

Forty-Two Blue

By

Rachel Schipul

Copyright

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used factiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Copyright © 2010 by Rachel Schipul.

All rights reserved. Except as permitted under the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, no part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, or stored in a database or retrieval system, without the prior written permission of the author.

www.rachelschipul.com

ISBN 978-0-615-38484-9

About the Author

Rachel Schipul worked in the technology field for twenty years before devoting herself full-time to her writing.

Forty-Two Blue, her first novel, was one of ten finalists out of over 2600 entries submitted in the initial Gather.com First Chapters Writing Competition. Like American Idol, Gather.com enthusiasts vote for their favorite writers.

Rachel lives in Houston, Texas with her husband, Ed, and their three children.

Chapter One

The blue glow of the screen cast its fingers around the cramped, warehouse apartment, dimly illuminating the piles of programming books and hacker magazines that lay scattered across the table. He liked to work in the dark. Made him feel mysterious, even stealthy. As if peering at his victims from a physical cloak while walking through the shadows of the Web. Despite the late hour, the stifling heat was relentless, another summer night in Houston.

Charlie popped a tab of speed and crunched it between his teeth. The bitter dust of the pill caught in the beads of sweat on his lips, an acrid sting on his tongue, a precursor to the welcome flood of energy that was coming.

The time in the lower right of the screen read 2:33 a.m. His window of opportunity would soon close. A familiar surge of adrenaline spread through Charlie's body as he entered the final keystrokes needed to access his personal Internet playground, a subtly linked set of unwitting hosts scattered throughout the world.

The cursor pulsed, beckoning, and he paused, fingers suspended just over the keyboard. Would anyone be watching? Charlie took a deep breath to slow his heart, fighting the effects of the speed, and forced his paranoia back under the surface. Eight hits so far. No indication that anyone was on their trail. Just get in and get out.

He entered the two-line SQL string from memory at the waiting prompt and watched the seconds tick by, his requests bouncing off a compromised server in China to cover the trail.

A few scrolling lines and a quick flash on the display. Then the screen obediently listed the accounts on the company's central database.

Charlie leaned forward in his chair, a smile of relief flickering at the corners of his mouth as he scanned the list of names. "Who's the lucky player tonight?"

#

Across town, Phil Barnes sat in his cubicle also staring at a computer screen, shivering from the blowing vents that kept the office a frigid sixty-two degrees. A small desk lamp spread a pool of light across his desk on the sixth floor of the OPTIN building.

Even at two in the morning, he could hear the faint clicking of another keyboard. Somewhere in this maze of beige colored cubes there was another lost soul, a type-a personality following the thread of a thought born hours ago, a masochist unable to shut down for fear of losing the spark that propelled him forward.

Phil squinted at the screen. Focus now. He was close, very close.

"What are you doing with that stored variable?" he whispered to the screen.

Six days ago, he had discovered a collection of rogue functions sitting quietly in the back end of the company's accounting software, a small group of subroutines, undocumented and unrecognizable. The functions were written cryptically using third-party modules, a huge no-no at OPTIN, and to his frustration, Phil was unable to tell how the script affected the software. Not to mention that the programmer failed to include any comments in his work. A common rookie mistake. Most likely, a newbie trying to impress his boss with a quick solution to a programming request.

But why were the lines tagged not to print on a standard code report?

Phil had succeeded in breaking down one of the functions, uncovering a series of commands that affected the Account Transfer module. Bad programming in this part of the

system could bring down the entire OPTIN Trading System and then the shit would really hit the fan. But so far, no problems had been reported.

The module was obviously not part of the original program, but without decoding the other functions, the purpose behind the code remained a mystery.

Should he call his supervisor and wake him for this? If there was a green programmer experimenting on the live system, someone needed to know. He pulled out his cell and hit the speed dial for Jack. But even before the phone started to ring, he knew he wouldn't go through with the call. Other programmers within the company brought their unsolvable problems to *his* group. Phil, the company's shining star and ultimate problem-solver, wasn't ready to admit defeat on this one. The phone closed with a sharp click. He would figure it out first, *then* alert his boss.

He had just opened a fresh Coke when an anguished cry erupted from across the room.

"I...HATE...THIS...PROGRAM!"

Phil grinned in sympathy and checked People Tracker. Just the two of them still beating their heads against the wall. He stood up in his cube.

"Becky?"

A woman's head popped up three rows over. "Hey, Phil. Sorry about that. This goddamn computer..."

"I know the feeling."

"I think I'm going to pack it in." She let out a big yawn and stretched. "How about you? You ready?"

"Nope. Not yet. I'm *this* close."

“Yeah. I was that close, too. About two hours ago.” Becky gave him a tired smile. “Sure you want to stay? You look like hell.”

“Gee, thanks. And those dark circles under your eyes do wonders for you, too.”

“Bite me.”

Phil pushed his exhaustion aside. One hundred variables tested, only five hundred more to go.

Twenty minutes later, he bolted upright in his chair.

“Holy shit!” Phil checked the results again. “Holy fucking shit!”

This wasn't the pet project of a freshman programmer. Someone had built a back door into the main accounting program, a function that allowed them undetected access to the software. A very sophisticated function. Based on the timestamps, it had been inserted almost a year ago. Phil's mind raced through the obvious questions – Who? How? And most importantly, for what purpose? He would need to decipher the other functions to figure that out.

As he burned a fresh copy of the altered file to a CD, he thought about the phone call to Jack. The thrill of sharing the discovery, the immediate concern, the middle-of-the-night phone calls to his team members, the relentless hours of intense pressure to break down the code. Maybe he should wait until morning to tell Jack, at least until the sun came up. The avalanche of work that was to follow his news would be much more exciting after a few hours sleep. An email would buy him some time.

He was midway through composing the message, hinting at the importance of the discovery without sharing the news. The company email was scanned by at least three different programs and two humans. Besides, he had to word it in such a way that he wouldn't get chewed

out for not calling Jack immediately. He typed, deleted and retyped the message but in the end it didn't matter. The computer locked up before he could send it.

“Piece of crap.” He powered down the computer and stuffed his notes in his briefcase along with the CD. He would take it all home, organize his information and make a full presentation to Jack in the morning.

This was going to be a big highlight in his next performance evaluation.

Too keyed up to wait for the elevator, Phil started down the stairs. He trotted quickly down the first few flights, but by the third floor, his energy started to wane and he paused on the stoop to catch his breath. Whoever had inserted those functions into the accounting system had access to the company's highly secured developers' network. He reached the second floor. And that could only come from inside the building. First floor. It had to be someone who either worked, or used to work, in Programming.

Phil pushed open the door and scanned the lobby, suddenly aware of the emptiness. A feeling of vulnerability crept over him and he pulled the briefcase closer, holding it slightly in front of his body like a shield. He looked back over his shoulder at the lighted server room. Surely someone would hear the noise if he was attacked. He would have to yell, loudly. A chill passed through his body and Phil stepped quickly across the tiled floor, anxious to get out of the building.

He mentally ran through the people in his group. Which of them had a dirty secret? His mind darted from face to face. What would they do when it was exposed?

The muted ding of an elevator reverberated in the lobby, stopping him in his tracks. Phil took a quick step back, slipping into the shadows, his chest throbbing as he stared toward the opening doors.

A petite, well-dressed woman exited the elevator and paused. She glanced toward the door and then back toward Phil. He breathed a sigh of relief and stepped forward.

“Hoo, boy. You surprised me,” he said, his voice shaking.

“Didn’t mean to.” She grinned and held up her hands. “Harmless.”

Phil forced the air out of his lungs. “Just a little jumpy. Must be all the caffeine.” He tried for a casual tone. “So, um, what keeps you here so late?”

The woman looked oddly awake for almost three in the morning, her eyes bright, her face slightly flushed. She could have been climbing off a roller coaster instead of stepping out of an elevator.

“Finishing up with the Japanese market. You?”

He saw the lie in her eyes but didn’t call her on it. While he knew who she was, they had not officially met. Besides, he had his own secrets tonight.

He shrugged. “Working on a bug. Always seems to be something.”

“Job security.” She was smiling, teasing him.

“Walk you to your car?”

“Sure.”

When they reached the double glass doors leading to the parking garage, she politely turned her head away as Phil punched his personal security code into the keypad. The red light turned green and the locks retracted with a soft click.

He held the door open for her, but she had already pushed through the other side, skipping the keypad and smirking at him as she passed. *Interesting*. He took two quick steps to catch up to her.

“You work in Special Teams, don’t you?”

Phil felt a small surge of pleasure. She knew him. “For about three years, now. Phil Barnes.” He started to put out his hand but she gave him another sly smile and kept walking.

“Nice to meet you, Phil. The Board speaks highly of your group. Says that’s where all the brain power is.”

“We do have a great team.” And someone who is not quite the team player they are pretending to be. “For the most part.”

“I’ve heard you guys are quite territorial down there, sometimes keeping your ideas close to the vest until ready to share. Afraid someone else might figure it out first and steal your thunder?” She was teasing him again.

“Maybe a little.”

He glanced down at his briefcase, the contents of which were sure to bring public kudos and a big, fat bonus, maybe even a promotion.

The vapor lights of the parking garage emitted a pinkish-orange glow, softly illuminating the area and the few cars that remained.

“Well, that one’s mine.” Phil pointed across the lot. “So this one must be yours.”

They moved toward a silver Mercedes.

“For what it’s worth, I think more people appreciate your work than you realize.” She flashed him another grin, her body close enough that he could smell traces of her perfume. Was she flirting with him? Cougarlicious!

They reached her car and she fumbled her keys, dropping them to the ground.

Phil quickly stooped down to pick them up, admiring the curve of her calf as he felt around for the keys.

“Here you g—”

The darkness exploded into an array of bright spots as her knee smashed into his nose, knocking him backward onto the concrete.

His head banged against the floor, sending another shower of fireworks through his skull. He clutched his face and felt blood oozing down his face, a slight metallic taste in his mouth, then bright red spots blooming on the front of his white shirt. He looked up, confused, as she pulled something from her purse. A cell phone? His eyes flicked from the device to her face and back again. She wasn't using it like a phone. The woman clicked a small button at the base of the unit and a low electric hum floated across the night air. In the weak garage light, he could clearly see the protuberance of two silver prongs.

“What the hell?” He scrabbled backward, looking around for cover or a weapon but found neither. The woman jabbed the stun gun toward him and Phil threw his arms in front of his face in a gesture of protection and surrender.

“Hey, I'm not going to hurt you,” he yelled. “I was just walking you to your – ”

She shoved the device against his left forearm and pressed the button, her face twisted in determination, the flirtatious look in her eyes gone.

Pain seared through Phil's arm as the voltage hit him, the popping and crackling of the electricity between the nodes only registering faintly in his brain. When she removed the gun, his arm dropped, dangling uselessly at his side. Phil looked at his limp arm and then at the woman.

“What the fuck are you doing?”

Without answering, she took a step toward him.

Phil turned away, gathering his feet under him. She may have caught him off guard but he could outrun her. Immediately his entire body wrenched as the stun gun hit him again. This time planted squarely on top of his right kidney. He collapsed on the concrete floor, his mind in a

panic, his body writhing in agony. Phil lost all sense of fear and pain as the current surged through him. The only thought he could put together was a single word.

Stop.

The woman held the gun firmly in place and he heard her voice from miles away slowly counting to eight, each number falling from her lips after an eternity of waiting. When she mercifully released the button, he lay immobile on the ground.

Relief flooded over him.

It had stopped.

He lay exhausted on the warm, dirty concrete, listening to the click-click of her heels as she walked away from him. Crazy bitch. He tried to sit up but his body wouldn't cooperate. He felt drugged, his limbs heavy and unresponsive.

Then he heard her coming back.

He strained to lift his head but it stayed where it had fallen, half on the gritty garage floor, half on his limp and useless arm. She knelt beside him and wiggled his wallet out of his back pocket.

Oh my God. Was she mugging him? No one was going to believe this. There were supposed to be security cameras in here. Hopefully they were catching all this on tape.

The woman placed both hands under Phil's shoulder and pushed. It took several tries, but she managed to roll him onto his back.

One look at her face and Phil knew she wasn't done with him yet.

#

“Gerard Boitanni.” Charlie said the name with a sneer, picking it at random from the list on the screen. “Level A client. Man, I bet you are *loaded*. Probably spend your days playing golf and your nights drinking fifty-year-old Scotch and fucking twenty-year-old blondes. Cabin on

the lake, cabin in the mountains, vacation home in France. You wouldn't mind if I borrowed just a little, would you?"

Charlie finished the Red Bull and pulled up the account profile.

"Single. Two kids. Likes it when we buy dinner. Prefers Café Annie." He snorted in disgust. "Yeah, me too."

He continued through the personal data on the screen.

"Eight different phone numbers. Are you really that goddamn important? Where's the listing for your bathroom, dickhead?"

Enough playing around. Let's get to business. He pulled up the account history.

"Average trading activity." Last login date by Boitanni was more than six months ago. He was letting the professionals at OPTIN manage his account. Sweet.

Charlie scanned through the account portfolio. Boitanni traded in all the top technology stocks, Microsoft, Dell, Intel, HP, Oracle. He had almost eight million dollars invested through Online Partners in Trading, Inc., all of it spread throughout the technology sector.

The irony of it was too much.

Charlie entered the commands to transfer \$200,000 of Boitanni's money to another account in the system.

"Live by the sword, die by the sword, Gerry my man."

He updated the last variable and resaved the file as a lascivious smile crossed his face. She would be pleased with this one.

The last time they were together, she had started talking about hitting another account.

"No one's watching, Charlie."

“Not yet. It’s only been two weeks,” he had answered without breaking the rhythm of his hips.

“So what? The money is there. Just waiting for us.”

She continued to harp on it, making it very difficult for him to concentrate. Finally she had stopped altogether and climbed off of him.

“Forget it, Charlie. I’m not in the mood anymore.”

He had lain there, frustrated and panting as she sat on the edge of the bed, her back to him, whining about needing more cash. He had stared at her naked back, the curve of her hips, the crack of her ass, and begged her to get back in the bed. Instead, she had gathered her clothes and told him to let her know when the next transaction was complete.

If she wasn’t such a personal trophy, he would have gotten rid of her a long time ago.

Charlie entered the commands to back out of the system, leaving no footprints and feeling slightly aroused at the thought of telling her it was done.

“Thanks for playing, Mr. B.”

He tossed his empty can toward the trash and missed.

#

Phil lay sweating, confused and shit-scared on the ground as the woman leaned over him, her face set in concentration.

“You know, I didn’t want to do this but you really left me no choice,” she said. “You’re a nice guy, and so good-looking.”

Phil’s mind raced as he looked up at her, frantically trying to determine where this was headed and how he could stop it. She was kneeling next to him. If he could just move his leg, he would kick her debutante ass across the parking lot. He strained his muscles and wiggled his toes.

“...and I almost chose you. Smart, very smart. You could have done it in half the time.”

She sighed. “But I just couldn’t trust you.”

Trust him to do what? He tried to speak but his tongue lolled around the inside of his mouth like a wet sock. He glanced down at his right hand and concentrated. A finger twitched. Then another. Just a few more minutes.

“Oops.”

He looked up. She was also staring at his hand.

“I didn’t know how long this would last. The sales guy said probably ten or fifteen minutes. That wasn’t quite right, was it?”

There was a light metallic scrape as she picked something up off the ground.

“Let’s get this over with.”

She brought her hand back into his line of vision. And in it, she held a large hunting knife.

Phil’s eyes went wide with shock and he was momentarily diverted by the fact that he could move his eyelids. In fact, he was now able to wiggle his foot slightly back and forth. His fingers were also regaining some noticeable movement. If he could just talk to her, buy himself some time to get his muscles back. If he could just get to the cell phone in his briefcase.

The woman held the knife over his chest with her left hand and poked him with her right. She pressed her fingers on his sternum and then moved her fingers slowly to the left about two inches.

“Here.” She brought the knife down slowly and pressed it into the chosen spot. The blade went in about a quarter of an inch, then hit a rib. Phil let out a small squawk of pain. At least his

body was responding. And the pain was helping him focus. He started working on his leg muscles.

She pulled the knife from his chest, moved it down a half-inch, and pressed again. Again it stopped.

“Damn,” she whispered. Sweat beaded along her hairline. She moved the knife again and pressed harder, this time putting her weight against the handle. Again, the blade found a rib and stopped.

“Goddamn it!”

The woman rocked back on her heels and looked at the three small red spots of blood that were spreading on his shirt. Phil froze to mask his progress. He could now flex his foot and move his legs a little. Just a few more minutes and he would be able to defend himself. He needed to distract her.

“Hey.” The sound crackled from his throat. She jerked her head up, as if surprised to see him there. Phil tried again but nothing else came out. He pleaded with her through his eyes and worked his tongue. His mouth was dry. “Please.”

She frowned at him, then put her hand back on his chest and felt her way down his ribs, finding the curve of his bones where the edge of the rib cage met with the sternum, then laid the knife flat against his stomach, the sharpened tip pointing toward his chest.

“I’ve been watching you, you know. It was the email to Jack that convinced me.”

“Please. Don’t.” The words came hoarsely from his throat, the fear in his voice palpable in the hot night air. He didn’t want to die. Not like this. Not on a filthy parking garage floor.

She didn’t look at his face as she angled the knife thirty degrees away from the center of his chest, then shoved it up under his rib cage, grunting with the effort.

Phil felt the impact of the knife before the pain hit.

It made a soft thump as she embedded it in his body and a sickening *shuck* as she pulled it back out. Blood bubbled up from the wound, covering the woman's hands. The smell hit his nose right before excruciating pain racked his body.

Phil convulsed twice, then a third time, as the blood flowed and death approached.

He cracked open his eyes for one last look at life. She still knelt beside him, her face rigid as she wiped her hands on a towel and wrapped up the knife. He tried to focus his thoughts, the random pieces of information floating around in his mind. I almost chose you. The email to Jack. Then the confusion lifted and he understood.

But the knowing brought him no comfort.

Phil lay on the concrete floor, his breathing shallow and ragged, and watched as the world around him slipped away, the orange lights of the garage fading to black. He should have gone to Jack. He should have ignored it. He should have...

#

The woman watched the life leave his body and gave a small shudder. It was over. She moved carefully around the growing puddle of blood and nudged his leg with the toe of her black pump. No response.

She glanced around the garage but saw no one.

Retrieving a gym bag from her car, she stripped off her suit and pulled on a pair of running shorts and a tight Nike T-shirt. She rolled up the stained clothes and stuffed them in the gym bag along with her shoes and the towel holding the knife. She placed the bag in the trunk of her car along with Phil's wallet and briefcase and took one last look at the body before climbing into her car.

She took the back roads away from the building, watching her rearview mirror. The adrenaline flowed freely through her limbs and her hands trembled on the steering wheel. By the time she hit the interstate, her breathing had returned to normal.

Chapter Two

Earlier that evening, in a rural Texas Hill Country town, Maggie Johanssen sat at a desk hunched over her own pile of printouts, eyelids scraping painfully down and back up again with each blink. An empty bottle of Visine taunted her from the corner of the desk.

Her current client, CRS Business Solutions, had hired her to perform a cursory review of their network traffic after reading a newspaper article about employee electronic theft.

“Our management practices,” the vice president chose his words with legal precision, “particularly those regarding employee evaluation and termination, haven’t always been as polished as they could be. We have concerns.”

Like what? Get your shit and get out? What the man needed was a course in common sense. One on how not to be a total ass to your employees. Litigation – the new American pastime. Why complain about unemployment when you can sue?

But she had bitten her tongue because she needed the work.

Billing her clients under the ambiguous title of Network Securities Consultant, Maggie found her projects to be a combination of technical analysis, detective work and client therapy. Many of her clients, like CRS, wanted reassurances that their networks were secure from attacks by current employees and unknown outsiders. Others had general network problems such as viruses run amok or unauthorized emails being sent from their systems. Several faced ongoing

hacking issues, such as denial of service attacks on their web servers, or defaced sites that prevented them from doing business online.

Occasionally, Maggie would get cases where the attack was personal. In one case, a former employee accessed the CEO's email account and sent a company-wide email proclaiming his fondness for wearing his wife's lingerie. In another more lucrative case, an employee copied the product definition files of a new pharmaceutical drug still in the R&D phase before heading off to a competitive lab. Maybe the CRS files would turn up another juicy story like one of those. Or maybe she would spend another forty dull hours combing logs of innocent data.

Maggie backed her chair away from the desk, stretched until her back popped, and headed for the kitchen, her socks dragging on the carpet. The metal handle of the refrigerator shocked her.

She reached for a Diet Coke, carefully rapping it with her knuckles first. Her body's affinity for electricity was something she had endured all her life. Her dad loved to tease her, saying her dark, kinky hair was a result of sticking her finger into an outlet at an early age. She had his dark green eyes and olive skin but her mother's frame, small and supple, a runner's body. Her nose was slightly hooked, an everyday reminder of her Greek heritage.

Maggie popped open the soda and carried it back to the extra bedroom that served as a home office, and sat down at the large, mahogany desk, a gift from her father.

"Won't need this anymore," he had told her with a hint of sadness. Two years ago in the midst of the market crash, he traded a lifetime in the oil and gas industry for a healthy retirement package. Her parents packed up the bulk of their thirty-five years in the States and moved back to Greece. Maggie missed them more than she had expected to.

When she sat at this desk, she felt the need to work hard and succeed as he had, as if somehow even the thought of failure would blaspheme the furniture itself.

Maggie carefully sat her Coke on a coaster and refocused on the CRS project.

The server logs showed several entries for outside access of the system after normal working hours. A recurring pattern in her work. Most system break-ins occurred during the night. A little ironic given that daytime activity blended in better with normal network traffic.

But she couldn't change the facts, only work with the data that was presented.

Several different IP addresses were used for the after work access. She started by eliminating the legit ones. Maggie put a small dot next to all of the entries that matched the corporation's leased lines. She would check out the corporate veeps later. Right now she was interested in the other entries.

Maggie scanned the IP addresses of the remaining entries. Most of them were within the same range with a few random ones mixed in. Same address range, same host network. Whoever was breaking into the system was probably using their home Internet account for access. Idiots.

Tracking the points of entry to an Internet Service Provider based in Michigan took less than two minutes. It was a small shop. They had ten servers and could probably list most of their accounts by name.

