how can I help you today?”

“Isn’t the whole point of this service supposed to be that it helps people, is anonymous, and that anything said over the call is confidential, *Veronica*? Though I’m sure that’s also not even your real name.”

“I’m sorry sir but I don’t know what you are talking about,” Valerie replied. “As I stated when I answered the phone, my name is Michelle. Yes, this service is anonymous and confidential. Nothing you say here leaves this room. The calls are recorded for random customer service evaluation checks which are done by the head of the Crisis Hotline and none of the information is disclosed. Now is there something that I can help you with?”

“My boss found out about something I talked about to one of the hotline agents and I was certain that Vanessa was the only one that I spoke about the subject with but maybe I let it slip with one of my friends. Sorry to yell at you. I should get back to my desk.”

Valerie hung up the phone shaking. She knew she was walking a fine line and that she had to be more careful from now on. If her boss found out what she’d been doing with customer information, she could be fired, or worse. She’d have to be careful when she went to retrieve the $500 from the planter. She smiled to herself. It wasn’t that she needed the money. Her job paid well enough, she had seen to that, and provided her with dental and healthcare. What it did not provide her with however was a sense of power. That she got from the way she used information the clients shared with her.

When the light on her phone flashed again, she adjusted her headset and answered the call, “Hello, Compusoft Employee Crisis Hotline, my name is Thea, how can I help you today?”

“I did something really bad and I’m worried I might lose my job over it.”

“Start from the beginning and let’s see if we can work this out together,” Valerie said.

“I’ve been working on a project that’s being kept under lock and key. Like no one’s allowed to talk about it until its release date is announced and even then, we have specific things we are and are not allowed to say about it. But a few weeks ago some pipes burst and my apartment flooded. My super refused to pay for the damages, saying that it was my responsibility. I needed the money to fix it so I still had a place to live while I sorted the issue out with a lawyer and Lemon Tech was willing to pay a lot for information.”

**Option 1-** “What was the project?”

“I can’t tell you that. Don’t you see that’s the whole point! I told somebody about it when I shouldn’t have and now my job could be on the line. I’m sure it won’t be difficult to trace it back to me, or at least to my department since there’s only one team working on this particular piece of software.”

“Fair enough. Why don’t you tell me about the person at Lemon Tech who paid you for the information? How much did he pay you? Where did you meet him? Or was it a wire transfer online?”

“Wait a minute, why do you want to know? Why are you asking?”

Valerie pressed her fingers into her temples and tried to backtrack. “It might be easier for me to help you if I have some of the details. There may be a way out of this.”

“I’ll tell you if you tell me your real name.”

“What do you mean my real name?” Valerie asked.

“This service is anonymous yes? So it stands to reason that the staff use fake names too. If you tell me yours, I’ll tell you who I spoke to.”

Valerie thought a minute and then decided she could easily regain control of the situation, “It’s Valerie.”

“Thank you Valerie. I’m Aaron. I believe we spoke earlier in the week about my co-worker Charlie. I was called into his office earlier today and told that someone knew that I was covering for him. I know he wouldn’t tell anybody and I also know that you are the only person I told. Your boss will be hearing from me with regards to how you handle sensitive information. Thought you might want to know that.” Aaron hung up the phone.

Valerie gripped the edge of her desk and looked around. Of course her co-workers were all blissfully ignorant that once again she had screwed up so royally that her career was over. Twenty minutes later her boss called her to her office where she was told in no uncertain terms that her job was over and she would be escorted off the Compusoft property by two security guards. She was also told that Aaron would be pressing charges and she’d best find a good lawyer. She cleared her desk off thinking that it was too bad she didn’t get the chance to collect the $500 she’d demanded from Charlie for her silence.

Game over.

**Option 2-** “Wait a minute, haven’t I spoken to you before?”

“Have you?”

“It’s Aaron yes?” Valerie replied. “We spoke two days ago about your boss Charlie.”

“Only two days ago you were Vanessa. I suppose that’s all part of the anonymity isn’t it?”

“Can I help you with something Aaron?”

“You know how I told you that I cover for Charlie and do his work?”

“Yes”

“Somebody’s blackmailing him and I think I know who it is.”

Valerie gripped the edge of her desk. “That’s probably information you should take to the police, or at least security, is it not?”

“I was hoping you could help me out. Can we meet tomorrow night?”

“Aaron, I’m not allowed to meet with clients.”

“Think of it not so much as a meeting, more of a crazy, random happenstance that we both might happen to be at the same bar tomorrow night. Say around 7?”

“I can’t, Aaron.”

“Well I’ll be at the pub around the corner tomorrow night. I’ll be the one with the blue and red striped tie. If we happen to run into one another, they can’t fault you for that.”