Maggie put on her headset, switched over to email, selected a name and clicked Chat. A new window opened on her screen, the display divided into three portions. The left side of the screen sat blank awaiting the image of the recipient. The top of the right side listed the chat participants by screen name. The bottom wrote out the contents of the discussion.

Randy's hotline. The words scrolled onto the screen.

Hey Randy, it's Maggie. She typed, grinning at the screen. Randy was using the Tasmanian devil as his personal image today. She had turned off the photo-relay on her end, too wary to send her own image and too busy to come up with something cute.

What up, M?

They chatted a few minutes about nothing before Maggie brought it back around to work.

Can you talk?

Sure. Her earpiece clicked and then Randy's voice came over the line. "Hey."

"Hey, Randy." She disabled and deleted the chat log file. The typed comments disappeared. "Do you know anyone at Hotwerks? Based in Michigan."

"All Unix?"

"That's the one."

"Mmmm...maybe a friend of a friend." His standard noncommittal response. "What'cha need?"

"I'm working with a company called CRS. Based here in Round Rock, but with a global reach. Need to know if any of their employees use Hotwerks for access."

"I'll see what I can do. Anything interesting?"

"Not yet," Maggie said. "But I did run into a creative user of the Katrina virus last week."

"Spill."

"Someone snuck in through the HR system of one of our up-and-coming online institutions and allocated himself a buttload of stock options." She described the alterations made to the virus and the auto-run program used to install it. "Made close to four hundred grand when they took the company public."

"No kidding. Did he get busted?"

“On the run. But I heard the HR rep with the infected machine was fired.”

“Good,” he said. “Hey, if you see the modified file posted anywhere, send me a link. I’ll let you know on the other as soon as I have something.”

“Bueno.”

Maggie clicked off. That would give her a good starting point for the bulk of the addresses. She would tackle those first and save the random hits for the morning.

#

She was halfway through her backlog of must-see online videos when the phone rang. The screen listed the caller as Nikolai H. Dalakos and provided both his home address and phone number. Her brother.

Maggie clicked Answer. “Yo, dork.”

“Yo, bigger dork.”

“Still an ace with the wit, I see. Hold on while I switch to the phone.” She took off the headset and picked up her cordless.

“So, how are you?” she asked, heading into the kitchen again. They talked about family and friends while she worked on dinner, rinsing and chopping lettuce, sprinkling on black olives, feta cheese, slathering it with creamy dressing.

“Well, the reason I called –”

“Other than to talk to your favorite sister, of course,” Maggie said.

“My only sister, but yes, favored one, I need your help.”

“Talk to me.”

“It’s work-related. I want to hire you.”

She stopped tossing the salad and rolled her eyes.

“Nick, you know I don’t like working for family. It gets...complicated.”

“I know but this is a different sort of request.” He hesitated. “I need someone that I can trust. Completely.”

“Okay, I’ll bite.”

“I noticed some strange activity on the network while looking through the access logs the other day.”

“Like what?”

“Well, we set triggers in the system to record certain events, such as user logins. The network crews use this data to analyze system activity and determine when we have the most legitimate traffic or when repeated unsuccessful logins –“

“I know what an access log is, Nick,” she spouted, trying to keep the irritation from her voice. “So what’s up? Are you getting hacked?”

“All the time. Brad and his team do an awesome job of keeping the network locked down and the servers updated with the latest security patches.”

“Fulltime job.”

“No kidding. The costs of keeping our network clean are spiraling out of control. Between spam, viruses, bored hackers, you name it, I’m losing my ass. And our government won’t step in and do anything about it.”

“I’ll write my congressman.”

“Whatever. I’m just sick of wasting time and money on these bastards.” Maggie heard him take and release a deep breath.

“So back to your network problem...”

“Right. So, one of the practices we have implemented with the team is timely follow up on all unsuccessful logins. Legitimate attempts are sent to Customer Service, usually forgotten passwords or expired accounts. Illegal attempts are tracked back to the source.”

“Sounds like they have it under control.”

“They do. But there was something else in the logs that concerned me. Something that may not be of any importance or may be of extreme significance.”

“Depending on...”

“Depending on what you tell me after looking at the logs.”

“Not to state the obvious, but why aren’t you asking Brad to look into it? I mean, that is what he gets paid for, right?”

Maggie had faced more than her fair share of pissed off network managers. She wasn’t anxious to start poking her nose into someone else’s territory again.

“It’s a rather sensitive issue,” Nick said.

“It always is.”

“Well, this one could cause problems internally if my concerns are without merit. I need to bring in someone from the outside. Someone really exceptional and naturally, I thought of you.”

“Ah, the sweetest words.”

“All true. So, if you’ve got nothing pressing, can you make a road trip down here tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow? What’s the rush?”

“I want this cleared up as soon as possible.”

“God, you’re such a client.” She thought about the small stack of files sitting on the corner of her desk. Every one of them wanted her on their issues yesterday. “What’s this all about, anyway?”

“I’ll fill you in on the details when you get in tomorrow.”

“Can’t you give me the details now so I can be thinking about it? It might save me a trip.”

“Well, it involves one of our partners. Look Maggie, I’d really rather talk to you in person about this. It’s probably nothing. Besides,” he said, his voice brightening, “I haven’t seen you in ages. Diana and I are planning to take the boat out this weekend for some R&R. Why don’t you stay an extra night or two and come with us?”

Maggie stifled a groan. She loved her brother, but not his wife. Diana was beautiful all right, but there was something hard about her, like the way an ex-con always stood coiled to fight, watching and aware, tense and suspicious. She had tried to talk to Nick about it before the wedding but couldn’t come up with the right words to describe her reservations.

In desperation, she had finally run it by her best friend, Jenna.

“Yeah, definitely a bitch at the core.”

A little relief in knowing she wasn’t the only one. “So what am I going to do?”

“Nick happy?”

“Beyond happy.”

Jenna shrugged. “Suck it up, girl.”

So she had shut her mouth and smiled for the photos. And Diana had never been anything but pleasant to her since the day they met. And yet...

“Hello? Earth to Maggie.”

“Sorry.” She really did want to see her brother. Any bit of family would do at this point.
“I think I could trade services for an overnight boat trip.”

“You’re a hero.”

Maggie popped an olive into her mouth and rolled it around. Nick was an excellent programmer and network analyst in his own right. If he was asking for her help now, it must be something big.

#

After licking the last of the salad dressing from her fork, Maggie checked her current email accounts and found a new message, sender ‘taz9951’. Randy. Must have been a no-brainer.

She scanned the attached file for viruses, unzipped it and read the names of eleven employees based in Detroit who used Hotwerks for their Internet access. She compared this list to her printout, spotted seven sales reps, and immediately drew a line through those names. Maggie hadn’t met a sales guy yet with the kind of technical snap needed to break into the multimillion dollar systems they sold. That left her with one office manager and three support reps.

Accessing the corporate data files, she copied the usernames of the four potential problem employees to Notepad, returned to the command line and searched the system for all activity performed by these users within the last ninety days. The screen filled with data and continued scrolling for several seconds. 56289 entries. Next she filtered this list to show only those occurring between the hours of 10:00 PM and midnight. The system responded with twenty-four entries. Now she was getting somewhere.

Only two of the IDs showed up in this list, SMITGO and STEVJA. According to the personnel report, SMITGO was Gordon Smith, the office manager. STEVJA was Janie Stevens, one of the support reps.

Maggie started with the manager. Filtering the list again for only SMITGO, she followed the first entry to the personnel file of Andrew Hale, another manager in the Michigan area.

Interesting. He was looking at the personnel files. But not his own.

“Gordo, you little sneak.”

Each entry showed him accessing a different file in the personnel records. After checking out Hale, he reviewed the history of nine managers in Round Rock, seven others scattered throughout the country, and the four vice presidents. Time logs showed the files opened for a period of forty-five to ninety minutes each.

“Looking. But did you change anything?” She scanned the audit trail. “Nope. Just browsing.”

She turned her attention to STEVJA. There were only five entries for Janie in the list. The first led to Janie’s own personnel file.

“Hmmm. Not a very good review there, Janie. Low marks on attendance and attitude.”

The next entry was logged ten minutes later and went to Janie’s payroll record. She had been with the company for eighteen months. Salary okay, not great. Minimal raises each of the first two six-month evaluation periods. No raise on the last one.

“Oh, but what’s this?” Maggie checked the timestamps on the file. “Clever girl.”

There was a slight difference in Janie’s salary, very slight. Using the desktop calculator, Maggie figured a 0.75% raise was granted to Janie seventy-three days ago at 11:12 p.m.

The other three entries for Janie showed another quarter percent increase in her salary, another review of her personnel file and then a bigger two and three-quarters percent raise.

“Busted.”

Maggie made a final comparison of the record timestamps to the system's firewall access log. Someone using the ISP in Michigan had definitely made those changes. That was as far as she could go. If the company wanted to pursue official charges, they could work with the ISP. Most likely, they would present Janie with the evidence and ask her to leave.

“Well, you deserve it,” she said. “Next time, don't be so sloppy.”

She shuffled the printouts, feeling satisfied to have netted a bad fish. It was much easier to present a bill to the clients when she could prove the value of her work. The other random IP addresses were probably local field reps but she would have to clear each and every one before wrapping up the project. And she did bill by the hour. Maggie drafted an email to the CRS IT manager with a brief summary of Janie's activities. That was theft, pure and simple.

But what about Gordon Smith? He was just a petty snoop, poking his nose into other people's business. Wrong, yes. Illegal? Probably that too. He'd have to go in the file, too. But first...

Maggie constructed a quick, little program to run unnoticed in the system; then re-accessed the CRS system and uploaded the file. The program was set to delete itself after the first run.

The next time Gordon Smith tried to open the personnel file of anyone at his level or higher, he would see “Access denied, you nosy little prick.”

Chapter Three

As dawn broke the next morning, Maggie sat on her limestone patio, feet propped up in the chair across from her, and sipped her first cup of coffee for the day. The sun was still low in the sky, sending fingers of orange and yellow through the trunks of the scrubby cedar trees huddled across the property. This was her favorite part of the day, when the air was still cool from the night before and the world was quietly stirring to life.

She scanned the tree line that edged her property, looking for deer, and wondered for the hundredth time if she had made the right decision moving out here. Sixteen months ago, she had become a widow at age thirty-three, after a car accident stole her husband from her. Now she was here, alone.

Back when the economy was booming, she and Matt had spent many weekends in the hill country of central Texas, seeking out small, secluded bed and breakfasts nestled along the Blanco River. They spent their nights dancing at Gruene Hall, their mornings in bed, and their afternoons driving down small dirt roads, a local real estate rag dictating their route. The plan was to let their investments ride to the top of the crest, then cash out and move to the country. Start a family, get a dog, enjoy the good life.

“Chickens,” he had said one night as they lay on the bed, mapping out the plans for the property.

“What?”

“Chickens. We need chickens on our land.”

“Ugh, no. No chickens.” Maggie screwed up her face and stuck out her tongue.

“Why not? Fresh eggs? Fresh chicken?”

“I can’t stand chickens.”

“You love chicken.”

“I love dead chickens. Plucked, cleaned, and ready to stick in the oven.”

“What’s wrong with live chickens?”

“They are messy and nasty.”

“You’re messy and nasty, but I still love you,” he teased. She had punched him for that one and was tackled in return. Maggie wrestled her way back on top but only for a moment. Matt quickly pinned her again and sat there on all fours, looking down at her with a smug smile. Unable to move her arms, Maggie lifted her foot and slowly moved it up the inside of his thigh, a smile spreading over her face.

“Cheater,” he said, the victorious look in his eyes changing to one of passion. He leaned down and kissed her deeply. They struggled out of their clothes, their bodies still crushed together and made love to the sound of the rural maps crinkling beneath them.

Afterward, as they lay on their backs, staring at the ceiling, catching their breath, he whispered those loving words.

“I want chickens.”

It had been a great plan.

In reality, the market had dropped without warning. She and Matt were both laid off from their lucrative positions at different high-tech companies and their robust investment portfolio dissolved into worthless paper within a few short months. They watched in disbelief as one by

one, the top executives of the nation's leading companies were exposed for plundering their own firms. Some of their closest friends lost their homes, or got divorced, or both. The "M&M Ranch" sign Matt had bought was stored in a closet in the back room. Their dreams for the good life put on hold.

And then the call had come. There had been an accident. The wallet identified the driver as Matthew Johannsen of this address. Does your husband drive a black Camry? Yes. Can you come down to the station? Yes. Should I send someone to come pick you up? No. She called Jenna. Together they went down to the morgue. Together they watched the sheet pulled back and seen his face.

When the life insurance money came through, Maggie sold their small vintage home in the Heights, bought a ten-acre plot of land in Driftwood, a small town outside of Wimberley, and set up the M&M Ranch.

"Just the Single M Ranch, now," Maggie said aloud, the sound of her voice breaking her out of the morning reverie. She would've wiped away a tear but there were none left. Maggie slipped her feet into her waiting sandals and headed toward the chicken coop.

#

Maggie saw the feathers on the ground before she reached the pen.

"God bless it! Not again." She knelt next to the scant remains of what used to be one of her chicks. The soft dirt still held the paw prints of the culprit. Maggie scanned the tree line again. Nothing. Whatever was eating her birds was either long gone or well hidden.

How the hell did it get in? The last time was her fault. The latch wire had broken and she had simply pushed the door closed. The next morning, the chickens were roaming the backyard, three of them missing, a partial chicken foot next to the brooding boxes the only clue to their disappearance. But she had repaired the gate.

Maggie walked the outside perimeter of the pen, looking for breaks in the wire. The chickens followed her around on the inside, clucking softly to her as they waited for their breakfast. The fencing was intact. Then she found it. At the back of the coop facing the trees, something had dug a large hole under the fence, large enough for the predator to get in. She knelt and touched the dirt. It was cool and crumbly, still fresh.

Instinctively she looked back over her shoulder toward the tree line. All was still. She hefted a large rock from the pile near the driveway and dropped it into the hole, then walked around to the front of the coop and stepped into the pen. The birds came toward her, their heads bobbing up and down as they looked for the food they knew was coming. She lifted the can of feed off a nail and scooped out a small handful. Then started counting. Eleven. He had gotten two more of the youngsters. Maggie looked at the one adult rooster in the bunch.

“And what were you doing while he was attacking your family?” She scolded gently. The rooster lifted his head and looked at her sideways as if he was going to answer. Then took two steps in her direction.

Maggie grabbed the long, heavy stick that was leaning on the fence and waved it at him.

“Back off, Rocky.” She warned, jabbing the stick in his direction.

The rooster stretched out his wings and fluffed his neck feathers for good measure. Then returned to his breakfast.

She replaced the feed can and backed out of the pen, looping the wire handle securely over the top of the support post. Then found some old two by fours in the shed and laid these next to the fencing around the outside of the pen, filling the gaps with the limestone rocks that covered her property. Maggie stepped back to survey her work. It would do until she got back from Houston.

Rocky stopped mid-peck and lifted his head. A strange low sound bubbled from his throat and then hens formed a tight group behind him, all facing the tree line. The hairs on Maggie's arms stood up on end and a strange feeling filled her stomach. Something was watching them. She turned toward the tree line herself, saw nothing, and started toward it slowly, her ears pricked forward, her eyes searching the brush.

A soft breeze came up, sending a ripple through the leaves in front of her. Maggie took another step. The chickens waited in silence.

Then she saw them.

Two yellow eyes peering through the dense undergrowth.

Fear surged through her body. Run. No, freeze. Shit. What the hell was she doing out here unprotected? The eyes were locked on hers, challenging, unswerving. She groped wildly behind her, searching in vain for the rooster stick. The beast stood stock still, three feet tall in the wild grass, its muscular body covered in thick fur. German Shepherd? But the colors weren't right. And those yellow eyes.

In a flash, it was gone. The eyes disappeared, taking the rest of the dog-like animal with them. She heard only a slight rustle and then nothing. Maggie let out her breath and started backing toward the house, keeping her eyes trained on the woods. When she reached the back patio, she turned and ran.

#

An hour later, showered and dressed in a white cotton shirt and khaki pants, Maggie maneuvered her truck down the gravel path that doubled as a driveway. In the rearview mirror, she could see her chickens gathered around the automatic feeder in their pen, pecking at the spouts protruding from the bottom. They would be fine for a few days, at least as far as fresh food and water were concerned.

She hit the garage door opener and waited as the iron gate that blocked entry to her drive swung inward. Across the street, her neighbor's lot stood quiet, the rundown trailer hidden behind a thick grove of live oak trees and mounds of overgrown weeds. The battered pickup was gone. Maggie relaxed into her seat. J.Clark, per the rusted mailbox, gave her the creeps.

Maybe that creature belonged to him. Wild, unfriendly. Dangerous.

Maggie turned onto the paved road and followed the twists and turns out to the county road. Then turned south and drove the ten minutes to the small town of Kyle. She pulled into Bubba's to get gas, a pack of cigarettes, some beef jerky and a bottled water.

"Where you headed today, Maggie?" the cashier asked, as she rang up the items on the counter.

"Back to Houston."

"Business or pleasure?"

"Neither," Maggie said. "Family."

The woman behind the counter laughed and started putting the items into a small sack. Maggie thought back to her chickens.

"Do you know if there are any wolves in this area?"

"Nope. Last wolf they caught was back in the eighties, a real pretty gray female. None since then." She cocked her head. "Why? Think you seen one?"

"I saw *something* this morning. It looked like a big dog but there was something un-doglike about it. Something wild."

"Hmph. Nope. We used to have wolves, long time ago. But they were hunted to extinction," she winked at Maggie, "with the help of my daddy. He always said they weren't good for nothing but killing."

“There aren’t any more just running loose? You know, like the deer?”

“Oh, some people claim to have seen one but I doubt it. Probably just big coyotes. The thing about wolves is that them’s pack animals. You never see just one. Against their nature. Now coyotes, they run alone. Like it that way.”

“Maybe so. But this thing looked bigger than a coyote, meatier. And it’s killed a bunch of my chickens. I’m wondering if it’s a dog that’s gotten out.”

“Could be.” The old woman snorted. “When do the attacks happen? Morning? Afternoon?”

“Night or early morning, I think. If something was going on out there during the day, I would probably hear it. It’s during the morning feed that I find the feathers.”

“Just feathers, huh? Hmm.” The woman screwed up her face in thought. “What about the other chickens? Are they injured? Spooked?”

“Nope. They seem fine.”

“Well, it sure sounds like a wolf. See, here’s the difference. Dogs are bred to live off humans. When they get into a pen, you can bet your last nickel they will chase every one of them birds, leaving a bunch of them hurt, some dead and half-eaten. They’re just playing, having some fun.”

She paused to light up a Winston, took a long drag and blew a plume of smoke over Maggie’s head before continuing.

“Wolves, on the other hand, they are pure hunters. It’s in their blood. They don’t kill for fun. They kill to eat. A wolf will sit back and watch, quiet as a mouse, carefully choose the one it wants and then bam! Kill it in one move. Then they eat it nose to tail, either on the spot or dragging it back to the den for their pups.”

Maggie shivered at the image. “Well, why is it eating the little ones? Why doesn’t it go after the hens? Or the rooster? He’s huge.”

“Don’t make no sense to a hunter. Wolves are smart,” she said, leaning forward and tapping the side of her head with her finger. “They pick the small, the weak. Them they can kill without a fight. Don’t want to get hurt or cause a ruckus that will bring you on the run.”

She leaned back and took another drag from her cigarette.

“But I doubt you have a wolf. Like I said, there ain’t none left.”

“Hmph.” Maggie picked up the small sack of groceries.

“Except for that breeder down in Boerne.”

She set the groceries back down. “Someone breeds them locally?”

“Yeah. Some tree-hugger group set up a big outfit on the government’s dollar. Wants to bring the gray wolf back from the edge of extinction,” she said with a sneer. “Real nice place from what I hear. Steel cages, big shot experts on wolf breeds. Ships in the beasts from all over the country.”

“You don’t sound very happy about it.”

“Like I said, wolves aren’t good for nothing but killing.” The old woman’s face crinkled into a smile. “Now get to Houston. Find one of them good-looking city boys and go out on the town. Kick up your heels a little.”

“I’ll see what I can do.”

Maggie turned toward the door and came to a sudden stop.

A large tank of a man filled the doorway, blocking the morning sun, his face shadowed by the light streaming in around it. J.Clark stood there, dirty overalls stretched over a protruding beer belly, beard unkempt, looking at Maggie with eyes sunk deep in the folds of his round face.

“Hey, Jimbo,” the cashier said.

J.Clark pulled his eyes away from Maggie and started toward the back of the store, his heavy work boots clumping on the wood floor, his enormous bulk filling the small space. Maggie gave him a slight nod of her head and skirted past him, willing herself not to run out the door.

The battered truck that was absent this morning was now parked next to hers. A dead deer lay in a heap in the bed, a bloody trail left by its body as it was dragged over the tailgate. It was May, definitely not hunting season. One of the legs was twisted at an impossible angle, obviously broken. What the hell did he do? Beat it to death?

Maggie climbed in her truck, opened the pack of cigarettes, turned the first one upside down for luck, and pulled onto the freeway.

#

Three hours later, Maggie parked in a visitor space outside of OPTIN. Two cops in uniform leaned against an HPD squad car parked along the curb, talking in low voices. They nodded to her as she walked by, their mirrored glasses glinting in the midday sun. One of them sucked on a toothpick. The other chewed gum.

Maggie opened the tall, arched door to the building and stepped inside a small chamber where a second set of glass doors blocked her entrance. A soft buzzing sound filled the space, followed by a click, and the woman behind the reception desk motioned for her to enter.

It was cool and dark inside, a welcome contrast to the heat of the Texas highways.

The entrance to the building was impressive, as was intended when designed by the partners a few years ago. Martin Shale, the partner with money, was the primary force behind the architecture. Influenced by a passion for railroading history, he had the lobby built to resemble the train stations of the nineteenth century, with an affluent twist.

The ceiling extended up to the third floor of the building with massive skylights forming a domed roof, the glass tinted to deflect the intensity of the sun. Huge iron girders curved up the walls and arched toward the middle of the room, joining together thirty feet above the ground. Large globes of frosted glass banded with iron belts dropped from the roof by steel cables in replication of the old gaslights used in the stations. An antique clock displayed the current time.

And then there was the train. A full-size, completely restored steam locomotive from the 1800's occupied the right half of the lobby. A small plaque at the base stated,

The locomotive once transformed the way of life.

So will those who harness the power of the Internet.

Through a bullet-proof glass wall behind the engine, thousands of servers ran twenty-four seven, processing requests, serving up data, storing billions if not trillions of dollars of financial information at any given moment.

Maggie gave her name to the receptionist then drifted over toward the antique engine.

Over fifty feet in length with driving wheels five feet in diameter, the machine was beautiful and outrageous at the same time. The locomotive was an 1852 4-4-0 engine, the one that redefined the American frontier, its wheel composition designed to accommodate the undulating and often rough condition of the railway under development. The bell and steam domes were polished to a military sheen. The name "Cavalry" was painted lovingly on the side of the boiler. Shale bragged that the train was originally the one chosen for the Andrews Raid back during The War Between the States but it had been held up in Kingston. No one believed him but he didn't care. In Shale's lobby, the flanged wheels hugged a small section of track, ready to roll if called upon.

A small group of employees dressed in navy suits and skirts started down the stairs.

Pieces of their conversation drifted through the cavernous lobby.

“Yeah, they talked to everyone in Account Setup also.”

“It’s scary.”

“Poor Christy. Can you imagine?”

“Is she still here?”

“I think Sandra took her home.”

“Talk about needing a Valium.”

Nervous laughter ran through the group.

“I wish the cops would leave.”

“I wish they would stay. Forever.”

“Leon told me you can still see the stains on the concrete.”

“I don’t know if I can eat.”

“There’s supposed to be a meeting this afternoon.”

Their voices faded as they disappeared around the corner. Maggie stared after them.

What the hell was that about?

“Maggie!” Her brother’s voice boomed across the lobby.

Nick Dalakos, not quite four years’ her senior, was just under six feet tall with dark curly hair prematurely flecked with gray and cropped close to his head. His olive skin was swarthy from many weekends spent on the boat, almost concealing an ever-present five o’clock shadow. His deep green eyes matched hers to a tee. He was dressed in a dark Armani suit with a crisp white shirt, heavily starched, pulled tightly over his once muscular frame now softer and fuller

from age and affluence. He reached her in three long easy strides and swept her up in a big bear hug.

“Hey, Nicky,” Maggie said, the childish address slipping out from somewhere deep inside. “It’s good to see you.”

Nick stepped back and held her at arm’s length. “Good to see you, too, Maggie Moo.” His smile faded a little, concern crept into his eyes and he looked closer. “How are you doing?”

“I’m doing great. You?”

His face slammed shut. “Other than finding one of my guys dead in the garage, this morning, I’m doing fine.”

Chapter Four

They passed through the company cafeteria, a large gray room filled with round industrial dining tables and hard plastic chairs. Despite the number of young suited professionals, the vacuous room was unnaturally quiet, the muted conversations blending into an industrial hum dotted with an occasional sob. Maggie followed Nick through a frosted glass door into the executive lunchroom.

In here was a smaller, cozier space with plush carpet, wooden tables, wall sconces and cushioned seats. There was only one other person in the room who nodded gravely in their direction before returning to his laptop.

“Oh my God, Nick. So what the hell happened?” Maggie asked as she unloaded a baked potato and glass of iced tea from her tray.

Nick sighed. “From what the police said, he was attacked as he walked to his car last night. The keypunch log shows him leaving the building around a quarter to three in the morning. The medical examiner says it probably happened as soon as he got to the parking lot.”

“Who was it?”

“Phil Barnes. Did you ever meet him?”

Maggie shook her head. “I don’t think so.”

“Well, he was a great guy and an incredible programmer. One of our best. Hired him personally.”

“Was anyone else here? Did anyone see anything?”

“We had two guys here on the midnight shift but they were doing backups of the system between two and four. Even if they had been sitting at their desks, they wouldn’t have heard anything. They had no idea anything happened. No one did until one of the service reps found him this morning. Called nine-one-one from her car. When the cops showed up, she was still sitting in the driver’s seat with her headlights on, not five feet away from him.”

“Oh, Nick. I am so sorry.” She reached across the table for his hand. “How’s everyone holding up?”

“Okay, I guess. The cops have been here all day, talking to as many folks as they can. Nothing is getting done. No big surprise there. The bulk of the system activity has been email, instant messaging, requests for additional security, armed guards, more lights.”

“Don’t you have video cameras in the parking garage?”

“Yeah, but they don’t cover the entire lot. We scanned the tapes this morning. Nothing. It must have occurred outside the range of vision. The cops took them anyway to see if they can get something out of them.”

“And you have access controlled gates on the parking lots, right? I mean, what else can you do to make this place more secure? Add barbed wire to keep them from climbing in?”

“I know. I don’t know what to do. Whoever did it must have somehow gotten an access card.”

“Or climbed the fence.”

“No. They had a car.” Nick looked around. The other man had left and they were alone in the small room. “This is confidential info. For now anyway.” He leaned forward. “According to our logs, the exit gate to the garage opened about ten minutes after Phil left the office.”

“So they either followed someone into the parking lot earlier in the day or had an access card.”

“And if they had an access card...”

“Then someone who works here...”

“Might be involved. *Might be*. Someone could have lost their card months ago. We don’t know for sure.”

“Anything stolen?”

“His wallet.” Nick looked down at his plate. “And maybe his briefcase. It wasn’t in his cubicle. The police are checking his apartment.”

Maggie ducked her head and leaned across the table, trying to read his expression.

“Nick, what is it? Wait. You don’t think this is related to the matter you called me about yesterday, do you?”

“I doubt it.”

“But you told the police about it, just in case.”

He looked up at her with blank eyes and said nothing.

“Oh my God. Nick, you have to tell them!”

Nick’s eyes flashed with an intensity that made her draw back from the table. But he spoke softly. “No, Maggie. I don’t. I have no idea if the two are related.”

“I’d say there’s a pretty good chance.”

“And I say maybe.” His voice grew stronger. “This place is a madhouse. Everyone is on edge. Half our employees went home after hearing the news. Now is not the time to wave a big red flag around saying ‘Oh and by the way, I can’t keep our network secure either.’” Nick sighed

deeply, regaining his composure. “I need to keep this information to myself until we can figure out just what the hell is going on.”

“We who?”

“We, me. And hopefully, you.”

“Uh-uh.” She shook her head slowly from side to side, holding his stare. “No way.”

“Come on, Maggie. I need your expertise now more than I did yesterday. If the two incidents are related, we are looking at a much larger problem than I thought. Phil was murdered. Think about it. How much would it take for you to kill someone?”

“I hadn’t really looked into a career as a professional hit man.” She glared at him in disbelief. “What’s the going rate?”

Nick sighed, refusing the bait. “Well, I have thought about it and my answer is *a lot*. Unless this was a random mugging, someone desperately wanted what was in his briefcase.”

“So what was in there? Work stuff?”

“Shouldn’t have been. We have a strict policy against removing company documents, including copies of software, from the building.”

“But you think he was taking stuff home.”

“I know the programmers work offsite. Competition is fierce, from both the market and among the employees.” Nick held up his hands in a half-shrug. “I’ve been looking the other way because I like the results.”

“Do you think Phil was attacked by one of your competitors? Is that the angle the police are investigating?”

“It’s one of them. It could be the result of something in his personal life or he could have just been in the wrong place at the wrong time.” He looked at her sincerely. “But I think it is highly unlikely his death is related to the issue I need you to look at.”

“Why’s that?”

“I just don’t see any connection.”

“What is this super secret issue? The one that we know is not related to the murder?”

“The access reports I mentioned last night? They show Shale logging into the system from home.”

“And this is a cause for concern? He’s still a partner, right?”

“Definitely a partner. We wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t for Martin. But Maggie, the man doesn’t know a single thing about computers. He can’t even type. His secretary prints his email and brings it to him throughout the day.”

“Neanderthal.” She rolled her eyes but felt the worm of curiosity inching its way into her brain. “So why the hell would he log in from home?”

“That’s just it. I don’t think he is. I doubt he has a computer at home. He has one in his office to impress the clients but has never turned it on.”

“So who’s logging in on his account?”

“Don’t know.”

“What if he just learned how to use the computer and was too embarrassed to tell you? Maybe he has a tutor coming to his house to help him.”

“Between one and four in the morning?”

“Maybe she’s a full-service tutor.” Maggie laughed at her own joke. Nick didn’t. “So, what’s he doing in the system? Did you follow the trail?”

“There is no trail,” he said slowly.

“What do you mean, no trail? What programs did he access?”

“I can’t tell. I ran a quick check out of curiosity. There is nothing in the system logs between the account login and logout times. It just doesn’t make sense.”

“Weird.” Maggie took a sip of her drink. “I still think you should tell the police about it. I’m sure HPD has electronic intelligence experts on staff who handle this type of stuff.”

“Yeah and they would call in someone like you to figure it out. I’m going straight to the source. Besides, it could turn out to be nothing and I would look like an idiot.” Nick ran a hand over the whiskers on his face. “Come on, Maggie. Please? You’ll be safe at my house. No late nights at the office alone. I promise.”

Maggie pushed away her uneaten lunch. “I don’t know, Nick. Just being in the building right now is freaking me out a little.”

“No kidding. Look, please just stay the night. Please? Diana’s down on the boat and won’t be back tonight. We can go over the network access, you can work your wonder woman powers, figure out what is happening and then go home tomorrow.”

Maggie looked at him. He was pleading with her. She kind of liked that. “Fine, I’ll stay. But just for one night.”

“Thanks, Mags.” He stood. “I have to go prepare for the meeting this afternoon. Do you want me to pick up Chinese on my way home?”

“I’m meeting Jenna for dinner.”

“Sweet. Too bad she was already married by the time I made my fortune.”

“She wouldn’t have you anyway.”

“In that case, tell her I said hello.”

#

Upstairs, on the fourth floor, Charlie Connor sat in his office with the door closed, breaking management rule number one. *Managers will keep their doors open at all times unless conducting confidential business.* Sweat gathered along his brow and soaked his collar. He loosened his tie and unbuttoned the top button of his shirt, acutely aware that he was breaking another company policy. His fingernails were chewed down to the quick and he nervously tapped his pencil on the desk, the rhythmic beat covering up the muffled sound of chaos. The Programming department was unnaturally and frustratingly noisy today, making it impossible for him to concentrate.

As manager of the Accounting software group, one of the things Charlie never needed to address with his team was excessive socialization. His introverted employees tended to stay in their cubicles, preferring their computers over the pressure of human conversation. Today they were gathered in small groups, at their desks, in the halls, many of them clutching tissues, some of them letting the tears fall without shame. None of them working.

Their incessant chatter was grating on his last nerve and Charlie had banged his door shut hours ago to shut out the noise. The fact that the commotion was all about Phil made it doubly hard to endure.

Phil had already been designated a shining star when Charlie joined OPTIN five years ago. They worked together in the Accounting group, Charlie's achievements forever tempered by the shadow of the great Phil Barnes. When a management position opened up, Phil was the natural choice, recommended by his co-workers and the other managers. Recommended, in fact, by everyone but Charlie. To their surprise, Phil had turned down the promotion, choosing instead to move into Special Teams.

Charlie had been elated. Now, out from underneath the wings of his tormentor, he would have the opportunity to show them his greater intellect. The first thing he wanted to do was rewrite some of the sloppy code that Phil had left behind. He began working nights and weekends, fighting for a better solution, a new way that would revolutionize the way the system was programmed. He would be the new star, the real legend of the department. After six months, Charlie was offered the management position rejected by Phil.

He had triumphantly moved his files into the small, inner office reserved for managers and immediately ordered new business cards, insisting on reviewing the proof personally to make sure the title and new extension were correct. By the end of the first day, he had re-recorded his voicemail message, changed his email signature block, re-labeled his company materials and made notations of suggestions he would submit over the next several weeks. From his new position, Charlie would now write the programs that would gain him company-wide recognition and respect.

A year later, he found his quest sidetracked by the mundane tasks of approving vacations and handling performance reviews. Instead of writing new code, he was forced to wade through lines of poorly written script, forever reviewing the work of his subordinates, viciously scratching through their printouts with a red pen, scribbling illegible notes in the margins. Phil, to his frustration, continued to impress the entire world just by showing up for work.

Someone knocked on Charlie's door, startling him back to reality. The tip of his pencil snapped on the desk calendar and flew across the room.

One of the other managers opened the door and stuck her head in. "Hey, Charlie."

"Elena." He felt the sweat start up again.

She squeezed through the crack in the door and sat down. "How're you holding up?"

“Um, okay. How about you?”

“Okay, I guess.”

His cell phone sat in the middle of the desk. He had been waiting all day for it to ring. What if the call came while Elena was in here? Should he answer it or let it roll to voicemail? Surely she could see the name readout from where she was sitting.

“— whole department is pretty freaked out.”

“What? Oh, um, yeah. That’s why I’m hiding in here.”

“I don’t blame you.” She looked around the small room, surveying his collection of programming books and Jedi memorabilia before settling on a Rookie of the Month award from his early days with the company. “How’s the rest of your team doing?”

“I don’t know. Like I said, I’ve been in hiding.”

There was a slight edge to his voice that ripped her eyes away from the award and back to his face. Shit, wrong emotion. He softened his expression into what he hoped was one of helplessness.

“Sorry. I just don’t know what to say to them. I’m still trying to come to grips with it myself.” It was the truth.

“Yeah,” she said, still watching him warily. He tried for a neutral, poker face.

“Um, ready for the meeting this afternoon?”

When was she going to leave? He stole a quick glance at his cell.

“Guess as ready as I can be,” she said. Thankfully, finally, she stood. “Well, hang in there.”

“Don’t let the door hit ya,” Charlie muttered as the door closed behind her.

The phone rang two minutes later, displaying a number he didn't recognize. He snatched it off his desk and flipped it open two bars into the dance track.

"Hey, Charlie."

"Where the hell are you? What the fuck happened last night?"

"At a grocery store. And I assume you already know the answer to the second question."

"Oh, God," Charlie said, slumping over the desk.

"Look, Charlie, I –"

"So it's true. You killed him."

"Shut up, Charlie."

"Shut up? This place is a fucking zoo! The cops are everywhere. The parking garage is roped off. Everyone, including me, is fucking freaked out!"

"Has Jack said anything to you?"

"What?"

"Has Jack said anything to you about the Accounting program?"

"No. Not yet. But you know, that's not really at the top of everyone's list right now. We're all kind of busy talking about the *murder*."

A face appeared at the narrow window in his door and quickly vanished. Charlie sat upright and ran a hand through his hair. He needed to keep his voice and appearance under control.

"I know that's not what we had planned but –"

"But what? What can you possibly say next to explain what happened?"

“Goddamn it, Charlie. Chill out.” She paused and he heard the cry of seagulls in the background. “I didn’t want to. I just didn’t see any other choice. He had figured it out. Philip had decoded your perfect, unbreakable code.”

That hurt. But she was the one who killed him.

“And he was going to talk to Jack this morning. I couldn’t let the interfering little over-achiever ruin everything.” Her voice turned plaintive. “What other choice did I have?”

Another face at the window. Another rapid departure. He must look like hell. Charlie put a hand to his brow to shield his face. “We could’ve come up with something. I don’t know. You should have talked to me first.”

“There wasn’t time.”

“Lucky for us you just happened to be here, fully prepared.”

Charlie stared at his desk. He needed another valium.

“What’s done is done. What we need to do now is make sure he didn’t leave any notes lying around, any copies of the files.”

“That’ll be tough. There’s a steady stream of mourners passing by his desk like a goddamn funeral procession.”

“So get in line. But check his desk.” Her voice was demanding, sending a wave of irritation through him. He was the one having to bear up under the pressure of the backlash. She was safely tucked away somewhere.

“I’ll try.”

“You have to do better than try, Charlie. You have to do it.”

“Or what? You’ll kill me, too?”

“Just check. I have his briefcase but he may have left some stuff at the office.”

Charlie took two deep breaths. He had to focus. He wanted on that computer more than she realized. Phil's work would expose the weaknesses in his program, information he could use to make it stronger. But if Phil had taken the solution with him last night, the only way to get it was through her.

"Okay. I'll hit his desk. You check the briefcase. I need any notes or files he had in there."

"Whatever. Just clean his desk. And do it before Jack does."

"I've got to go."

"Alright. I'm out of touch this weekend. Call you Monday."

Charlie closed the cell and covered his face with his hands. If anyone looked in, he was grieving. He needed time to come up with a plan.

#

A simple plan was the best plan.

Charlie opened the door to his office and waited for the noise level to drop. When it sounded as if most of the employees had returned to their desks, he left the sanctuary of his office, strode toward the cubicles and turned down the row leading to Phil's desk.

Joaquin "Jack" Rincon, Phil's supervisor and Charlie's second-most detested co-worker, was standing at the entrance to Barnes' cubicle. With his good looks and Latin charm, Jack not only held the women in the palm of his hand but had also entranced the executive team. Nick had chosen Jack to head up Special Teams. Jack had chosen Phil to join him. Charlie was not invited to the party, even though he was smarter than them all. He had the IQ test scores to prove it.

"Hey, Jack." Charlie said as he walked up behind him. "I didn't know anyone was still here. I'll come back later." But he remained where he was.

"No need to leave." Jack said. "I'm just..."

Charlie followed Jack's gaze to the collection of snapshots that had been pinned to the wall throughout the day. There was one of Phil with his teammates at the bowling alley celebrating a group success. There was another of Phil at the company Christmas party, holding a drink in one hand, a cigar in the other. He suppressed a smile.

"Yeah, it's weird," Charlie said. "So, I guess you have to clean out his desk."

"Nick called about an hour ago. Asked me to get his personal effects together."

"What about his work stuff?"

"I'm going to have to go through that too."

Charlie relaxed. There was still time.

"Need any help?" he asked.

"No, I'll do it."

"I mean, I've got some time—"

"I said I'll do it, Charlie. What's the rush?"

"Oh, uh, no rush. Just trying to help."

Charlie rubbed a sweaty palm on his pants legs and looked around.

"Hey, I saw some empty paper boxes in the break room," he said, gesturing down the hall with his thumb. "I mean, if you need something to put all his stuff in."

"Thanks. I'll get them later."

"Well, I think I saw Carlos headed up to get the trash."

Jack looked at him with blatant irritation. "Would you mind getting me one?"

"Um, sure. I need to talk with one of the guys on the team first. Should only take about thirty minutes or so. Then I'll get you one."

"Forget it," Jack said. "I'll do it."

Charlie waited until Jack disappeared around the corner then surveyed the cubicle.

Each cube was equipped with a bookshelf, a computer, a phone, a chair, and a standard beige desk supported by two sets of drawers, one on either side. Charlie bent down and pulled on the bottom drawer of the left cabinet. Locked. He tried the right one. Also locked. The middle drawer opened easily, revealing a few empty pads of paper. The other three drawers contained nothing but business cards, pens, pencils, paper clips, loose change and assorted office supplies.

Damn. He looked around the small space. The trash can held two Diet Dr. Pepper cans and a candy wrapper. No paper. And there was no time to get into the computer.

Straightening his legs but keeping his back hunched, Charlie carefully lifted the cover of the bookshelf. Next to an assorted collection of programming books, there was a pile of printouts. The top page had some handwritten notes on it. He pulled out the top report to get a closer look.

“Charlie?” He whirled around, dropping the lid of the bookshelf and winced as it banged shut behind him. Jack was standing there holding an empty box. “Looking for something?”

“Oh, um, nothing in particular. I just thought that, you know, if Phil had been working on any Accounting issues, I might be able to, you know, um, clear that out for you. So you wouldn’t have as much to go through.”

Jack took a step into the cube and put his hand protectively on the book shelf containing the printouts.

“I’ll let you know if I find anything that would be of interest to your team.” He said, his eyes locked on Charlie.

“Okay. Thanks.”

Charlie turned sideways and edged around Jack, then scurried down the row of cubicles.

He needed a Plan B.

Chapter Five

Maggie sat at the bar, cradling a glass of Sangiovese and stared out at the downtown Houston skyline. Seven o'clock in the evening and the sun was just now considering whether or not to set. The happy hour crowd was beginning to thin, the heated trays of buffalo wings and egg rolls already removed from the floor. A group of secretaries sitting near Maggie downed the last of their whiskey sours, made a few more disparaging remarks about their bosses and tottered toward the elevator bank, the corporate attorneys watching their tight skirts until they rounded the corner.

Tacky, but then again, so was A.J.'s. Built by an interior designer with a passion for art deco, the bar was a magnet for those wanting to go someplace fancy for two-dollar drinks and a free buffet from five to seven. Office workers, desperate to escape the tedium of their jobs, would flock to the express elevators and be seated, drink in hand, by 5:05. More than once, Maggie had seen someone tracked down at the bar by an angry boss and dragged back to work.

"What is it about that place?" Jenna had groaned when Maggie insisted on A.J.'s. "The food isn't that good and the service sucks. Come on, you're only in Houston for one night. Let's go someplace nice."

"I just like the view. And making you suffer is always fun, too."

It was definitely the view. Perched atop the Transco Tower just outside the city's inner loop, A.J.'s Bar and Grill sat like a crow's nest on the mast of an enormous ship, the city of

Houston sprawling out below. Maggie could spend an hour or two here and leave Houston feeling satisfied that she had seen everything except the ship channel refineries. She had spent the afternoon thinking about all the places and people she wanted to visit. But in the end, she had simply driven around killing time. She wasn't up to facing any of it.

Here in the dim lights of A.J.'s, she nodded to the city and whispered, "Hi everybody."

"Oh, yeah. Now that's what I'm talking about." The slurred voice of a scotch-on-the-rocks businessman floated across the bar and Maggie smiled.

Jenna must be here.

She spun around on her barstool and watched as Jenna made her way through the admiring crowd, her long legs striding confidently across the floor, the light bouncing off her thick, long blonde hair. Maggie unconsciously touched her own kinky hair and felt a small pang of envy. But it was gone as soon as Jenna saw her.

"Maggie!"

Jenna was tall, blonde, and beautiful with bright blue eyes and a wide mouth that was always smiling. Maggie gave her a long hug.

"Hey, girl."

"I'm so glad you wanted to have dinner. Even if it is here," Jenna said, earning them a disapproving look from the bartender.

They got a table next to the window facing south where they could see the waterfall pavilion below.