Valerie shook her head, “You’d do best to take this information to the police. As I’ve previously stated, I am not allowed to meet with clients or contact them. I could lose my job. Now is there anything I can help you with?”

“Tomorrow night, 7PM, the pub around the corner. Enjoy the rest of your day.” The line went dead.

Valerie considered her options through her shift. On her way out, she got off the elevator at the third floor, retrieved the envelope from the planter and took the stairs the rest of the way down. She checked that her $500 was there when she got into her car and left.

**Option 1-** Don’t go.

Valerie had thought about it most of the evening and decided that while she was curious what Aaron knew, it wasn’t worth risking her job over. Instead, when she got home, she rang up Charlie again. This time she didn’t get his voicemail.

“Hello?”

“Mr. MacDaniels, thank you for following my instructions so well.”

“Who is this?”

“I’m sure you’re dying to find out. Too bad you’ll never know.”

“How do you know about Aaron? Did he talk?”

“I have my ways. Speaking of Aaron, there’s another thing you can do for me. Keep in mind that your career is on the line if you don’t.”

“If you think you’re getting more money out of me, you’re not.”

“You’d be wrong about that but right now that’s not what I’m after.”

“Then what?”

“Mr. MacDaniels, I need you to call off your dog.”

“I honestly have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Valerie sighed, “Aaron, Mr. MacDaniels. He’s getting on my nerves. I don’t know what you told him, but he’s barking up the wrong tree. Oh and while you’re at it, you’d do well to remember that as I have control over whether or not to let it slip that Aaron deserved that promotion twice as much as you deserve to be let go, I also have control over you. You’d also do well to not tell anybody about our little arrangement. It wouldn’t look good on your part.”

“What arrangement?”

“I continue to not tell people that you have no idea how to do any of the work you were meant to be doing since you were hired and in return you continue to do what I tell you to. Have a good evening Mr. MacDaniels.” Valerie hung up the phone before Charlie could protest. She knew she had him beat and it felt good.

The End.

**Option 2 –** Meet with Aaron.

After work the next day Valerie ran her errands. At 7, she headed back towards the office. Second guessing her decision the entire way. She didn’t want to lose her job, but she also wanted to make sure that Aaron actually had no idea it was her blackmailing Charlie. This was probably the best way to do that.

She walked into the pub at 7:12 and ordered a vodka water from the bar. Drink in hand, she looked around to see if anyone was wearing a red and blue striped tie. It only took her a minute to spot him. He was sitting in the far corner, watching the door while peeling the sticker off a bottle of Corona. She walked over and slid into the booth across from him. “Hello Aaron.”

“What do I call you? Because you’re not Vanessa, or Michelle, or Thea. And you know who I am so it seems only right that I know who you are.”

“So far as you know, I am Vanessa, Michelle, or Thea.” Valerie replied.

“I don’t think so,” Aaron placed his hand flat on the table. “If you want to know what I know, you’re going to have to play this game by my rules.”

Valerie arched a brow, “When did you grow a back bone? I never would have expected this from the pathetic, stammering little creature that called me earlier this week worried that his co-worker would lose his job because he didn’t know what he was doing. I have to admit, I’m impressed.”

Aaron did not reply.

“Very well Nancy Drew, you can call me Valerie.”

“Got a last name Valerie?”

“Everybody has a last name.”

“My rules, Valerie.”

“Jenkins.”

Aaron nodded his head and took a drink from his beer. “Now Valerie, I’m going to need you to stop blackmailing Charlie. He’s a good friend of mine and he’s my boss.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I figured it out pretty quickly. You are the only person I told and like I said earlier, it’s not information that Charlie would willingly share with anyone seeing as it would lose him his job at Compusoft. So either you’re going to stop blackmailing my friend, or I’m going to tell the police like you suggested I do.”

**Option 1 –** “Okay, you win.”

Valerie crossed her arms and stared Aaron in the eyes, “I’ll stop.”

Aaron nearly choked on his drink, “Wai- wha- th-that easily?”

“Yeah,” Valerie shrugged. “It’s not like I actually need the money.”

“Then why do it?”

She finished her drink and got up. “Because I can,” she told him before walking away. There were always other idiots she could exploit and it was clear that Aaron was not going to back down. He had the upper hand and she knew it was time to call this one quits.

The end.

**Option 2-** “I find it interesting that you keep referring to Charlie as your friend.”

“What do you mean?” Aaron replied.

“I’m assuming he was upset with you for telling me about your arrangement, was he not?”

“I can’t really blame him for that seeing as you blackmailed him.”

“Well yes,” Valerie sighed, “but have you considered that he’s getting all of the credit for work that you did? I mean it was all your hard work and ingenuity that got him that promotion.”