"So what should we start with?" Jenna flipped the menu over to the last page and began skimming the desserts. "Bread pudding?"

"Mmm. Sounds good."

They ordered dessert and two glasses of wine.

“How’s little Bryce doing?” Maggie asked.

“Gorgeous and finally sleeping through the night.” Jenna produced a handful of pictures of her son. “Here he is at six months but he’s already changed since then. And here he is with Joseph.”

She flipped through the photos and they talked about her family as they ate the pudding, then ordered a bowl of linguini to share. Jenna filled her in on the latest news regarding mutual friends, who was seeing whom and who was still working at HMC, the company where they had met so many years ago.

“So how’s life on the range?” Jenna asked.

“I love it. It’s quiet, peaceful.”

“Must be wonderful to sit on your back porch every night and watch the deer. Away from the traffic and city lights. I’m so jealous.”

“Yeah, it’s nice.” *I’d trade it for your family in a heartbeat.*

“And the chickens?” Jenna asked, sniggering into her wine glass.

“Damn Matthew and his chickens.” Maggie twirled some pasta around her fork.

“Although I may be chicken-free soon. Something’s eating them.”

“Something?”

“Yeah. It’s either a big dog or a coyote or something.”

“How many are gone?”

“Five, including the two last night.”

“Girl,” Jenna said. She leaned forward to make her point, “you need to get yourself a gun and shoot that critter.”

“Whatever.”

“What? It’s your property. You have a right to protect it. Not just a right, but a responsibility.”

“It’s a dog.”

“Or a rabid coyote. You don’t know, miss Maggie-for-PETA-president. It might decide that a chicken isn’t enough of a dinner. It might think you look good and tasty sitting out there in your nightie.”

Maggie smiled and shook her head.

“Don’t shake your head at me. Living out there all alone. You’ve got to protect yourself.”

“I’m not in any danger. Besides, I’ve never even fired a gun. I wouldn’t know what to do with one.”

“Just point and click.” Jenna said matter-of-factly. “I shot my first gun at age four out on my granddaddy’s ranch. Nothing to it.”

“I’ll think about it.”

When the waiter cleared away their plates, they ordered coffee with extra cream and settled back into the pleather seats. Maggie lit a cigarette.

“Ooh. Give me one of those.” Jenna lit up and took a long drag. “You know, you’re a bad influence on me. I only smoke when you come to Houston.”

“I only smoke when I come to Houston.”

“Speaking of, what brings you to town with no notice?”

Maggie gave her a brief synopsis of the phone call from Nick.

“So I figured it was simply a veiled attempt to get me to come to Houston for a visit. Go out on the boat, right? Well I get to the office this afternoon and the place is crawling with cops.

Turns out one of the employees was killed in the parking lot last night. Stabbed. He bled to death right there.”

“No effing way! Do they know who did it?”

“I don’t think so. Looks like he was mugged.”

“Hmm.” Jenna took a drag off the cigarette. “What aren’t you telling me?”

Maggie leaned forward confidentially and Jenna did the same.

“There’s a possibility he was killed by a co-worker.”

“Get out! Why do they think that?”

“Happened in the locked garage.”

“Wild. How locked is it? Can you just follow someone else in like at an apartment complex?”

“Sure. But that means the killer risked being noticed on the way in. And then waited, possibly all day, for this guy to walk out.”

“Which means it wouldn’t have been a random mugging.”

“Exactly.”

“So why do you think they did it?”

“I don’t know,” Maggie said, leaning back in her chair. “I haven’t gotten that far with my conspiracy theories yet.”

“Maybe his girlfriend found out he was seeing someone else and killed him.”

Maggie laughed. “Maybe. If she were a professional wrestler. It would take a lot of strength to overpower someone and stab them to death, don’t you think?”

“Not if she was pissed off. Hell, I’d cut off Joe’s balls if I caught him sleeping around on me!” Jenna gave Maggie her sweetest Texas smile. “Then I’d kill him.”

“I have no doubt that you would.”

“So how are you supposed to concentrate on these boring access reports when there’s a murder under investigation at the company?”

“Actually I’m going home tomorrow after Nick and I figure out his network issue.”

“And miss all the excitement? Are you nuts? You’ve been living out on the farm too long. You should stay.”

“And hang around a murder scene?”

“More exciting than the chicken ranch,” Jenna said. “Stay. Go out on the boat. Follow the cops around. Find some intrigue. Meet some new people.”

Maggie eyed her friend with suspicion. “Some new people?”

“What? So you meet some new people. What’s so bad about that?” Jenna grinned. “And maybe you meet a nice guy...”

“And maybe whoever went after that programmer comes after me.”

“And maybe this nice guy will protect you.”

“And maybe he will ride up on his white stallion and whisk me away to his castle.”

Jenna shrugged. “It happens.”

#

Maggie drove down the dark, tree-lined street of her brother’s neighborhood. The homes in the Memorial area of West Houston sat on oversized lots dotted with huge old oak trees that stretched across the street and provided complete shade even during the noon hour. Coming home around ten at night was like driving through a cave.

Developed in the sixties, the original homes were sprawling ranch-style houses built to alleviate the Texas heat with tile floors and ceiling fans in every room. A trend had been sweeping Houston, particularly in the more expensive neighborhoods, where instead of

remodeling, owners were demolishing the existing homes and building massive structures on the lots. This neighborhood was no different with some of the new homes extending to within five feet of their property line, the vaulted two-story roofs replacing the towering pines, and no space outside to plant a garden or hang a hammock.

Turning the corner, she saw her brother's house at the end of the cul-de-sac, set back from the road with lush landscaping, the ferns and azaleas greeting Maggie as she pulled into the gravel driveway. She walked past a small pond of koi filled with water lilies and cattails and up the stone steps to the door. The doorbell chimed softly from within.

Nick greeted her with another bear hug as he swept her inside the foyer.

“Hey, kiddo. I was getting worried about you.”

“Whatever.” She pushed away from him and dropped her small bag on the stone floor. “I should be the one worrying about you.”

“Look at me. I'm perfect,” he said as he threw his arms wide and looked around. “Let me grab a bottle of wine and we'll head out back.”

Maggie gazed with mild envy at the expensive furnishings that filled the rooms of Nick's house. They were both programmers, both graduated at the top of their classes and both had landed good positions after college. The difference was that he had risked it all on a start-up company seven years ago. Today, OPTIN was the fifth largest player in the online financial trading industry. And Nick was one of three partners with equity in the privately held company. She was happy for him. Sort of.

Nick came out of the wine room carrying a bottle from his extensive collection. One she had helped him build. It was a weakness they shared.

He twisted the label toward her. “Jordan Cab. Ninety-eight.” Her favorite.

Nick opened the bottle of wine and they stepped out onto the deck that overlooked the bayou. Diana had screened in the porch to stave off the swarms of mosquitoes that teemed over the brackish water. They settled into the padded chaise lounges and sipped their wine, staring out at the blackness.

“So, have you heard from Dad?” Nick asked.

“Yeah. I talked to him last week. He and Mom left for Italy on Monday for a few weeks. I think Grandma was going with them.”

“That’ll be fun. Ya-Ya nagging at him the whole time. ‘Leo, don’t drive so fast. I’m getting carsick. Leo, I can’t walk up all those stairs. I’m an old lady. Leo, this food is terrible. Margaret, don’t you agree?’”

Maggie laughed. “Yep, and you know Mom. She’ll get up early to ‘run some errands’ before either of them wakes up. Probably sitting in a café right now, sipping her coffee and enjoying the peace and quiet.”

“I miss them.”

“Me too.”

They sat in silence for a few minutes, each absorbed in their own thoughts.

“So tell me what’s going on with the investigation,” Maggie said. “Do the police have any more news?”

“Not yet. They’ve talked to several people in the office. But so far, nothing. At least nothing they’re sharing.”

“Do they suspect anybody?”

“Don’t know that either. The official story is that it was just bad timing on Phil’s part.”

Maggie sipped her wine. “What about the meeting this afternoon?”

“Pretty somber. There wasn’t much information to tell that hadn’t already spread through the grapevine.”

“Anyone jump up and scream ‘It was me!’?”

He grinned. “No. But the cops were there. Maybe they’ll come up and confess to me later in private.”

“Maybe.” Maggie refilled their glasses.

“I’m just glad Diana wasn’t here when it happened.”

“Does she know about it?”

“Yeah. She called this morning to check in and I told her.”

“And?”

“And she flipped out.”

“Did she know the guy who was killed?”

“No. She recognized the name but didn’t know who he was.” Nick shook his head.

“She’s been bugging me for months to beef up security at night. Said she never feels safe when she works late.”

“Diana still works at the office?”

“She doesn’t work for OPTIN anymore but does keep an office upstairs next to mine. She’s been trading in the stock market for the last year or so. Been very successful, I might add.” He sighed. “Anyway, I guess I didn’t take her complaints about the building too seriously. Bought her some mace and told her to ask one of the computer room guys to walk her out at night if I wasn’t there. We already have locked entries and security cameras.”

“That should be enough.”

“Should have been. After this, there’ll no be no more late nights at the office without me there.”

“Spoken like a man in love.” Maggie saw him smile.

“That’s me. I know you haven’t always been a big fan of Diana but she is very happy that you’re here.”

So it still showed. “Nick, I –“

He waved her off. “You’re always good to her, Maggie. That I appreciate.”

Maggie let the night unfold her and hide her shame. Why couldn’t she accept Diana into their lives? Was the jealousy too much? Was everyone to suffer the same blow of life’s injustice as she was? Experience told her that sucking others into her puddle of despair wouldn’t bring happiness. But logic never changes the heart.

Maggie sat up abruptly and swung her legs over the side of the chair. She needed to think about something else.

“So, any more thoughts on a connection between recent events and the strange logins by Shale?”

“Don’t think so. Just for grins, I checked Shale’s keypunch log and he left last night at 6:41 PM.”

“Well, to be honest, I can’t imagine Martin attacking anyone.”

“Me neither. Martin’s a tough businessman but I’ve never seen him exert himself more than to lift a brandy snifter.” They both laughed.

Whether it was the truth of the statement or the effects of the wine, it didn’t matter. The laughter felt good.

#

“Tell me more about what you’ve found on the network.”

Maggie was perched on the edge of a chair, leaning across the desk to look at the computer with Nick. They had switched out their glasses of wine for two small bottles of Perrier and moved into his study. The access reports and network activity logs were spread out in front of them.

“Okay. Well, here’s how it started. We were having some noticeable slowdowns on the system, typically in the morning between the hours of seven and ten and then again in the afternoon from two to four. Normal network pattern, right? That’s when users are the most active. So I decided to run a few reports based on time of day to gather some numbers. First, I wanted to see if there were any internal processes that were running during these peak periods that we could move to another time slot. And second, if we need to purchase additional hardware to handle the traffic, I’ve got to have specifics to put in front of Shale and Jones.

“The processor reports showed nothing out of the ordinary. All our system maintenance occurs between midnight and five in the morning. But consumer traffic goes on twenty-four hours a day. Along with the constant hacker streams. So that means it is just a matter of increased traffic.”

“And more traffic means more consumers.”

“Right. If I can put the right spin on it, I can easily convince the other partners to spend the money on the hardware. So I started to formulate how I would present the information. Where are our new consumers coming from? Are we getting additional traffic from the East coast or the West coast? Is it coming from the international market? I’m looking through the timeframes of activity and that’s when I noticed Shale’s login in the middle of the night.”

Nick opened the first report on the pile and pointed to a line on the third page.

“There’s Martin,” Maggie said. “SHALMM.”

“Yep. Logs in at 2:28 a.m. and then back out 2:41 a.m.”

“Thirteen minutes. Not that long. But long enough to go through email.”

“If he keeps his mailbox clean. Given his CEO title, he probably receives several hundred pieces of spam a day. Even if Edna cleaned it out before she left, there would have been at least fifty waiting for him by this time.”

“True. Most spam is sent after hours because there’s less network traffic. And an inexperienced user...”

“An inexperienced user reads spam. Every piece.”

Maggie grimaced. “Bringing every virus in existence into your network.”

“Scares the hell out of me that he might actually be using the system.”

“And Edna’s his secretary?”

“Right. She has control over his email from her own account.”

“But she might know his password. Surely some things are flagged Confidential which precludes her from opening them using her proxy rights.”

“On the occasion that’s happened, she calls me and I open it for her.”

“Why doesn’t she ask Martin?”

“I doubt he even knows his own password. Like I said, the man doesn’t use the computer. Ever. He’s old school, Maggie. Very old school.”

“So rather than embarrass him, she calls you.”

“Edna’s smart. She knows how to handle Shale.”

Maggie looked at him. “How smart is she? That’s pretty good cover if she really does know his password.”

“True. But she could log in as him at any time during the day. He’d never know. Why in the middle of the night?”

“And why doesn’t she leave a trail?”

“Right.” Nick pushed aside the top of the stack and pulled a thick report from the bottom. “Here’s the activity log from that time period. Shale’s username doesn’t show up anywhere in here.”

Maggie turned the report toward her and started flipping through the pages. “How is this data sorted?”

“By internal software package ID number. Each of our packages is recognized within the system by its four-digit number. This report is sorted by the ID but shows the package’s common name.”

Standard practice. By giving each program a number, relationships could be built between the processes that remained constant. No matter how many times the project manager wanted to change the common name of the program for marketing purposes, the internal mechanism would keep running as designed.

“Can you sort this by username?”

“Done it. He’s not there.” Nick turned to his computer and pulled up the report onscreen. Then he clicked on the column header marked ‘username’, sorting the data alphabetically by user. He scrolled down to the S’s. There were no entries for SHALMM.

“Weird. Where else does Martin’s login show up?”

“The firewall reports show another login three weeks ago. About the same time.” He pulled out another report. “Here it is. Login at 2:31 a.m. Logout 2:40 a.m. Again, no corresponding traffic on the system logs.”

“Any before that?”

“Don’t know. That’s as far as I got before I called you.”

“And you haven’t said anything to Martin about it?”

“No. If it is Martin logging in, I don’t want him to know I’m following him around in the system. And if it’s someone else, I need to resolve the situation before I say anything. Either way, it is a very delicate situation.”

“Agreed.” Maggie sat back in the office chair. “Alright, I’m hooked.”

“So you’ll stay?”

“Yeah, I’ll stay and see if we can’t figure this out. But I’m surprised you stopped where you did. This is the type of thing that usually keeps you up all night. Why are you passing it off?”

“We are less than two months out of a planned upgrade to our consumer systems. I am absolutely swamped with that,” Nick said, indicating the multiple files stacked around the office.

“Besides, Diana encourages me to spend my free time in other ways.”

“I’ll bet.”

“And now with Phil and the police investigation at the office...”

“You’ve got your hands full. I’ll handle this one.”

“Great. I really appreciate it. And based on what we’ve seen tonight, I don’t think Phil’s death had anything to do with this. Do you?”

“Nope.” Maggie paused. “Not yet anyway.”

Chapter Six

Maggie awoke to the sounds of morning radio, an unending stream of mindless chatter punctuated by howls of laughter.

“Six-thirty in the morning and it’s already hot, hot, hot,” the announcer said. “Think we could fry an egg on the hood of your car, Michelle?”

The co-host let loose a round of chuckles. “Yeah. And maybe some bacon, too.”

“Give me a full Waffle House breakfast – a la Ford.” More laughs.

Maggie hit the snooze button and sank back into the pillows, pulling the sheets up under her chin. She hadn’t slept well, never did outside her own bed, and had a slight headache from the wine.

The guest room offered a good view of her brother’s lush backyard, the native landscape of Houston so verdant and rich, not to mention the creative skills of an experienced gardener. A low stone wall ran intermittently through the lawn, creating a myriad of gardens filled with impatiens, hydrangea and thick fern. Scattered crepe myrtles bloomed gently in the early light. The intense green of the well-manicured lawn made everything appear fresh and soft, a stark contrast to the dry, rocky land back home.

A family of house wrens hopped near the base of a half-clad statue, pecking for bugs in the soft dirt. Maggie spotted a gray cat crouched in the grass twenty feet away, patiently

watching, his tail switching low to the ground. He raised himself a half-inch, crept forward three feet, then sank back down, his eyes locked on the birds.

Circle of life. She wouldn't interfere. Her thoughts floated back to her own flock, wondering how the chickens had fared through the night.

Their predator had to be a neighbor's dog. Everyone out there had dogs. And the barbed wire fences surrounding their homesteads were built to restrict the movement of cattle, not pets. Even if she could figure out whose dog it was, would they even care?

The radio clicked on again and the irritating sounds of the latest teen sensation finally propelled her out of bed.

Maggie opened the door to her room and stopped to listen. A few lights were on in the front part of the house but the air was silent. To her right was the master bedroom suite. The door was open and she could see the morning paper strewn across a velvet chaise lounge. She tiptoed toward the room, her steps soundless on the plush carpet, stopping a few feet outside the door.

"Nick?" No answer.

Maggie entered the room and called again.

"Ni-ick." Still no answer.

She strode forward under the pretense of retrieving the paper, glanced toward the dressing area, and stopped to listen again. Upon verifying she was alone in the house, Maggie couldn't contain her curiosity and began to survey the room.

Diana had definitely made her mark in here. A huge four-poster bed sat unmade in the center of the far wall, a heap of pillows and thick cotton sheets piled atop a silk summer spread. A natural stone fireplace had been added to the sitting area and the previous furniture replaced with an overstuffed loveseat and leather chair. Nick was spoiling her.

On the built-in bookshelves, there was a family shot of Maggie and her parents taken right after she graduated from college. And another one of Maggie and Matt from their wedding, a candid shot of the two of them, taken by Nick with a disposable camera. Their faces smiled back at her now, the broad grins defiantly challenging the world to take this moment away.

And somehow it had.

Maggie pulled her eyes away from the photo.

She picked up an ornate silver frame that held a picture from Nick and Diana's wedding three years ago. Diana had foregone a lavish affair, one which Nick would have gladly supported, in favor of a private ceremony. They had taken a charter out to the Bahamas, just the two of them, and been married by the ship captain under a full moon. The photo showed them standing against a flower-bedecked railing, the choppy ocean waves behind them reflecting the moonlight in a mesmerizing pattern.

The family had thrown a reception for them on their return, a casual get-together in Nick's backyard, brisket on the grill and a few kegs of beer. Maggie had built the guest list with her mother and had received no input from Diana on who she wished to invite. Her family was dead, Diana had stated firmly when pushed, and all her friends were those she shared with Nick at OPTIN. The look on her face had told them to drop the issue.

Maggie started walking slowly around the room, looking at each photo again. A strange feeling crept down her back as realized that she recognized every face. It was all her family. Nick's family. A photo of their grandparents on their wedding day. Nick on a whitewater rafting trip with his friends. A family portrait from their elementary school years. Family keepsakes. Family memories.

So where were Diana's photos? The ones of her family and friends. The stuff that hangs on your walls so you can remember those people who are a part of you. The proof of her life before Nick?

She shivered at the direction her mind was going. Who was this woman living in Nick's house? The heavy silence of the house was playing on her imagination.

Maggie turned to go and saw someone watching her from across the room. She jumped, a squeal of fright escaping her lips, before she realized she was looking at her own image in the mirror above the dresser. She took a deep breath and pulled her hands through her hair. Busted.

Now who was the nosy little prick?

#

It was almost nine when Maggie arrived at OPTIN. No cops waited outside the building and she wasn't sure whether this was a comfort to her or not. The lobby was likewise deserted and Maggie pictured the employees seated in their cubes, hands on keyboards, staring at the screens in front of them. She had been a member of that club, too. A lifetime ago.

Through the glass wall of the computer room, she could see the servers blinking with activity, the quiet flickering lights belying the enormity of simultaneous tasks they handled.

As she stood watching the lights pulse, two men walked out from behind a partition and over to a desk in the middle of the room. The man who sat at the desk was of Indian descent with dark skin and thick eyebrows. He looked with concern at the screen as he entered a number of commands. The other man stood next to the desk, looking over his shoulder, holding a small tape used for system backups. He pointed to something on the screen. The man at the desk shook his head, entering more commands.

She shifted her stance to the left and studied the standing man. He had a dark complexion also, although more Latino in color, and wore his dark hair a little longer than the current style.

His hair was thick and looked soft. A familiar tingle shot through her body as she wondered what it would feel like to run her fingers through that hair.

As if sensing her attention, the man turned and looked through the glass wall into the lobby. Maggie shifted back to the right, hiding her face from view behind the old train engine. Busted again. Dork.

“Maggie?”

She turned to see an attractive woman of about fifty, striding toward her, hand outstretched. Maggie let out a breath she didn't realize she was holding and shook the woman's hand. She hoped she wasn't blushing.

“I'm Carole, Nick's assistant. It's good to see you again.”

Carole stood almost six feet tall in her pumps, with jet black hair and strong facial features. She wore a navy power suit, minimal jewelry and a warm smile that was currently directed at Maggie.

“Do you want a Danish before we go up?”

“No. I'm fine thanks.”

Carole nodded. That was the correct answer.

They rode up to the eighth floor, making small talk, while Maggie wondered silently about the man downstairs. Had he caught her staring at him? She felt the surge of electricity again and couldn't suppress a small grin.

They exited the elevator and entered a small room sporting a large OPTIN logo, two potted plants and a locked door. A numbered keypad was mounted to the left of door, its small red light discouraging entry. Carole blocked the security keypad with her body and entered a

series of numbers. A green light replaced the red and Maggie heard the click of the lock as it released. They pushed through the door into a lavish, wood-paneled sitting area.

Similar to the contrast found in the dining area, the executive floor flouted the cold efficiency found throughout the rest of the building, and was designed to impress. Leather sofas and heavy wood furniture screamed stability and money, the two criteria necessary to secure new clients.

Carole introduced her to Lily, a tiny, prim woman who, from what Maggie could discern, was responsible for keeping the coffee fresh and protecting the eighth floor from uninvited guests. They walked through another door to a glass-walled conference room where she could see Nick sitting at a table with the other two partners, engaged in conversation.

Carole opened the door and poked her head in. “Nick, Maggie’s here.”

Nick came around the table to greet her. “Hey Sleepyhead.”

The two other men turned around in their chairs.

“Let me introduce you to the other two partners at OPTIN. I think you may have met them before. This is Martin Shale, our CEO.”

Shale looked Maggie up and down without a hint of shame, and put on a large, patronizing smile.

“Morning, little lady.” Shale was a well-established member of the good-old-boy network. From his expensive suit to his two-thousand-dollar boots, he had an air of confidence and stubbornness that said he was used to getting what he wanted. He nodded his head and made a motion of tipping an imaginary hat in her direction.

“And this is Bill Jones.” Nick turned Maggie toward the other man. “He runs the place, from accounting to customer service to personnel to you-name-it.”

Jones was in his late forties and dressed smartly in a dark suit, crisp white shirt, freshly shined shoes and a bright yellow tie. He was a Harvard MBA grad with ten years of experience to back it up. Even his smile was conservative.

“Morning.” Maggie responded, shaking his hand.

“We were just having a quick meeting before the counselor gets here,” Nick said.

“What a load of horseshit.” Shale snorted in contempt.

“Martin doesn’t think we need the counselor.”

“Well we need something,” Jones said. “We didn’t get any business done yesterday. Zero, Martin. Hundreds of thousands of dollars lost.”

“What they need to get productive is a good kick in the ass.”

Nick turned Maggie to the door. “Let me get you set up in Diana’s office. It’s right next to mine.”

Before the door closed, Maggie heard the creaking of Shale’s chair as he leaned across the table.

“Wish I had a swing like that on my back porch. Know what I mean, pardner?” His coarse laugh echoed down the hall.

“What an asshole,” Maggie muttered as they walked away.

“Yeah, but an asshole with money.” Nick said. “And connections. He loves all the wheeling and dealing it takes to get the big clients. Just glad it’s him and not me that has to sit through those three hour lunches.”

“Whatever. He’s going to get you sued one day, you know.”

“Probably.”

Nick led her into a small but tastefully decorated office.

“This is Diana’s office,” he said. The décor was much different from her tastes for the house. Here things were sleek and modern with bleached wood floors, a slim simple desk and contemporary chairs. “She usually comes up a few times a week.”

“Pretty nice for a wife.”

“Yeah. It was a tough sell to Jones but he finally agreed. Diana’s not the type to join the tennis club or do lunch with the ladies. She enjoys working and, like I said last night, she’s pretty damn good at it. You know she bought that boat with the money she made.”

“I was going to ask you about that. Not that it’s any of my business, but it seemed an extravagant purchase for someone who’s supposedly tightening the belt.”

“To be honest, Maggie, that boat was the first real argument we ever had. We were floating pretty high on the bubble for a while, had a nice fat stock portfolio. When the economy went south, Diana wasn’t quite ready to give up the lifestyle she had become accustomed to.” He grinned, shaking his head. “And I didn’t want her to have to either.”

“You’re so whipped, it’s pathetic. Now, what can I use to log on with? Do you have a guest account set up for me?”

“Not yet. I’ll have Carole call downstairs. Hopefully this meeting won’t take more than an hour. Then I’ll be back to show you around the network.”

After he left, Maggie looked around the office, her eyes scanning the titles on the bookshelves. Stock trading, day trading, international trading, financial markets. Boring. But then, Diana probably thought what Maggie did for a living was boring, too.

She sat down at the desk and powered up the computer, knowing she could get into the network without a guest user account if she really wanted to, and deciding not to attract that kind of attention just yet.

Instead, Maggie swiveled around to look out the window. Great view. Nice perk for being married to Nick. Not bad for a lady from... from where?

She got that odd feeling again as she looked around the office.

The shelves and desktop were devoid of any personal items, clean and sterile, as if waiting for a new employee. No mementos, no silly toys, no papers of any kind.

And not a single photograph. Not even of Nick.

Chapter Seven

Brad Flueger was having a bad day. The network attacks had been increasing dramatically over the last few months, the hackers getting more creative and brazen, always one step ahead of the security patches. Last night someone had broken through, found an open port and sent more than two million porn emails from his mail server. He was facing system slowdowns, client complaints and pressure from management to fix the problem. And now, of all the ludicrous ideas floating around, the owner's sister wanted to play around in the network.

“What the hell does she need full access to the system for?” he demanded. His hand clutched the receiver tightly enough to whiten his knuckles.

“Mr. Dalakos didn't say.”

“Well, she's not getting it. Nick didn't say anything to me about it.”

“I understand your concerns but this was a personal request from Mr. Dalakos.”

Flueger shook his head in disbelief. A small, compact man from Lubbock, he had a temper that simmered just below the surface and usually found its way out. His dark brown hair was shorn close to his head as was his neatly trimmed mustache. A pair of intensely blue eyes peered out from beneath a brow furrowed by concentration or frustration. Usually both. He wore snug fitting jeans with a heavily starched crease and well-worn boots. During his hiring interview, Nick had told him he would need to purchase some suits for work. To which he had replied, “Sir, I own a suit that I wear every Sunday morning. But I work in jeans.” And he had

for the past four years. At thirty-one, he held the position of network manager for one of the largest online trading firms in the country. And no one touched his network.

“No, ma’am, I do not think you do understand my concerns. No one gets access to the system without a good reason. And I don’t have one.”

A knock on the door and one of his network techs appeared at the window. Flueger impatiently waved him inside and turned back to the phone.

“Let me talk to Nick.”

“Mr. Dalakos is in a meeting.”

Flueger clenched his jaw, fists balled at his sides. The rules for dealing with women precluded him from swearing at or striking her. But under the right lighting, Carole might pass for a man.

“I’ll be up there in a minute.” He slammed down the phone, his entire body radiating anger and frustration, and turned to see the tech cowering against the door. “What?”

“Um, I just got off the phone with Rashid and...”

“And what?”

“He, um...”

“Spit it out before I beat it out of you.”

“There’s a problem with the backups.”

“What kind of problem?”

“He didn’t go into details. He just wanted you to call him.”

“That’s just great. That just makes my fucking day.” He took a step forward and the technician flinched. “Well, you tell him that I don’t have time for his shit right now. And he

needs to handle it, whatever it is. Because I will be busy opening up our network to Dalakos' fucking sister."

"He said it was really important."

"Goddammit!" Flueger looked around for something to kick, considered his frightened employee for a moment, then took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Message delivered. Get back to work."

The technician nodded and scurried out of the office.

What was going on around here? The death of Barnes had turned the company into a bunch of idiots. He yanked the receiver from its cradle and dialed the computer room.

#

Detective Frank Galloway felt a headache creeping up the back of his neck. Hunched over his desk, resting his forehead on his fingers, he stared down at the preliminary medical examiner's report for the body of one Philip Howard Barnes.

...two superficial cuts between the fourth and fifth ribs. Again between the fifth and sixth ribs...Death resulted from puncture wound below the rib cage extending vertically upward until piercing the heart muscle...

Every homicide was different.

"Vance?"

His partner, Arnold Vance, looked up from his desk. "Yeah?"

"Notice anything about this M.E. report?"

"Yeah. Lots of stuff."

"Thanks, smartass. What do you see? First off."

"The small cuts between the ribs."

"Yeah. The cuts. Why cut him?"

“For kicks?”

“Yeah, I’m sure Barnes got a real kick out of it.” Galloway shook his head. “Why would he just lie there and let someone cut him? This Barnes was an average size guy.”

“Didn’t have a choice?”

“Maybe. Any bruising on the arms or legs showing restraint? Somebody holding him down while his buddy carved him up?”

“Page three. Two small welts found on the left forearm.”

Galloway flipped the pages. “Slight burning of epidermal layer. Less than one inch apart.”

“Stun gun.”

“Huh.” He looked up again. “But a hit to the arm isn’t going to bring this guy down. He was what? One eighty? One ninety? I was jolted with one during a training session. Pissed me off, but it didn’t take me out.”

“Keep reading.”

“Why don’t you just tell me what else is in here so I can stop wasting both our time?”

“Another hit to the body. This time to the right kidney. Marks are a lot more pronounced too, like it was held on him for a while. You know those belts used on the federal prisoners? The stun belts?”

“Yeah?”

“Electrical shocks delivered straight to the kidneys. Eight seconds. Can’t be turned off even if you wanted to. Drops them like a sack of potatoes,” Vance said, snapping his fingers loudly.

“Huh.” Galloway scratched his head. “What size belt do you wear? I got a great idea for a Christmas gift.”

“What I don’t get is this. The guy walks up. Smashes him in the nose hard enough to knock him down, right? And then uses a stun gun. Why? Why not just finish him off?”

“I don’t know. Maybe he likes to play with his food.”

“Something doesn’t add up. When do we get the final report?”

“Should be this afternoon.”

“Okay. I want first crack at it.”

“Whatever you say, hotshot.”

#

Maggie was bored. She applauded Flueger for protecting his network but without access, there was only so much she could do. She’d give him another fifteen minutes to give her legit access or she’d find a way to get into the system on her own. Nick would be pissed.

She pushed back her chair and walked out of the office.

“Hey, Carole. Can you point me toward the coffee?”

“Sorry about the wait. I’ll get it for you.”

“No, I can get it. I need to do something or I’ll go crazy in there.”

Carole pointed down the hall. “Second door on your right.”

Maggie passed another conference room on her left, this one smaller than the one Nick and the other partners were using but just as richly decorated. Adjoined to this room was a lounge with deep leather chairs, a thick red Persian carpet, and a smartly stocked bar. The faint smell of cigars lingered in the air. Martin Shale’s round face beamed out at her from a photograph of himself and the president standing in front of a split rail fence, the Texas countryside rolling gently behind them.

From an enclave on the right side of the room, a small woman appeared and walked up to Maggie, blocking her entrance.

“May I help you?”

“Good morning. I’m Maggie Johanssen, Nick Dalakos’ sister.” She stuck out her hand.

The woman gave it a limp shake without offering her name. Didn’t matter. Maggie could tell by her sour expression and tweed suit that she was Edna Simmons, Shale’s secretary.

“I was just looking for the coffee. Carole said it was down this way?”

“You passed it.” Edna turned her around and pushed her toward a door across from the small conference room, then stood in the doorway, arms crossed over her chest, and waited.

Maggie gave her a mock salute and headed toward the neatly aligned cups. She kept her back to Edna and took her time selecting a cup, slowly looking them over. She picked one up, looked inside and then replaced it, agonizing over the decision.

Edna released a sigh of immense proportions and Maggie grinned, stifling an impulse to sigh in return. She had to do something to entertain herself.

“When you leave, turn immediately to your left, not your right, and make your way back to Mr. Dalakos’ office.”

“Got it.”

After Edna flew off on her broomstick, Maggie poured herself a cup of coffee and leaned back against the counter for the first sip. She was in no hurry to leave. The fifteen minute window was for her own conscious. She wasn’t going to get access from the network manager.

The executive break room was furnished with a round table for snacking, two comfortable leather chairs, and a couple of magazines. Maggie flipped through the current issue of *Texas Monthly*, and then tossed it aside.

Opposite the door, a television with a built-in VCR sat against the wall. Maggie picked up the remote and flipped on the set.

Instead of daytime TV, she found herself looking at an empty conference room.

She looked closer, leaning in toward the set. It looked like the small room across the hall. That's weird. She tiptoed to the doorway and peeked out. No Edna. Taking three quick paces, she crossed the hall and stepped into the unlit room.

The table looked like the same one, the same pattern of light splayed across the top from the open blinds. She checked the corners of the room but didn't see any cameras. She picked up a napkin from the sidebar, folded it and placed it on the table. After checking again for Edna, she slipped back across the hall.

The table on the television screen now sported a napkin folded neatly in half.

"Well, now. Isn't this interesting," she said, asking and answering the *why* and *who* in her head. To snoop on private meetings was why. And the who was Edna, definitely Edna.

Maggie headed back to the door and this time, feeling morally in the right, walked confidently across the small space between the two rooms. She looked around for the camera, trying to orient herself with the picture she had seen. The angle had shown the far corner with the chair closest to her in the front of the image. She looked at the door. In the corner of the jamb, she found it, a tiny camera mounted to the frame, the tip barely visible. From the table, you would never see it. That sneaky bitch.

Back in the coffee room, Maggie picked up the remote and pressed the Channel Up button. Another conference room appeared, also empty. The next few channels showed other conference rooms. Then a small office came onto the screen with a man sitting at his desk, working on the computer. She could hear the faint click of his keyboard. Her curiosity growing,

Maggie pressed the Volume button and the clicking grew louder. Audio added a whole new dimension.

She cycled through a few more offices, listening in on bits of conversation and phone calls. Finally, she hit on the large conference room where the partners were currently meeting. She could see them all – Nick, Shale and Jones – discussing who would handle the counselor, the police, and the employees for the next few weeks. Then she was back to the original conference room.

Maggie switched off the TV and sipped her coffee. Amazing. From here, you could spy on every meeting in the building. There was something grotesquely fascinating about the whole setup, with a whole lot of *Big Brother* thrown in.

Employees wanted privacy. Employers wanted to protect their resources. Where did management draw the line?

The digital display on the VCR showed a tape in the machine. Nothing like a recorded conversation to prove your point. Maggie pressed Eject and the tape slid out, unlabeled and about three-quarters full. She pushed it back in and turned on the television. Nothing but static.

She rewound the tape for a few seconds and pressed Play again. This time the screen showed the small conference room across the hall occupied by Shale and another man.

“... come up with the investors and I will deliver the product.” Shale was saying.

“You just be sure the product is market-ready as promised.” The other man said.

They stood then and shook hands.

“Come on. Let’s have a drink to celebrate.”

“Make mine a small one.”

“Alright, Tex. In that case, I’ll have Edna skip the ice.” Shale ripped his coarse laugh and slapped the other man on the back.

Then the tape cut off.

Maggie heard a sound behind her and hit the power. The TV went dark and she turned to see Edna standing in the doorway, arms crossed and lips pursed.

“That TV doesn’t get network channels.”

“Bummer. Because I hate to miss Oprah.”

Ms. Simmons didn’t smile. “You found the coffee?”

“Yes, thank you.” She refilled her coffee cup. “Well, I better get back.”

Maggie walked halfway down the hall before stopping to check the bottom of her shoe, the pause giving her just enough time to catch Edna coming out of the break room, video tape in hand. She seemed surprised to see Maggie standing there, but stared at her defiantly before stalking away.

Maggie watched her go, wondering what else old Edna had on that tape.

Chapter Eight

“Hard at work or hardly working?”

Maggie looked up from the printouts. “God, Nick, you’re so corny. How’d the meeting go?”

“Fine. Martin’s going to handle the counselor. We’ll see how long she lasts.”

“And you got stuck with the cops.”

“Yeah. But I don’t think – wait a minute. How’d you know that?”

“I went for a cup of coffee.” Maggie threw him a smirk. “Saw your little setup in there. Pretty nifty.”

“Oh that. That wasn’t my idea.”

“Uh huh.” She wasn’t convinced.

“It wasn’t. I actually fought against it. Overruled, two to one. We were going through some legal hassles at the time and Bill thought it would help with personnel issues. Said he wanted to get unbiased reports of certain conversations. Figured if he could tackle issues before they became problems, it would mean fewer lawsuits against the company.”

“So, spying on your employees is supposed to reduce lawsuits?”

“Something like that.”

Maggie rolled her eyes.

“Oh, get off your high horse. Spying on employees is what you do for a living.”

“Touché.”

“All right then, so can we get back to the business at hand? Which coincidentally is spying on someone. Did Brad get you the system access you need?”

“No.”

Nick looked at the OPTIN programs on her screen and the red circles on her printouts. And the stupid smile on her face.

“Damn it, Maggie. Brad is going to shit a brick.”

“So sue me. I have a job to do.”

Nick pulled a chair up next to hers. “Don’t forget to fill me in later. So, find anything yet?”

“There’s a definite pattern for both the time and the IP address range. All the activity is bouncing off an Internet backbone server overseas, probably Asia.”

“That doesn’t narrow it down much. Eighty percent of the hackers come from Asia.”

“Cheap technology and millions of bored, intelligent humans.”

“Throw in limited opportunities and you’ve got a fertile mess.”

Maggie nodded. “But we’re getting off track. If this were a simple network hack, the system would have been bombarded with traffic looking for an opening. In each case, there was a single, successful entry.”

“Whoever was coming in, knew how to get in.”

“Yep. This would never show up on the Network Attack logs.”

“What about the times? You said there was a pattern there also.”

“These reports only go back two months but the entries are all between 2:20 and 2:50 a.m. What would be significant about that time?”

Nick shook his head. “I’m not sure. Our batch processing kicks in at one to give the programmers a few extra hours to work. Then everything is backed up. That whole process usually takes until around four.”

“Is the system accessible during that time?”

“Yes, but horribly slow.”

“I’ll run a system trace on that IP block. See where that leads.”

There was a knock on the open door.

Maggie’s heart skipped a beat as the man she had been admiring in the computer room stepped into the room. Perhaps he hadn’t seen her before she ducked out of sight. He flashed her a quick knowing grin. Perhaps he had.

“Jack. Thanks for coming up,” Nick said. “This is my sister, Maggie Johannsen. Maggie, this is Jack Rincon, manager of our Special Teams department.”

When he shook her hand, the tingle passed over her again.

“Jack is the best programmer in the building. Other than myself, of course,” Nick said with a laugh.

“A pleasure to meet you, Maggie.” His voice had a slight Latin accent, the “s” in “pleasure” sounding like a “z”, the “r” soft against the roof of his mouth.

“Pleasure’s mine.” And it was.

“I didn’t mean to interrupt,” he said, looking at the printouts on the desk and then to Nick. “You called earlier?”

“Yeah. I need you to write up a brief summary of what Phil was working on over the past few weeks. Very brief, maybe a page or two.”

“Sure. Why?”

“The police want it. They’re checking to see if any of his work projects could have been a factor.”

“Like a client?”

“A client. Or a competitor.” He paused. “They’ve also asked for an employee list.”

“An employee?” Jack looked from Nick to Maggie and back again. His eyes registered confusion, then disbelief. “That’s crazy. Nobody here killed Phil.”

Nick held up his hands. “I agree. But the fact that he was killed in our parking garage doesn’t look good.”

“It doesn’t mean one of his friends did it.” Now he was angry.

“I know. I know. But the police want the file, so we’re giving it to them.”

“Waste of time,” Jack muttered.

“As for the project list, I don’t want to turn over any work product or files. I need you to go through his time logs and write up a few paragraphs about projects he was working on. The police don’t need a detailed report, they wouldn’t understand the nuances of the code anyway. Just general items and any clients he might have talked to.”

“You’ll have it this afternoon.” He paused at the doorway and looked back at Maggie.

“Nice to meet you.”

Maggie nodded in return. The somber mood of the conversation had doused any chance for flirting. Damn her bad luck.

#

Brad Flueger slammed open the door to the computer room and marched in, his boots clomping on the raised floor.

“What the hell is going on?” he screamed.

Rashid jumped up from his desk and shouted back. “Fuck if I know! The goddamned tapes are missing!”

The techs in the room all poked their heads up to watch.

“What goddamned tapes?”

“The goddamned backup tapes.”

“How do you lose backup tapes?”

“I didn’t *lose* anything!”

The two men squared off, looking each other in the eye, faces set. For a moment, there were no sounds in the room but the soft whirring of the computers and the heavy breathing of the two men. Rashid broke the silence.

“Jack came down this morning to get a copy of Wednesday’s backup. We pulled the tape and restored it to the temp server. It was the wrong tape.”

“Let me see it.”

Rashid ejected the tape from the server and handed it to Flueger.

“See, the label says Wednesday. It was in Wednesday’s slot.” He reinserted the tape.

“But the data is from Wednesday of last week. The backup kicked in at 2:18:01. The last change was written to the file at 2:57:12. Normal run.”

Flueger leaned over and pulled up a few different files, the muscles in his jaw flexing. Someone had either screwed up big time or was purposefully jacking with his system. Both options pissed him off. He stared at the screen and spoke through clenched teeth. “Have you checked the tape from last Wednesday?”

“Yes. Yes. I check that tape too.” Rashid paused, aware of the broken English that slipped out in his excitement.

“And?”

“It is the same as this one. Same files, same timestamps.” Rashid pulled another tape from the top of the server and showed it to Flueger. “Labeled correctly. Last Wednesday.”

“Did anyone run a dual backup that night?”

“They shouldn’t have.” Rashid sat down at the computer and pulled up a system log. “They couldn’t have.” He pointed to the screen. “The next job kicked in at 2:57:13. There wouldn’t have been time. Besides, the timestamps are the same.”

“Somebody made a goddamned copy of the backup.” He stared at the tape in his hand. “Pull up the index file.”

Rashid punched a few keys on the keyboard. “Aw, shit.”

Flueger let out a long trail of expletives that caused the techs to duck back into hiding. The timestamp on the index file read 20:32:11.

Rashid was babbling. “Someone made a copy of the tape the next night. They stole the original tape, made a copy of the old data, which means they must have taken that one too, labeled it using the –”

“How many other tapes are missing?” Brad asked, not wanting to hear the answer.

“What?”

“How many other backups have been compromised?”

Rashid shook his head. “I don’t know.”

Flueger pronounced each of his words slowly and with increasing volume. “Well, fucking find OUT!” he shouted, slamming the tape down on the desk.

#

Charlie paced around his office. He mind whirled so fast he felt like throwing up as he waited for the Xanax to kick in. He hadn’t slept last night, opting instead to stay on the sofa and

watch the technology cable channel, jumping every time he heard a siren on the street. He felt worse than he looked, if that was possible, but couldn't call in sick this morning. So he hid in his office and cursed Diana.

Screwing the boss's wife was one thing. That was fun on so many levels. But murder? He hadn't signed up for that. They could've found a way to stop Barnes. Planted something to throw him off-track. Temporarily pulled the code. But she had freaked. Who would've thought Diana was capable of something like that?

He paused in his mental tirade as the image of Diana straddling Barnes, knife in hand, took form in his mind. That was a little bit of a turn on. Kind of a *Fatal Attraction* type thing.

Charlie crept to the office window and peered out.

The cops were somewhere on this floor, making their way down the cubicle rows, asking questions, digging for information. The police hadn't questioned him yet but only because he hadn't made himself available.

He sat down at his computer, exited to a DOS prompt and used a backdoor to access the phone system control panel. He needed to make a call. And every phone call that went through the office switch was logged by the system – the caller, the phone number and the duration. The management spin on it was to track time spent with clients. The employees recognized it for what it was.

Charlie reassigned port 12-84B to extension 105. Then picked up the phone and dialed.

“Hello?”

“Hey, Diana.”