“Yeah but he’s helping me out in return.”

“How many friends and contacts would you say he’s introduced you to? Are you actually getting anything worthwhile out of it? Anything that you couldn’t get on your own?”

“I mean I wouldn’t get invited to most of the parties without him.”

“Do you really enjoy these parties?”

“Charlie says it’s good to get out and meet people.”

Valerie shook her head, “That’s not what I asked you.”

Aaron looked at the table, seeming to be engrossed in a shredded bit of label from his beer. Valerie took a sip of her drink, waiting for his reply. “They don’t really talk to me much,” he finally said.

“So what you’re telling me is that you bust your ass doing your work and Charlie’s, get him a promotion and a bigger pay cheque, only to be ignored at a party of complete strangers? It sounds to me like Charlie isn’t really as good a friend as you seem to think he is.”

“I suppose he’s getting a bit of a better deal,” Aaron trailed off.

“Whose idea was this arrangement anyways?”

“He asked me to help him with something on his first day and he invited me out to the pub with some friends. After that it sort of just kept happening. Oh my god he’s just using me isn’t he!”

Valerie felt a twinge of guilt seeing the look on Aaron’s face. She thought it was a bit unfortunate on Aaron’s part that he didn’t catch on sooner and rather pathetic that Charlie was the only friend the man had to begin with. “It’s very probable he might be.”

Aaron nodded staring at his hands. The two sat in silence, Valerie not knowing what to say and Aaron processing the realizations that Valerie had led him to. After a few minutes Aaron asked, “Why did you blackmail Charlie though?”

**Option 1** – “I needed the money.”

“You have a steady, full time job.”

“They don’t pay well enough to afford an apartment, student loans, and groceries.”

“I suppose that makes sense.”

“I was a little behind on my rent and my super was getting testy and then you came along with your co-worker and I thought it wasn’t like it was hurting anyone who was really innocent.”

“I mean if anything, it probably would’ve taken way longer to realize what Charlie was doing. In a way you were just helping a client.”

*Wow this guy is easy*, Valerie thought. “Exactly.”

“I suppose I’ll keep it quiet so long as you agree to stop blackmailing Charlie.”

“Not a problem.” There were always other idiots she could exploit and it was clear that Charlie was no longer useful since Aaron finally realized he’d been tricked.

The end.

**Option 2**- “I’m dying anyways so I figured it’d at least entertain me for a little.”

“You’re dying?”

“Yup.”

“What of? If you don’t mind my asking.”

“Cancer. Chemo didn’t work. Neither did radiation. It’s spread to several organs. My doc gave me six months a month ago.”

Aaron’s eyes narrowed, “You look pretty healthy for someone who’s terminal.”

“Are you accusing me of faking an illness?”

“What kind of cancer?”

“Lung.”

“Who’s your doctor Valerie? You sure he knows what he’s doing?”

Valerie knew she had no way out.

“You don’t have cancer Valerie. Come with me.”

“Where?”

“You can either come with me to the police department, or I can call the cops here. Either way they’ll be told you blackmailed Charlie. I’ll also be informing your manager of the situation and you’ll definitely be losing your job.”

The End.

**Option 3 –** “I’ve been in his position before. It ended badly.”

“What do you mean you were in his position?”

“In uni I was friends with this girl and I’d get her to do my psych homework in exchange for an invite to all the hottest parties. It went on for a few semesters. But one day I got called in to talk to the program administrators. A few weeks earlier apparently Erika had gotten drugged at one of the parties and I guess it didn’t end well because the night before I was called in they found her hanging from the hook on the back of her door in rez. She left a note. I was expelled for plagiarism.”

“I’m not sure I understand why you’re blackmailing Charlie though.”

“Erika wouldn’t have killed herself if we didn’t have this arrangement. She never would’ve gone to the party. So when I noticed Charlie treating you exactly the same as I treated Erika, I guess I wanted to teach him a lesson.”

“I suppose that’s thoughtful of you, in a twisted sort of way, but have you considered that blackmail probably isn’t the best way to honour your friend’s memory?” Aaron asked.

“I suppose there might have been better ways of going about it.”

“Blackmail isn’t all that much different from you bribing your friend to do your homework if you think about it. You’re gaining from someone else’s work.”

“I never thought of it like that,” Valerie began fiddling with the straw in her drink. “I thought I was protecting you, but really I’m still being just as manipulative as I was with Erika and Charlie was with you.”

Valerie and Aaron sat talking late into the night and planned to meet the next week as well. Aaron decided to not turn Valerie in since she hadn’t really hurt anybody and seemed to really want to reform herself. Valerie thought that maybe Aaron wasn’t as stupid as she’d originally thought.

The End.