“Charlie.” Her voice hardened. “What are you doing calling me from the office?”

“I’m not stupid. I switched extensions. Anyone checks the phone log, it will look like Nick made the call.”

“Fine. Make it quick.”

“The cops are back today and taking stuff from Phil’s desk.”

“Like what stuff?”

“I don’t know. For some reason, I’m not real anxious to talk to them.”

“Well, they wouldn’t take any of the printouts. They wouldn’t know what to look for. Besides Nick wouldn’t let them.”

“And they’re asking everybody a bunch of questions.”

“Well, duh, Charlie. It’s an investigation.”

“You have the briefcase, right?”

“Had,” she corrected. “Burial at sea.”

“All of it?” he asked, a little panic in his voice. “I needed those notes.”

“Relax, Charlie. I saved a CD that was in there.”

“What’s on it?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t pulled it up yet. But I don’t think holding on to it is a very good idea. It’s a pretty solid piece of evidence.”

“Just get it to me.”

“Okay, okay. It’s safe for now. Is that why you called?”

Charlie tried to remember why he had called. Surely it was something important. His pulse was starting to even out but he was still confused.

“It’s, well, I don’t want to talk to the cops. I didn’t kill him.”

“So just tell them you didn’t do it.” Diana groaned in frustration. “Really, Charlie. I would’ve expected you to hold up a little better than this.”

“Well, really Diana, I didn’t expect you to off somebody on a whim,” he whined.

“Look. This is not the best time to have this discussion. I have to go.”

“Wait.” The Xanax was kicking in, his mind starting to focus. He did have something important to say. He knew it. “I think maybe we should pull out for a little bit.”

“What do you mean pull out?”

“Lay low for a while. Cover our tracks, enjoy our profits.”

“I think you might be overreacting to the situation, Charlie. No one is going to link Phil’s death with you or me. We just need to keep acting like nothing has changed. Besides,” her voice took on a seductive tone, “I don’t want to call it quits with you. Don’t tell me you don’t want to see me anymore.”

Charlie thought back to their last afternoon together, the way the sun had looked on her hips, the pattern broken by the jumbled sheets. Maybe he could hold out a little longer. “No. I do. I just...I’m just scared.”

“I know. Hold tight. This will pass and things will get back to normal.”

“All right. I’m holding. But I need to see you. Soon.”

“I’ll be back Sunday evening. Then we can have a laugh about all this, okay?”

“Okay.”

“And Charlie?”

“Yeah?”

“Clean up Phil’s desk. Before the cops do.”

Charlie switched the extension back to his own and exited the program.

She was wrong. They needed to stop now. He was already working on a plan to take the software to the next level and leave the OPTIN world behind. He would tell her all about it Monday. After he got the CD.

Chapter Nine

Detectives Galloway and Vance headed down to the Medical Center, Houston's other downtown. The final report from the Medical Examiner's office was ready and while it could have been faxed over to the department, Galloway knew they could get more information from talking to the examiner directly. Dr. Luann Hart was not only a brilliant doctor, but also had a woman's intuition for solving complex cases. Thirty years of marriage and two grown daughters had taught Galloway that this intuition had a bizarre and frustrating pattern of being right most of the time.

They found a spot on the seventh floor of the garage and took the elevator down to the lobby. The building, like every other building in the medical center, looked and smelled like a hospital with nurses bustling about in white lab coats and squeaky shoes. They found Dr. Hart in her office, reviewing files on the computer.

She was a small woman, dark hair pulled back tightly in a bun and wearing a navy pantsuit beneath her doctor smock. She looked too young for her position as Senior M.E. but the plus-forty reading glasses she wore gave away her secret. She looked up as they came in, intelligent eyes shining behind thin lenses, and flashed them a quick smile.

“Personal visit? To what do I owe the honor?”

Galloway stepped forward to shake her hand. “Luann. Good to see you again. You're looking healthy for someone who plays with dead people.”

“As long as I’m standing next to the table instead of lying on it, I feel pretty good.” Then looking at Vance, “I guess you’re here about Barnes. Follow me.”

She led them down the hall to Examining Room 5F. Inside was a collection of stainless steel implements and furniture. The table sat in the center of the room under blinding fluorescent light, a white sheet draped over the body.

“You guys saw the earlier report?” She asked, picking up a file folder from the table. They both nodded. “The stun gun marks. Subcutaneous cuts to the chest. The final cut from beneath the rib cage.”

“Looks like he was tortured,” Vance said.

“Perhaps,” Hart said. “The cuts to the chest were made while the victim was still alive, and, given the pattern of blood flow on the body, after his nose was broken.”

“So the perp breaks his nose to get his attention, pokes him with the knife a few times, then finally shoves it home.” Galloway looked at the sheet. “Can we take a look?”

“Be my guest.”

Hart walked the few steps to the table with Galloway close behind and pulled the sheet back. Vance turned his head away, fighting back the bitter taste of bile that rose in his throat.

Barnes’ face was swollen with blue and purple lumps. Dried rivulets of blood ran down his neck and pooled in the hollows of his collarbone. The cuts on the chest were puckered at the edges and black with crusted blood. The gash below the rib cage was more than an inch wide and surrounded by more bruising. The blood from that wound had been mostly cleaned off, leaving a faint red path that disappeared beneath the sheet.

Galloway leaned over the body and counted the small cuts with his finger. “Three cuts. How deep are these?”

“They hit the bone. All three of them.”

“So whoever was playing with this guy wasn’t just tickling him.”

“No. Look where the cuts are on the chest. All centered around the heart. I think they were trying to get in that way and couldn’t get past the rib cage.”

“So they gave up and just went up under the rib cage.” Galloway moved down the body and peered closely at the wound, his nose almost touching the body.

“Jesus, Galloway.” Vance hadn’t moved from his original position in the room. “You look like you’re about to take a bite out of him.”

“Shut up, dickhead. I’m working.” Then with a glance to Hart, “Sorry.”

Dr. Hart looked at Galloway and casually pushed up her glasses with her middle finger. *Whatever*, she mouthed with a smile.

“What about the stun gun?” Vance asked.

Hart returned her gaze to the body. “A light mark on the left forearm, here, and a stronger mark on the right kidney. He most likely raised his arm to fend off the attack. The one on his back would have been harder to place.”

“Unless there was someone with another gun standing behind him,” Galloway said.

“Maybe, but I doubt it. The end of a stun gun has two prongs. A current of electricity is sent through each prong and joins in the middle. The same way lightning works. Electricity from the air coming down meets electricity on the ground coming up and they join to make a streak of lightning.”

“Get caught between the two points and boom.”

“Right. The stun gun gets highest voltage when the prongs are equal in density and emitting the same amount of electricity. What we have found though, is that not all stun guns are created equal. Some have an unbalanced delivery.”

“Resulting in unequal marks?” Galloway asked.

“Correct. In Mr. Barnes here, the marks are consistently unequal. In both cases, the right mark is more pronounced than the left.”

“So they came from the same gun.” Galloway looked at Vance. “I’ll be damned. Stun gun fingerprinting.”

“Okay,” Vance said. “So we only have one attacker. He bashes in Barnes’ nose, hits him with the stun gun, stabs him a few times but can’t get in. Barnes tries to run, the attacker hits him again with the gun and goes for the goods.”

“Almost.” Hart checked her file. “There is no concrete dust residue in the cuts. I think he was hit with the stun gun both times before the cuts began.”

“Get him immobilized first, then go to work.” Vance looked at Galloway who was still eyeing the wounds. “And give you time to figure out where to stick the knife.”

“Seemed to have trouble completing his task.”

“Must have been a small guy if he needed that much help.”

“Or a woman,” Hart said. “Check that nose again, Frank. This guy wasn’t punched in the nose. He was hit from beneath. Based on the bruising and position of the cartilage, it looks like a short, powerful upwards thrust. Classic self-defense move. Every woman knows it.”

“So our man is a woman?” Galloway looked up at Vance in surprise. “You believe that?”

“Any other prints?” Vance asked.

Hart shook her head. “Just the smudges from the shirt. We’re processing those now along with the rest of the clothing to see if we can turn up any DNA evidence. Stray hairs, blood, the usual.”

“Alright,” Galloway said, straightening up. “Thanks for the info, Luann. Let us know when you get the report back from the lab.”

“Will do.”

#

Vance checked his watch as they pulled out of the parking garage and onto Old Spanish Trail. It was almost six.

“So what do you think about the woman theory?” he asked.

“You got a better one?” Galloway slammed on the brakes as a car cut into his lane. He flipped the bird and received one back in return. “Goddamn Houston drivers.”

“Well, it could’ve been a small guy. You know, one that fights like a woman.”

“Yeah, right. A little faggoty turd with his panties in a bunch.” Galloway hit the brakes again and this time laid on the horn for added affect. “Jerk.”

“Damn, Galloway. You sure are grumpy when you don’t eat. You need to run through a McDonald’s or something?”

“Look. Little guys don’t attack big guys. Even with gadgets. They slash their tires or put dog shit on their doorstep.”

“Maybe he was high. Shot a little China White into his veins and went out on the town.”

“No way. This kill was too methodical. A dooper would’ve slashed him to bits. Left pieces of his brain smeared all over the garage floor. Hey, there’s a Burger King, want to pull in?”

#

Maggie leaned back from the computer, victorious at last.

It had taken over an hour to do it, the hacker had made several circuitous routes through cyberspace, but she had been able to back trace the system entries to a hub up in Virginia. It looked like they were coming from one of the massive ISPs that served an international market. It was a pretty good bet the hacks were being initiated in the U.S. but this couldn't be confirmed without some inside scoping. She would need to contact Randy again but didn't want to start the dialogue from within the building where everyone could see.

So she had switched to internal analysis. She checked the system logs against the hacker timestamps and found no activity other than the log in. No other programs had been accessed. It didn't make sense. If someone was breaking into the system, why log in at all? Why not get in the way you came and stay off the server?

In fact, the only item of interest she had found with the logins was a vague correlation with updates to the production server. A new version of the software was released within three to seven days of the first few logins. Then several logins with no software updates. Two that appeared together about six months ago, more gaps, then three in the last two months, the last one occurring a week ago. A Trojan horse opening the door for the hacker? Sometimes? Or standard software updates? Only Brad would know.

She pulled up a phone extension list and took a deep breath before dialing.

"Flueger."

"Hi, Brad. This is Maggie Johanssen, Nick's sister."

"I know who you are."

Maggie bit her lip. She could feel the anger seeping through the phone line.

"I am researching something for Nick and needed to ask you a question."

Silence. She continued.

“Um, I have noticed a certain pattern in the timing of the updates to your production server, the most recent happening just last week. Do you have a list of all scheduled software releases?”

A pause.

“What exactly are you researching, Ms. Johannsen.”

“Nick asked me to keep that confidential.”

Another pause. This one a little bit longer.

“This is my goddamn network. If there is a problem, it is my job to fix it.”

“I understand. I do. I am not trying to encroach on your territory. Nick says you do a great job running—“

“Then what are you doing in my system. I have been tracking you since you entered the network and have a complete log file of your activity. Now I can take that home and spend the next four hours trying to determine your motives, but it sure would be nice if you would just tell me what the fuck you want.”

“Okay, look. Nick asked me to do him a small favor on a personal matter. He did not want to bother you with it.”

“Bother me.”

She had no choice. And perhaps a little information exchange would work in her favor.

“Shale’s been logging in to the system, sporadically, late at night.”

“Doing what?”

“Nothing as far as we can tell. But I don’t think it’s Shale.” She told him about the updates to the software. “Am I chasing a dead end, here?”

“No.”

“What?” That wasn’t the answer she anticipated.

“We found a bogus backup tape this morning.” His voice was still tense but no longer angry. “We are checking them all to see if any others exist. I’ll check the update release schedule against the actuals and let you know if any unauthorized updates were made.”

“Thank you. I appreciate it.”

“Now get the hell out of my system.”

Maggie hung up, backed out of the network and headed down to Nick’s office. Maybe they could catch a quick dinner.

As she approached the door, Maggie heard a conversation going on inside, Nick’s voice and the softly accented voice of Jack. She fluffed her hair and pulled in her stomach muscles.

“Hey, Nicky.” She nodded at Jack with a smile.

“Maggie, right?” he said, returning the smile. Then looked at Nick. “Nicky. I like that. Can I call you that, too?”

“Bite me.” Then to Maggie. “Find anything?”

She hesitated a minute, casting a sideways glance at Jack. Nick gave no response either way, except to further loosen his tie. She opted for caution.

“Not much to go on yet. I was hoping we could take a break and grab dinner.”

Nick might be able to shed some light on what she had found in the system. Speed up the process so she could wrap it up and head home.

“Great idea. Jack, you free to join us?”

“Wh—“ Maggie clamped her mouth shut but not soon enough.

Jack looked at Maggie. “Well, if you guys needed to talk...”

“No,” he said quickly. “We talk all the time. Don’t we Mags?”

What was he doing? Maggie tried some of that non-verbal sibling communication. But no matter how strong her evil eye, he just grinned stupidly back at her.

“Well,” She could tell by the hesitation in Jack’s voice that he wasn’t sure what was going on either. “Some of us are headed over to Bobby’s for a couple of beers.”

“Perfect.” Nick suddenly got very busy shuffling things around on his desk. “I have a few more things to do. Maggie can ride over with you and I’ll meet you guys there in an hour or so.”

Aha. That sneaky bastard.

“That’s okay, Nick. I’ll wait for you.”

“Go. You’ll just slow me down.”

She turned to Jack with a shrug. “Brotherly love.”

The offer was tempting. How long had it been? And Nick would be there soon anyway if she turned this into a disaster.

“Ready in ten?”

“Meet you in the lobby.”

Once he was out of earshot, she wheeled on her brother.

“What was that all about, Yente?”

“What?” He feigned innocence about as well as she hid her anticipation. He grinned, she blushed and the charade was over.

“Take your time, Nicky,” she whispered as she headed downstairs.

#

Bobby’s Ice House was a rambling building that had spread ungracefully over time. Located at the end of a strip center, the original space was carpeted, covered in posters of scantily clad women, and sported a huge, three-sided scarred wooden bar. Side doors opened into a large, metal structure with a concrete floor and garage doors that opened and closed depending

on two things -- the weather outside and the amount of smoke inside. Long rows of picnic tables led up to a collection of coin-operated pool tables. Beyond that, a door opened onto a small wooden deck.

The place was packed by the time they got there. Navy skirts and suits as far as the eye could see with a few local barflies thrown in. The guys had removed their jackets and the women had exchanged their white cotton blouses for linen tank tops, but they all still looked like they worked at OPTIN. Middle twenties, single, attractive.

The air inside was heavy with the smell of beer, cigarettes and grease. Merle Haggard serenaded them from a scattered set of dusty speakers. They forced their way to the bar, ordered a couple of longnecks, and pushed back through the crowd.

“Let’s see if we can grab a seat,” Jack yelled in her ear. She followed him through the garage doors, back through the pool tables and out onto the deck. Most of the white plastic tables were occupied, but they managed to grab one near the railing.

“Wow. This is some happy hour. Does everyone come here?” Maggie asked.

“Just about. I think if the company shut down, this place would too.”

She glanced at the other tables and met several pairs of eyes, most of which looked back at her with unabashed interest.

“You are an outsider. They’re curious.” Jack smiled, displaying a neat row of white teeth she hadn’t seen before. “Nosy but harmless. OPTIN, we are like a big family. All in each other’s business.”

As if on cue, one of the suits walked up and slapped him on the shoulder.

“Heya Jack. Hiding out here?”

“Steve, this is Maggie. Maggie, Steve. He works in the programming department with me.”

“With him? I work *for* him. And what a slave driver! Do this, do that and when you’re done, you can – ”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah.” Jack cut him off. “Maggie is Dalakos’ sister. In town for a few days’ ... visit.” She read the suspicion in his eyes. He had no doubt seen the printouts on her desk and was surely aware of her system access. But those eyes. Those wonderfully warm brown eyes...

Steve asked her several personal questions, some of which she answered, then jumped into a colorful discussion about a party he had gone to last weekend. He was desperately trying to work his way into the table, but Jack made no attempt to pull up an extra chair, and after a few minutes, he gave up.

“When you get bored out here with Jack, come on in. We’re at the pool table in the back corner,” Steve called over his shoulder.

“See? Harmless.” Jack took a pull on his beer. “Give him a few minutes to make the rounds. By the time we walk out of here, everyone will know who you are.”

“I had no idea I was so interesting.”

“Interesting? Maybe. Too early to tell.”

“What?” Maggie frowned and flagged down the waitress.

“Two more,” she said. “And this one’s on me.”

“*Now* you’re getting interesting,” Jack said with a smile.

Friday night, sitting outside with a cold beer and a great-looking guy. Not at all what she had expected to do on this trip. Not that she was complaining either.

Charlie checked the time, then pulled up the People Finder. Only a handful of programmers were still at the office. Friday nights at Bobby's were a big draw. Tomorrow morning, they would be back, wearing ratty jeans and t-shirts, bragging about how much they drank last night and outwitting each other with their hangover war stories. Tonight, however, he had free reign.

He popped a tab of speed to keep his energy up and surfed the web, staying away from the hacker sites – had to keep his network log clean – choosing instead to shop his relocation options. The untimely death of Mr. Barnes could, and probably would, dictate the end of this run. Who knows, maybe it would blow over. But the possibility of that happening was slim to none. The code was coming together and he was ready to find a paradise where he could disappear.

Thirty minutes later, there were only two programmers left, and they both worked on the other side of the floor. Time to go.

Charlie looked down and saw with surprise that his hands were shaking. Better take something to calm his nerves. He pulled a small red tackle box from his backpack and opened the lid. The medicine cabinet was carefully arranged by type, strength and color. Looking down the row of Benzos, he selected a Valium and washed it down with the last of his Mountain Dew. Wait for it to kick in or just go? He debated long enough for the effects to kick in, then quietly opened the door to his office.

The air was heavy with the subtle sounds of stillness as Charlie started making his way across the floor, heading for the Special Teams set of cubicles, walking to the rhythm of his breathing. His nerves were on high alert, his head moving erratically from side to side as he scanned the floor for signs of life.

He reached the row of cubes, ducked behind the cover of the carpeted walls and scuttled down the row to Phil's desk. Most of the photos were still pinned to the wall, a few holes in the collage where the police had removed some for their files. Other than that, the cube was virtually sterile, awaiting its new occupant.

He lifted the shelf cover and swore under his breath.

They were gone. All the printouts, all the papers.

His tongue worked the inside of his mouth, pumping his cheeks for saliva. Getting into Jack's office unnoticed would be hard, if not impossible. Maybe he could snatch a key from housekeeping. He would need to work on the details.

Charlie sat in Phil's chair and adjusted it to his comfort, wondering who would be selected to fill this spot. Would they ask him? How ironic would that be? A giggle escaped his lips and he clamped a hand over his mouth to contain it. Oh, the freedom he would enjoy then. None of that administrative crap. Just pure programming. He could build a complete inventory of black market programs. He would not only be the king of the underworld but have the riches that went along with it.

Still smiling, Charlie turned off the speakers and booted up the computer, careful to log in locally and keep any record of his activity off the network.

First he searched the main developer program. If the latest file was here, he wouldn't need to get the CD from Diana. He could follow the trail from here, tonight. Finish it. But his optimism faded as he skimmed the data files. Nothing. Phil had erased it from his local drive just like every other programmer who broke company policy. He had to get his hands on that CD.

Where else had Phil left breadcrumbs that would lead back to the discovery? Charlie went through the other files on the machine, deleting Phil's profile and cleaning out the registry

entries. Then he cleared all the cached files, deleted the recent documents lists and history logs, and systematically pulled up each locally installed program, scanning them for automatic backups and saved data.

Finally, he made a general sweep of the system, checking all files that had been accessed within the last three weeks. Thirty minutes later, satisfied that all traces of Phil's work on the program had been erased, Charlie shut down the computer and crept back to his office.

Now, if he could just get into Jack's office for the printouts.

#

The music at Bobby's had been cranked up a few notches to be heard over the increasing volume of the crowd. Clint Black blared from the speakers, a bar song that had everyone in the place singing along with him, a slur of drunken voices all trying to sing louder than each other. Maggie swayed along with the crowd, caught up in the rapture of group emotion. When the song ended, everyone cheered, applauding themselves and each other, and called for more beer. The waitress was ready, and plopped two buckets filled with iced longnecks onto the picnic table in front of them.

Jack snagged two before they disappeared and handed one to Maggie. They clinked the bottles to toast and both took a long drink.

"Having fun?" he asked, leaning in to be heard above the noise. His face was so close she could see the individual whiskers on his cheeks, the slight creases in his lips. Her stomach flipped as she resisted the urge to stretch up on her toes and kiss him.

Maggie smiled and nodded. "But I have to go to the bathroom."

He pointed toward a neon sign on the other side of the bar. "Over there."

"I'll be back," she said as she turned into the crowd and disappeared between the mass of bodies. Nick had called an hour ago to say he was still tied up at the office. And while she told

him to hurry, she didn't mean it. The flicker in her stomach was still with her. Maggie had forgotten how much fun life could be.

The bathroom was no more than a dimly lit cabinet with two stalls and pictures of cowboys in various stages of undress plastered on the walls. A machine selling feminine products and flavored condoms was mounted next to the sinks, the trash can below it overflowing with paper towels. The stalls were full, of course, and two women were leaning against the sink, waiting. One of the stalls opened and a woman that Maggie recognized from the office walked out, pants unzipped and still tucking in her shirt.

“Go, go go!” she yelled.

One of the waiting women darted into the stall.

Elena pulled a pack of Marlboro Lights from her pocket and held it out to the other woman that was waiting. “Linda?”

“You know I shouldn't,” Linda said as she took one.

“They're just bar smokes. They don't really count.” She offered the pack to Maggie.

“Thanks,” Maggie said, pulling one from the pack.

Elena lit one too and soon the small room was filled with smoke.

“God, you guys. Ever hear of lung cancer,” said a voice from the stall.

“Shut up, Jessie. We'll save you one.”

Elena turned to Maggie. “I'm Elena.”

“Maggie. You work at OPTIN, right? In programming?”

“Yeah. Programming supervisor over Users. I thought I'd seen you up there. Are you interviewing?”

“No. Nick Dalakos is my brother. I'm just in town visiting.”

“Well, you picked a really crappy week to come visit.”

“No shit,” Linda said. The other stall opened and she disappeared inside.

“I heard about what happened,” Maggie said.

“Yeah. Sucks.” Elena took a drag off her cigarette and blew it toward the ceiling, then grinned at Maggie. “So, I saw you over there with Jack, you lucky dog.”

“God, what a hottie,” Jessie said.

Maggie smiled. “Yeah, he’s pretty cute.”

The stall opened and Jessie came out, straightening her skirt. “That’s the understatement of the year. He’s a god.”

“Damn, girl,” Linda said. “Get a boyfriend, already. Or better yet, just get laid.”

Maggie ducked into the stall.

“You planning to stay in here all night?” Jessie asked Elena.

“If I have to. I’m hoping that if I wait long enough, Larry will wander away.”

“Dorky Larry in Accounting?” Jessie howled in laughter. “Is he still after you? Why don’t you just tell him to piss off?”

“I can’t do that to him. He’s a really nice guy.”

“Whatever. Your wasted youth.” They left, the music swelling and abating with the swinging of the door, and were quickly replaced by another batch of antsy women. The demand never ceased.

Maggie headed back out among the crowd, taking her time weaving through the bodies, enjoying the energy that surrounded her. Everywhere she looked, people were smiling, laughing, flirting. OPTIN must be a pretty good place to work.

She rounded the end of the bar and saw Elena standing next to a short, balding man with chubby cheeks. Definitely accountant material. Most probably Larry.

He was animated and earnest in his discussions, his plump hand waving a set of stubby fingers as he talked. Elena's fixed smile, however, barely masked her trapped expression. As Maggie approached, Elena made direct eye contact with her, silently pleading for help. It was a look every woman recognized.

And to pass by without doing anything would violate the unwritten but universal women's code of conduct.

"Hey, Elena," she said. "I've been looking for you."

Elena's face swelled with relief as she made the introductions. It was Larry.

"Do you mind if I steal her away for a little while?" Maggie gushed. "I really need to ask her advice on something."

Larry looked disappointed but couldn't stand up to the pressure of both women.

"Sure. I'll, uh, catch up with you later."

"I owe you," Elena said as they melted into the crowd.

They found their way back to the table where Jack was waiting.

"There you are. I was beginning to think you'd gotten lost." He casually slipped his arm around Maggie's waist.

She traded knowing smiles with Elena and then leaned against him, letting the strength of his body support hers as they watched the next round of pool.

Chapter Ten

Charlie sat on his leather sofa, wearing the same gym shorts and tank top he had put on twelve hours earlier, a laptop on the cushion next to him. He yawned and rubbed the mist of an all-nighter from his eyes.

Who could sleep when the world was worshipping at your feet?

Last night, he had logged into his favorite bulletin board and was stunned by the response to his latest postings. The votes were in, and according to his fans, he was a legend in the making.

Sure he had started with modules written by other hackers, but it was his own brilliance that had created the perfect backdoor into the industry's largest financial systems. And now the world knew it. He had responded to a select few, only to those users he considered equals, the small squadron of anonymous programmers that enjoyed the adulation of thousands of other anonymous programmers. Zeus42 was now part of that elite group.

He stretched complacently and ran a hand through his hair, showering his shoulders with tiny white flake, as his thoughts returned to money. The soft ding on the computer every time someone posted a new message had begun to play in his mind like the bell on a game show. Each sound signaling an increase to the jackpot. One day closer to fame and fortune.

Screw OPTIN and their fancy conference rooms and heavy-handed controls. They deserved to have their precious system compromised. Sitting in meetings and playing golf with

their cronies had made them slow and stupid. Charlie was here, fighting on the forefront, a soldier in the technology war, his senses sharp and his knowledge cutting-edge.

The code was perfect, impenetrable and undetectable. Well, almost. Phil had found it on a fluke. If Charlie could develop a way to insert the program, grab the cash, and back the code out before anyone found it, he'd be virtually invisible. Then it would be bye, bye OPTIN.

And bye, bye Diana.

He considered that for a minute. No, he wouldn't miss her. The sex was great, definitely the best piece of ass he had ever had. And he didn't have to buy her flowers or remember to put the seat down or any of that crap. But they had used each other for their own reasons.

Soon Charlie would be able to buy himself plenty of fresh, young ladies to replace her. Girls that would be available whenever he wanted a little action. Girls that would do whatever he asked.

Charlie closed the top on the laptop and yanked out the wireless network card. He was exhausted but not really sleepy. The pheds from a few hours ago still pulsed through his veins. He looked down and flexed his arms, his biceps bulging large and round on his bare skin. Then tensed his pecs and watched the ribbed tank swell slightly in front.

"I am a machine," he grunted.

He changed into a fresh set of workout clothes, choosing a muscle-shirt and short shorts that accentuated his firm glutes. It was almost nine and the gym would be full of those uptight executive women. The same ones that lusted after him every Saturday morning.

#

Maggie and Nick walked down the pier, bags in hand, and headed toward the boat. The ocean breeze carried the taste of salt and cooled their skin. She breathed in deeply, delighting in the faint cry of the sea gulls. This was something she missed living out in central Texas.

The Dalakos' boat sat several feet higher than those surrounding it and perched right on top of it all was Diana, sitting on the deck in her bathing suit, reading the morning paper, the sun bouncing off her blonde hair. With her tan legs stretched out luxuriously and a body that could sell magazines, Diana was the picture of carefree beauty. Hell, even Maggie was attracted to her.

Nick called out as they neared and Diana sat up, her face concentrating on the approaching figures, then breaking into a dazzling smile.

“Hey, you two! I was wondering when you were going to get here.”

They were greeted with hugs, Nick's hug lasting long enough for him to get a good grip on her butt. Diana giggled and pushed him away.

“It's going to be a great day for taking the boat out. Look at that sky! You guys go put your bags below so we can get going.”

Maggie went down first, pausing at the bottom of the steps to let her eyes adjust to the dark interior before walking into the main cabin. The boat, decorated in traditional nautical colors and patterns, never failed to amaze Maggie. Probably because it cost more than four times as much as her own modest home.

The compact but roomy space was richly designed using teak panels and dark blue fabric, with surprisingly plush carpet that cushioned Maggie's feet as she crossed the sitting area. A sofa ran along one side of the boat, with tables on either end and a complete entertainment center across from it, Nick's one request during construction, although Maggie had never seen the television set turned on. On the other side of the cabin a table that seated four was attached to the galley which sported an oven, microwave, dishwasher and outlets for kitchen appliances. Windows lined both sides of the room with their cloth covers rolled up smartly, the marble countertops gleaming as the sunlight bounced off the sea and reflected back into the cabin.

Diana pointed to a door past the galley.

“You know where your room is by now. Just toss your stuff on the bed.”

“Thanks.” Maggie ducked her head and entered the small room. A double bed occupied most of the space, flanked by wall-mounted lights. Storage spaces with custom-made cushioned lids lined both sides of the room. To the left between the end of the bed and the door was a ridged counter with more storage underneath; to the right was the bathroom. The only place to stand was in the space she was standing now, a four foot square just inside the door. It was amazingly complete but with strange doll-like proportions.

She heard Nick pull Diana into the stateroom on the other side of the cabin and shut the door firmly behind them. A few muffled sounds escaped into the cabin. Maggie groaned and closed the door to her room.

Dropping her duffle bag onto the bed, she fished out her cell phone charger, plugged it into an outlet on the counter, then pulled her phone from a back pocket to check the display. No calls.

As they stood by her car last night, Jack had asked for the number. She had scribbled it on the back of one of his business cards, and then jumped into her car, terrified he was going to kiss her, goose bumps because she wanted him to. Maggie had watched him in her rearview mirror as she drove away, debating all the while whether she should turn around and go back.

Now she carefully placed the phone in the cradle. She wanted to be sure it had juice if he decided to call.

She flopped on the bed and looked around the small room. It was amazing how efficient these manufacturers were with their space. She rolled over to one side of the bed and lifted the padded lid to reveal a space of about ten cubic feet, filled to capacity with bottled water.

Maggie closed the lid and opened the one next to it. This space was filled with groceries, canned tuna, canned fruit, spaghetti, rice, dry beans. Enough to feed Nick and Diana for several months. Seemed like a little overkill on normal provisions. Were they planning a big trip? An anniversary vacation? Nick hadn't said anything about one.

That dirty feeling of suspicion inched up her backbone again.

She rolled to the other side of the bed. The forward compartment was again filled with bottled water. Definitely more than ordinary stocking levels. How many other storage bins on board were full of fresh water?

Through the closed door, she heard the stateroom door open and the muted conversation of Nick and Diana as they milled around the galley. Maggie carefully eased the lid down on the storage space and laid her head on the bed, listening to the sounds of their voices, the laughter, the murmurs of intimacy between a husband and a wife, and wondered why she should be suspicious. Diana and her brother were very much in love.

She waited until she heard them climb the stairs, then quietly opened the lid to the final large storage area. This one was filled with toiletries, soap, shampoo, toilet paper. Again, a little more than she would expect to find in a linen closet, especially on a boat, but nothing really sinister.

Feeling foolish, she began to replace the items when one of the shampoo bottles slipped from her grip, dropped into the bin and struck something metallic. Maggie leaned into the space and lifted the bottle, revealing the corner of a green metal box. Carefully she removed the towels and lifted the lid of the box.

The unmistakable smell of cash floated into the room.

Maggie's jaw dropped open as she pulled bundles of twenties and hundreds from the box and piled them on the bed next to her. There were about thirty bundles, mostly twenties but six stacks of hundreds. She tried to estimate the amount. Maybe a hundred grand. Or two? Three, even?

What the hell did they need all this cash for? Were they running drugs? Suddenly the months' worth of provisions didn't seem so out of place.

The boat's engine started. They must be getting ready to head out.

Quickly, she placed the bundles back into the box, working to position them just as they had been. After she wedged the box back into the bottom of the bin, she pulled the towels back over it, then tossed in the shampoo bottles and soaps, before easing the lid closed.

They would be wondering where she was.

Maggie went into the head and splashed some water on her face, taking a few deep breaths to steady her nerves. No sense letting her imagination get out of hand. She would just ask Nick about the money. Then relax and enjoy the weekend.

But she'd ask him when Diana wasn't around.

Chapter Eleven

Detective Vance sat on the sofa, reading the morning paper, enjoying the slow start of the weekend as he listened to the familiar sounds of his wife, Patti, making breakfast in the kitchen. The groan of the bottom drawer as it scraped open, the clang of the cast iron skillet, the metallic swish of the whisk as she scrambled the eggs. Dylan, his four-year old son, sat next to him, his young face slack, staring zombie-style at the flurry of animated activity on the television screen.

The ringing of the phone intruded on their Norman Rockwell scene and Vance subtly recoiled from the sound. It was either his mother-in-law or one of Patti's numerous cousins. No one else called this early on a Saturday morning.

Except Frank.

Patti dug the phone out from under a stack of manila paper with pictures of lopsided, smiling people drawn in crayon.

“Well, hey, Frank.”

Vance pulled the newspaper up higher and pretended not to hear.

“Yes, he's up. He's right here. Hiding behind the paper.” She dropped the phone over the top of the paper. “It's for you.”

Vance grunted as the phone bounced off his stomach.

“What's up?” he said into the receiver, stifling a loud yawn, hoping Frank would take the hint. The problem was Frank didn't have a family to occupy his weekends. He lived to work.

And so had Vance, until he had a family. Now he looked forward to lounging around with nothing to do. He could sit and watch his son and his wife—her belly slightly swollen with their second child—for hours on end. The more he worked, the more he saw, and the more vulnerable they seemed.

“Sorry to bother you at home, Arnie,” Galloway said, although he didn’t sound sorry at all. “But I just talked to the m.e.’s office. They found traces of lotion on the victim’s shirt.”

“Could be his.”

“Not unless he was big-time gay. This was a woman’s hand lotion. Some French stuff. Very expensive.”

“Huh.” Vance scratched his chest through his t-shirt. “So I guess Dr. Hart was right after all.”

“Yep.”

“Well, on the bright side, that’ll narrow it down. When’s the last time we had a violent female suspect?”

“Been at least two years since that Dickenson crap. And she’s stuck tight up in Huntsville. I’m going to pull a list of the female employees. The last person to see him alive just happens to be a woman in his department. Can’t remember her name but it’s in here. Also need to talk to the girlfriend again. You coming in today?”

“Yeah. Give me an hour.” He tossed the phone glumly onto his stack of unread newspaper and looked over at his son. The cartoon had ended and a string of annoying commercials was blaring across the screen. Dylan hadn’t moved a muscle. Patti smiled at him from the stove.

“We’ll be fine. Grab a shower while I finish up breakfast.”

He came into the kitchen and gave her a hug. “I won’t be long. Couple of hours at the most.”

“I’ve heard that before.”

#

By the time he got to the precinct office, Galloway was ready to go. “I figured we’d start with the best options first. The last one to see him was a Becky Liu, lives out on the west side in some apartments just south of I-10.”

“Didn’t someone talk to her already?”

“Yeah, Torres and Jefferson. But I want to talk to her again. I also want to talk to the girlfriend again.”

“She French?”

“I wish.” He checked his notebook. “Felice Williams. Lives down by the Galleria.”

“How many female employees does OPTIN have?”

“About a hundred.”

“Damn. Let’s hope we get lucky.”

#

They followed a silver BMW through the security gate and pulled into the first empty parking spot. Apartment complexes were sprouting up wherever there was open real estate in Houston. Most were sprawling communities, hundreds of units on a barren stretch of land with a few small pear trees scattered about. This complex was a smaller, intimate collection of privately owned luxury condos, the grounds filled with towering pines and expensive landscaping.

They walked down a gravel path, over a manmade brook and up the stone steps to unit 205.

The door was opened by a woman of mixed descent. She had the straight, dark hair and warm coloring of an Asian, but the almond-shaped eyes behind her stylish black frames were softened at the corners, her body less angular, her face more oval than round.

“Becky Liu?” Galloway held up his badge. “Detectives Galloway and Vance. We’re investigating the death of Philip Barnes. Can we come in for a minute?”

“I already talked to the cops.”

“We just have a few more questions. Do you mind?”

She looked as if she did mind but opened the door anyway, running a hand through her tousled hair and stepping back to let them in. She was still in her pajamas, a worn tank top with a Chinese symbol on it and boxer shorts. The apartment was chilly and the nipples from her small breasts poked through the fabric, a fact of which she was either unaware or unconcerned.

She led them through the apartment to the kitchen.

“Nice place,” Vance said, taking stock of the spacious living room which held oversized leather furniture and a natural stone fireplace. “OPTIN must be treating you right.”

“They’re about market average. I made some money off the tech stocks before everything tumbled. Splurged a little. Coffee?”

They both accepted and she poured two more cups, then gestured to a set of French doors. “Let’s sit outside.”

They sat in painted wrought iron chairs on a small brick patio that faced the trees. Lattice had been erected on either side for privacy and morning glory vines wound gracefully through the slats, their lavender blooms soft in the dappled sunlight. Vance took a sip of his coffee – a hazelnut blend of some sort – then smiled as he watched Galloway swig and grimace. Nothing but plain java for the old man.

“So I guess the fact that you’re here means you haven’t got the guy who did it yet.”

“Or girl,” Galloway said.

“A girl?” Her face registered genuine surprise then slid into a slight expression of feminist admiration. “Really?”

“Yeah. We think it’s somebody with a little money,” he added, looking pointedly over her shoulder and into the apartment.

She responded with a smirk of disdain and shook her head. “So what do you want to talk to me about?”

“You were the last person to talk to Mr. Barnes the night he was killed,” Vance said. “We wanted to go over what happened that night and see if we can find anything new. Anything that might help.”

“Okay. Where do we start?”

“You were working late that night also. Wednesday.”

“Yeah.”

“Do you normally work late?”

“Depends. Not usually that late.”

“Did Phil?”

“Used to before he started dating Felice. Now he rarely stays past eight or nine.”

“Still seems kind of late.”

She shrugged. “Some of the guys are early birds and like to get there before the sun comes up. Me and Phil were more a part of the night owls club.”

“How many people in this club?”

“Varies.”

“Does anybody there work eight to five?”

“Welcome to the next generation.”

Galloway rolled his eyes.

“Look, I don’t give a shit what you think about us nerdy analytic types, Detective.

Programming takes creativity. It can’t be turned on and off like a light switch. We all put in way more than forty hours a week. The specific hours are, well, flexible.”

“Was anybody else working late that night?” Vance asked, directing her attention back to him.

“Not in our group. I didn’t make a sweep through the floor to check. But in our section, it was just me and Phil.” Her eyes watered a little. A few blinks, a quick breath, and she was back.

“Do you have any idea what he was working on? Something for a particular client or a specific project?”

Becky shook her head. “No. Phil worked on the Accounting suite. I deal with the Portfolio software. Our projects seldom overlap.”

“So there’s a good chance only Barnes and his supervisor know what he was doing?”

“Yeah. Jack would know.”

“What about any clients? Did Barnes get any strange calls that day?”

Again she shook her head. “We don’t talk to the clients. One of the reasons we get to enjoy flexible hours. The requests for our group come either from the regular programming department or the product managers. CSR handles the bulk of the client communication.”

Galloway made a few notes in his notebook.

“What time did you leave?”

“A little after two.” That checked out. The door logs showed her punching out the back door at exactly 2:11 AM.

“Did you happen to see anybody in the lobby or in the parking lot?”

“No. This is so creepy. I mean, they must have been there, waiting.” Becky shivered.

“Why Phil? Why not me? I might have walked right by them.”

Good question. Another black mark against a random attack. Becky Liu was mentally tough but physically a much easier target than Barnes.

“Where were you parked?”

“On the top floor. I got there late Wednesday morning.”

“How many other cars were in the garage?”

“There were a few on the bottom floor. Mine was the only one on top.”

“Can you remember what cars were there?”

“I wasn’t really looking. I was exhausted, wanted to get home. And even though I often work late, I still don’t like walking through the lot alone at night. I just make a beeline for my car, get in and lock the doors.”

“But there was more than one car? More than just Phil’s?”

“Yeah. There was more than one. We have a night shift that manages the computer network. So they would have been there. Somebody had parked in one of the executive slots. They get some kind of cheap thrill out of parking there when the execs aren’t in.” She smiled.

“There’s a story floating around that one of the techs once parked in Shale’s space when he was out of town. Shale came back sooner than expected, found them in his spot and had the car towed. Cost the guy two hundred bucks to get his car back.”

The detectives laughed, and Galloway scribbled some more.

“About the girlfriend, Felice,” Galloway said. “Were they having any problems?”

“Not that I know of. Besides, have you met her? She couldn’t do something like this.”

“We’ll see,” he grumbled. “Anybody else at the office he might have had trouble with? Other women? Maybe one that wanted him to go out with her instead of Felice?”

“Phil has,” she hesitated, “*had* gone out with a few of the women at the office before but nothing serious.”

“Can I get those names?”

Galloway made notes of the two women and then turned to Vance. “Done here?”

“Yeah. Thanks, Ms. Liu,” Vance said, standing up. “We appreciate your time. Can we call you again in case we have more questions?”

“Sure. Anything I can do to help you find the bastard that did this.” She led them to the front door. “So why do you think it was a woman?”

“Couple of reasons. We found some hand lotion on the victim.” Vance said.

“Men use lotion.”

“Fancy, girl type of lotion. Mind if we look at your makeup and creams and stuff?” Galloway asked, laughing but with a stab of genuine interest in the question.

“Um, yes, I do mind,” Becky said. Her eyes glanced subconsciously toward a closed door just behind Vance. “That’s my personal stuff.”

“Mind if I use your restroom?” Vance whipped opened the door without waiting for an answer.

An attractive woman lay asleep in the nude, the sheet wrapped around her legs. Becky pulled the door short and looked at Vance defiantly.

“Like I said, that’s my personal stuff.”

“Right. Sorry to bother you.”

They walked down the gravel path to the car.

“Looks like you sucked in your gut for nothing,” Galloway muttered.

#

The apartment complex of Felice Williams was an anonymous group of three-story buildings accented in beige and green located close to the Galleria. They climbed two flights of stairs to the third floor, sweating under the late morning sun that heated the grated steps.

Apartment number 609 had a grapevine wreath in the shape of a heart hanging on the door, a blue and white checked ribbon dangling a welcome sign. The doormat was in the shape of a cat and read PLEASE WIPE YOUR PAWS! Felice Williams did not open the door until they had each put their badge up to the peephole for her to see.

“Sorry, I just can’t be too careful. Especially after what happened.”

They both declined her offer of tea and took seats on uncomfortable wooden chairs, the backs painted white to resemble a picket fence. The apartment was neat and orderly, teacher-style, with apple-themed knick-knacks and wall ornaments. A huge, fluffy calico cat took up one side of the sofa. A black, short-haired one peered out from underneath a small oak desk. The smell of potpourri simmering on the stove floated throughout the room.

Felice herself was pretty in a plain way. Her long brown hair was pulled back in a ponytail, her makeup simple and light. The denim jumper she wore over a pink t-shirt was appliquéd with a basket of kittens, the shapeless garment masking, but not completely hiding, her youthful figure.

“Is there any more information about Philip?” she asked, pulling a tissue from a crocheted box cover.

“We’re still working on that, ma’am,” Vance said. “When was the last time you talked to Mr. Barnes?”

“Wednesday night. I called around seven to see if he was still planning to come over after work.”

“And was he?”

“Yes. He, um,” she hesitated and looked down at her hands. “He spent the night here three or four times in the last week or so.” When she looked up, her face was red, but she lifted her chin and continued. “He said he needed a few more hours.”

“A few more hours? At seven? Was he working on a project deadline?”

“I don’t think so. He sounded a little worked up. He gets that way sometimes about his work.”

“Must have been something pretty important.”

“Maybe.” Felice put up her hands in a helpless gesture.

“Did you talk to him again after that, Ms. Williams?” Galloway asked.

“No. After I ate dinner and graded some papers, I went online to research some of the district curriculum. I got an email around nine-thirty saying he would be even later and that I should go on to bed.”

“He didn’t call to tell you that?”

“I have dial-up. I’m sure he tried to call first. What I would give now to have talked to him then.” She wiped her nose with a new tissue. “Anyway, I was a little irritated that he wasn’t coming over so after I disconnected, I just curled up in bed with Whiskers and read a book.” She was crying audibly now, her attempts to keep it in check just making it worse. “I should’ve called him back.”

“And Whiskers would be the cat?” Galloway asked.

Felice nodded, looking over at the long-haired calico. The cat raised its head at the mention of its name, then licked its bottom.

“I think it likes you,” Vance said.

Galloway gave him a go-to-hell look and turned back to Felice. “Do you know what he was working on, by any chance?”

She took a deep, ragged breath and wiped her eyes again.

“No. We didn’t really talk about work that much. Well, we talked about the people he worked with but not his programming work. That was all way over my head.” She gave them another sad look. “I would sometimes look at his papers and stuff, you know. I wanted to understand what he did all day, but I could never make heads or tails of it.”

The detectives looked at each other.

“He brought his work here?” Vance asked.

She nodded. “Pretty much every time he came over, he brought some work with him. He would go through his reports while I graded papers. Sometimes he would try to get to his computer at the office but my setup is too slow.”

“When was the last time he was here?”

“Tuesday night. He brought a change of clothes with him and left from here to go to the office.” She blushed again.

“Did he leave any of his work papers here? Things maybe he wanted to work on some more when he came back that night?”

“No. He was pretty antsy about getting everything back. I think they have a strict policy about not taking things out of the office.” She paused. “I’m not getting him in trouble, am I?”

“Not much of it really matters now, ma’am,” Vance said gently.

“I guess not.” He watched another tear break free and roll down her cheek.

“Can you remember what y’all talked about Wednesday night during that phone call?” Galloway asked. “You said he sounded a little excited?”

“Gosh, I really wish I could be more help. We actually didn’t talk very long. He was pretty pre-occupied with whatever he was working on. He tried to explain it to me. Something about someone not documenting their work. Concealed code, maybe? Does that sound right?”

They both nodded at her encouragingly.

“Anyway, he had been working on this particular bug for at least a week and he thought he was getting close to figuring it out. He just wouldn’t let it go. Phil was stubborn that way.”

She stroked Whiskers with soft hands, fingernails cut short for elementary school projects, her delicate arm moving rhythmically down the cat. Becky Liu was right. This woman couldn’t have killed anyone. But they still had to check off the boxes.

“Can I use your restroom?” Vance asked.

She pointed down the hall toward her bedroom and as he walked away, he heard Galloway ask, “So you were here with, uh, Whiskers all night?”

Vance slowed at the door to scan the bedroom. A neatly made bed covered with an old-fashioned quilt sat in the middle of the room. Crystal figurines, mostly of cats in various poses, lined the tops of her dressers. Everything was tidy.

The bathroom was pretty much the same. He quietly opened each cabinet and drawer, then peeked inside the medicine cabinet. The only beauty products he found were of the drugstore variety, the brand of hand lotion the same one his wife picked up while grocery shopping.

The soap dish read “World’s Greatest Teacher” and Vance thought back to his son. Dylan idolized his teacher, had even proposed to her a few weeks ago. She was cut from the same cloth as Felice. They were wasting their time here.

He walked back out to the den, wondering how many more women Galloway had on deck for today. And when he could get home to his family.

Chapter Twelve

Maggie leaned back and let the sun warm her face, listening to the quiet lap of the waves against the boat. After using the engine to clear the bay, Diana had switched to the sails. The boat was fully automatic with sails that opened and retracted at the press of a button. Diana worked them expertly. It was clear that she preferred running solo, but indulged Nick's male ego occasionally by asking for a hand with this or that.

They sailed out across the gulf until reaching a desolate spot in the ocean. Then tied down the sails and sat adrift on the sea, letting the current move them at its will. Out in the distance, a tanker crept along the horizon, the image cloudy through the sea air.

Satisfied that everything was in order, Diana sat down on a bench next to Nick and pulled a water bottle out of the cooler.

"Feels great out here." She took a long drink and surveyed the ocean. "We might even get to do a little fishing. What do you think, Maggie? Up for a little sushi for lunch?"

"I'll catch. But mine either go into the frying pan or back in the ocean."

"Like brother, like sister. How about a swim instead?"

"Deal."

Diana turned to Nick. "Coming?"

Nick checked the cell phone at his waist. "You guys go ahead. I want to call in first."

"Come on, Nick. All work and no play..." She let her fingers crawl down his chest.

“I know. I know. I just thought the police would have turned up something by now. Maybe they haven’t been able to reach me.”

Diana dropped her hand back to her side. “Or maybe they didn’t want to bother you on the weekend.”

“It wouldn’t be a bother.”

“Sorry. That came out wrong.” Maggie tried to read Diana’s expression but the sunglasses obscured her view. “I just meant that they’re probably working on the case, but don’t need any input from you right now.”

“Well, they damn well better be working on it right now,” he said, looking out over the horizon. “Maybe I shouldn’t have left town this weekend.”

Diana stuck out her jaw. “Maybe they don’t need you following them around and slowing down the investigation.”

Maggie quietly turned her head away. She had never been witness to a disagreement between her brother and Diana, and the tension between them suddenly made the boat feel crowded. The expanse of the ocean only magnified the sensation.

Nick stood up. “I’ll be back up in a few minutes.” He disappeared into the darkness below.

Maggie wanted to follow him and ask about the money. Now was probably not the best time but she was pretty sure Diana wouldn’t follow her down there. She was trying to think of a reason to go when Diana turned toward her.

“Your brother,” she said shaking her head. “That man drives me crazy sometimes.”

“Yeah. He’s really upset about what happened.”

“Me too. But we can’t stop living just because he did.”

Maggie bit her lip and looked down at her ring finger. The tan line where her wedding band used to be was barely visible.

Diana reached across the deck and placed a comforting hand on her leg. “Wow. Hey. I wasn’t talking about you. I, um...”

“No.” Maggie shook her head. “Matt’s been gone for almost two years. Maybe it’s time for me to start living again too.”

“I know you miss him terribly. That will probably never go away.”

They sat in silence for a while and Maggie felt a closeness to Diana that she hadn’t before. Maybe she had been suspicious for nothing. So Diana had an unhappy past that she didn’t want to be reminded of. Was that a crime? Anyone would want to be prepared for the worst when sailing out here in the middle of the ocean. Maggie began to wonder if her current line of work was turning her into a prying old maid.

She sat up straight and smiled at Diana.

“You’re right. Let’s go.” She pulled off the top that covered her swimsuit and jumped off the side of the boat into the warm Gulf water.

#

By the time Nick came up from the cabin, Maggie and Diana were drip-drying in the noon sun.

“Where have you been?” Diana asked, running a comb through her hair. She leaned her head back over the side of the boat and poured a can of beer on her hair.

Nick stopped in his tracks. “What are you doing?”

“What? Oh this?” she asked, holding up the empty beer can. “All-natural hair lightener.”

Maggie nodded. “Cheap, too.”

“Well if you ladies are done with your beauty session,” Nick said, “I have some interesting info.”

“Ooooo. Gossip and beauty secrets go together like peanut butter and chocolate,” Diana said, smiling mischievously. “Why do you think women go to the bathroom together?”

“I always wondered about that.” Nick sat in the captain’s chair. “Anyway, I talked to the police and they seem to think,” he paused for dramatic affect, “that our *murderer* is a *murderess*.”

“A *what*?” Diana asked. The impish look melted away as the beer can slipped from her hand and bounced across the deck.

“A woman.”

“No shit,” was all Maggie could muster.

“Why do they say that?” Diana asked.

“Wouldn’t say. They’ve already talked to his girlfriend and one of the other programmers. They’re scanning the rest of our employee list this afternoon.”

“Can you think of anyone that could have done it?” Maggie asked.

He shook his head. “Nope. No one. Everyone liked Philip. In fact, I’ve heard from some of the female employees that he was one of our more eligible bachelors.”

“Spurned lover?” Diana suggested.

“Don’t know. I understand he had a girlfriend outside the office.”

“Well, that would certainly bring about motive,” Diana said, relaxing against the side of the boat. “A steady on the outside. Another on the inside.”

“I wouldn’t know. That kind of gossip doesn’t make it up to me.”

“Well, it must have been a pretty serious fling,” Maggie said. “Women get emotional, but come on, we don’t take our revenge that seriously.”

Diana smiled at her with a wicked gleam in her eye. “We’d do something worse like spread rumors that he was terrible in bed.”

“Yeah, or put Nair in his shampoo bottle.”

“Or tell his friends he liked to wear our panties.”

“Time out. I can’t believe you guys are making jokes about this.” Nick looked at them both reprovingly. “This man is dead.”

“I know, honey,” Diana said. “I’m sorry.”

Maggie nodded in agreement. “Me, too.”

“But now you know the police are still working on it,” Diana said. “Even without you there. Can we let it go just for the afternoon? It’s so pretty out here.”

“Not quite yet, I’m afraid.” He looked at Maggie. “Did you bring those printouts with you?” She nodded. “Good. Let’s go down to the stateroom. I want to look at something.”

#

Maggie and Nick went through the activity reports for both Shale and Barnes, comparing the entries. Shale’s report was less than half a page. Logins at the odd hours of the morning with no further entries attributed to it. The entries for Barnes filled almost a hundred pages for the last month alone.

“On the night that Philip was killed,” Maggie said, “there are two entries for Martin. He logged in at 2:17am and back out at 2:31. Phil’s email to Jack was written at what time?”

“Two forty-six.”

“So, he could have logged in as Martin before he was killed.”

“Only if he left the office. All of Martin’s entries are coming in from the outside. What was Philip doing before that?”

“Last entry shows him in the main developer program almost an hour earlier. Looks like he copied some code to his workstation.”

“So he was working locally.” Nick shook his head. “Damn it.”

“It’s quicker.”

“Yeah, but stupid. What if their hard drive crashes and we lose all that data? If they’re working on my dime, I want their work saved to the network.”

“Your company. Your dime.”

“Damn right it is. And a company that pays the mortgage, car payments and college tuition for the families of the people who work there. So what’s good for the company is good for everyone employed there.”

Maggie held up her hands defensively. “Okay. Okay. Sorry. Guess I’ve been living too close to Austin.”

“Well just don’t start voting Democrat.”

“The bottom line is we need to get a look at his computer.”

“I’ll call Jack and ask him to see what he can find.”

Maggie flipped a few more pages in the activity log as her mind wandered back to the discovery she had made that morning in her cabin. She shot a quick glance at the stairway. Clear.

“Um, Nick,” she whispered.

He looked up from his report. “What?” he whispered back loudly, teasing her.

“I found some stuff in my cabin this morning.”

“Why the fuck are you whispering?”

Maggie glanced at the stairs again. “Because—“

“Are we under attack?” Nick hissed. He looked over his shoulder in mock alarm. “Are the aliens finally coming to get us?”

Maggie kicked him under the table. “I’m serious.”

“Okay, me too. What are we being serious about?”

“I was looking through some of the storage bins in my cabin—“

“Snooping.”

“Well, maybe.”

“The problem with snooping, Mags, is that either you find something you didn’t want to see and it makes you upset. Or you don’t find anything and then you feel guilty for snooping.”

“Yeah, yeah. I’ve heard it. My problem is the first one.”

“Did you run across our stash of porno mags?” Nick grinned at her.

“No!” She groaned. “Thank God.”

“Because sometimes we—“

“I found months worth of food and a half a million in cash.”

Nick’s smile vanished. “What?”

He didn’t know. Maggie wasn’t sure whether to be relieved or concerned. “Yeah. Like that much stuff. Are you guys planning a trip?”

“Not that I’m aware of.”

His stunned reaction was enough for her. “Why do you think Diana would keep that much on board?”

“I don’t know.” He looked up at her. “But I don’t see anything wrong with it.”

“Five hundred thousand in cash? That doesn’t strike you as a little odd?”

Nick pulled back from the table and studied her with narrow eyes. “What have you got against Diana?”

Maggie studied him. How far could she go with her suspicions. That’s all they were, right? She had no proof of anything. “Nothing.”

“Liar.”

“I just think it’s a little strange, that’s all.”

“And I just think you’re sticking your nose into my business.”

“You’re right. My bad. I’m out.” She picked up the log reports for Barnes again and focused on them until she felt Nick relax. She had passed along the information. What Nick did with it was his business.

“Okay. So Wednesday night seems to be the only match,” she said. “The other nights that Martin logged in, Phil had already clocked out.”

“These reports aren’t telling us anything.”

“How well did Martin know Phil?”

Nick shook his head. “Didn’t. To Martin, every programmer is just another nerd making him rich.”

“That could be the attitude that got him selected for this little game.”

“Yeah, well it’s not a game once someone dies.”

Maggie pushed the reports aside. “You know, these two things might be completely unrelated. We could be looking at a hack job totally separate from what happened to Phil.”

“Maybe. Let’s wait and see what files he was working on.” He stood up. “I’m going back on deck with Diana. You, stay out of my cabin.”

#

The phone rang and this time Detective Vance snatched it from the cradle. After Felice, they had talked to both of the women that had dated Phil and struck them from the list. Now he wanted to wrap up and get home.

“Vance.”

“Hey Arnie. It’s Betsy from the lab. I thought I saw your car outside. Can you come down for a sec? I want to show you something.”

“On my way.”

He hung up and looked at Galloway.

“Let’s go.”

They walked down the hall, up a flight of stairs, turned right twice and found a door labeled Video Lab. Inside were a few techs, the weekend skeleton crew, all hunched in front of television screens, boxes of tapes littering the floor.

Betsy raised a hand from the corner. “Over here.”

She had a clear black-and-white image of a man walking through a door frozen on the screen in front of her.

“Thanks for coming up.”

“No problem. What’d you find?” Vance asked.

“Something was bothering me about this tape. Look here. This is Philip Barnes passing through the back door of the office building on the night he was killed.”

She rewound the tape and they watched Phil walking backwards through the door.

“Now, watch this,” she said as she played the tape forward again. “He approaches the door, punches his code on the keypad and then opens the door to walk through. But look how he

stops here.” She clicked a button and the image froze. “He doesn’t immediately walk through. He pushes open the door and holds it.”

“For someone else to walk through,” Galloway said.

“Right. But no one does.”

“Because it’s a double set of doors.”

“I think he opened the door and whoever was with him walked through the other door. Probably as soon as the doors unlock because he doesn’t hold it very long.”

“Do we have video on the other door?”

Betsy shook her head. “This one is supposed to cover both. I’ll bet you five bucks that OPTIN security says this camera angle was changed from its original position.”

“And no one noticed.”

“Who would? They don’t monitor it like that. It’s used more as a convenience for the receptionist and after-hours crew.”

Vance looked at Galloway. “Guess we need to start on the other ninety-seven women on that list.”

Betsy put up a hand. “Don’t leave yet. I want to show you another tape. This one from the garage.”

She pulled another tape from the box at her feet and inserted it into the machine.

“They have six cameras mounted in the parking garage. Three on each level. The taping device cycles through each of the cameras every ten seconds. So as you watch, you see each portion of the garage come up on the screen.”

The three of them watched as the tape showed the different portions of the parking garage.

“The northeast corner of the lower level, the northwest corner, the northeast corner of the upper level, the northwest corner, the south side, then the northeast corner of the lower level.”

Betsy looked at them with a satisfied smirk. “Notice anything?”

“Where’s the south side camera for the lower level?”

“You mean the one that monitors the murder scene?” she said dramatically. “Why, heaven knows.”

“Get a tech out there today and check that camera. Tell him to take a fingerprint kit too.”

Galloway turned to Vance. “Guess we can also rule out a crime of passion.”

Chapter Thirteen

Charlie sat on his sofa, feet propped up on the table, with his laptop beside him and a classic sci-fi movie running on the screen.

“Why don't I give you the finger....and you give me my phone call.” Charlie said the words aloud with the actor, then let out a girlish giggle. “Oh, man. This is all going my way.”

The code was ready. A few minor edits once he looked over Phil's final CD, but those could probably be done at home and tested over the Internet. He didn't need the foil of the great OPTIN anymore. But what a generous testing environment they had provided.

His visibility on the hacker sites was on the rise, the bits of posted code generating a buzz among his devoted followers. Just enough to keep them interested. Charlie was holding back on the details until he was ready to go to market. The true value of the code was priceless. He should start by asking a million. Maybe two.

He took a swig from his beer and refreshed the site. Four more messages. More adulation, more praise. And another nosy one asking for more details. nme607. No doubt part of the anti-hacker community. He could spot them a mile away. He was sick of this guy.

Charlie posted a message to the board listing nme607 as a corporate spy and sat back to watch. It didn't take long before the responses came pouring in. Soon the user would be banned from the site, his postings automatically rejected by the system.

The masses were behind him, and the rush of power was exhilarating.

Now he needed to come up with a price.

He looked down and flexed his biceps. Definitely getting bigger. Charlie reached for the small tackle box, looked over the selection of steroids in the different compartments and chose a thick, pink one with five sides. What was the name of this one? Didn't matter. It was one of his favorites. He washed the pill down with his beer, threw in two tabs of speed for fun, and looked at his inventory. He was getting low on the tiny white ones and completely out of the light blues. Time to restock.

But first, Diana. What was he going to do with her?

She wasn't ready to stop the flow of cash, even temporarily. The woman was crazy with greed. And if he quit making the transfers, she would explode. He giggled again. That was funny. He held the power and could dangle it in front of her at his will. Make her dance for it.

Besides, the money was going to her account, not his. That had pissed him off when they first got going, but now it was definitely working to his advantage. Didn't the police always follow the money? If he skipped town, she would be left to sort it all out. Just like she had left him here after Phil's death.

On the other hand, Diana was smart, too smart to go into this without a way out. The thought rattled his spine. She would have already come up with a way to turn this on him. She was setting him up. But how? And more importantly, when? He needed to get his hands on that CD before she made her move. She thought she would hang him out to dry? Not a chance.

He stomped his feet and kicked the sofa. Damn her for ruining his good mood.

Charlie grabbed a fresh beer and pulled a yellow tab from the tackle box. He needed something to help him relax.

#

Maggie woke up in the darkness, disoriented and sweating. The bed moved gently beneath her. She viciously kicked at the covers and her foot thudded against the ceiling. The boat. She was on the boat.

Trapped in the middle of the Gulf.

Stuck in a tiny space with her stressed-out brother.

Holed up with his wife and her shady past.

And Jack hadn't called.

Maggie stared up at the thin wooden slats on the ceiling. Maybe she would get botulism like they did in that movie. The one where all the dead bodies were floating around in the cabin. What was the name of it?

She rolled over to check the clock. One thirty-two. Four hours until daylight.

Awake at one thirty in the morning.

Just like the mysterious OPTIN hacker.

Was he back in the system, swiping money from the company right now? They should've set a trigger in the system to notify somebody if Shale logged in. Of course, that would require notifying Brad, the network manager, who would throw a fit, and be fully justified in doing so. And if Shale turned out to be legit, there would be hell to pay. Maybe she could write something that would go unnoticed.

But first, a drink of water. A day of sun and salty air had dried out her throat. The storage bin just inches from her head held cases of bottled water but Maggie resisted. Discovering the bundle of cash had tainted the contents of this room. Nick hadn't seemed that concerned and she was embarrassed at having to admit that she had been shamelessly rummaging through their stuff.

Of course, if her fears were on target and Diana realized that Maggie had found the water bottles, she might also suspect the full extent of her search. Better to grab one from the galley.

Maggie crawled to the end of the bed and reached for the door latch.

“I’m sorry. Did I wake you?” Diana said as Maggie stumbled into the room.

Maggie looked at the table covered with the activity reports.

“No. Just couldn’t sleep.” Maggie lifted her chin in the direction of the table. “Did you find anything useful in there?”

“Oh, gosh no. I don’t understand all those reports. I was curious what you and Nicky were doing down here this afternoon.” Diana gave Maggie a helpless smile, the perfect picture of a blonde, brainless wife. It didn’t work.

“We’re trying to figure out what happened at the office. You know, that man who was murdered the other night.”

“Yes, Maggie, I know.” The guilty look was starting to fade. “These reports have been consuming Nick since he got on the boat. I was curious as to what kind of information was in them.”

“Just part of the picture,” she said evasively.

“What have they told you so far about what happened to Phil?”

Maggie hesitated. “Nothing.”

Diana shrugged. “Well, it’s a shame you guys wasted all afternoon down here. It was a great day to be out on the boat. And after all that, you still came up empty.”

“At least we didn’t get sunburned,” Maggie said. “I only came out for some water.”

“Sure.” Diana pulled two bottles from the fridge but held them close to her. “Shall we take them up on deck? The ocean is beautiful at night.”

Maggie paused. There was something in those blue eyes that was unsettling. Something almost scary. She decided to follow her gut.

“I think I’ll just take mine to bed.” Maggie said.

“You sure? It’s a full moon.”

“I’m sure.”

Diana handed her a bottle and Maggie returned to her cabin and locked the door. She didn’t like the way Diana had looked at her tonight, like she knew a secret, a good one, and wasn’t going to share.

#

Nick and Maggie left the boat in the morning and were back in Houston by noon.

As soon as they reached Nick’s, Maggie grabbed a quick shower and headed out the door. She needed to get away and regain some objectivity. Her suspicions about Diana were mounting and Nick worshipped her.

“You’re just jealous of her, Mags,” he said on the way home. “She’s beautiful, rich and married to the most awesome man in the world!”

Maggie had laughed. But it didn’t shake the feeling. The look on Diana’s face when Maggie walked in on her going through those reports. The cash. She was guilty of something. Maggie just didn’t know what it was.

Her cell rang.

“Hey, Maggie. It’s Jack.” A thrill passed through her on hearing his voice.

They chatted for a few minutes about the boat and the pool game they had played on Friday.

“I think you rigged it,” he said.

“No way. It was an honest game. Is it my fault Elena accidentally knocked the twelve in?”

“And the fourteen?”

“Well, she was on her fourth beer.”

“So that’s your strategy? Encourage your drunk friends to bump the table?”

“Hey, I sunk the eight-ball on my own.”

“And it was a beautiful shot.”

There was a pause and Maggie considered asking about Phil’s computer, more to keep Jack on the phone than to go into the boring details of data recovery.

Jack filled the silence. “Do you have plans for dinner tonight?”

Dinner. A date. She hadn’t gone on a date since Matt.

“Hello?”

Idiot. Answer him. “No. No plans. What’d you have in mind?”

“I know a restaurant that serves excellent South American food. Very authentic.”

Maggie smiled and mouthed the word ‘authentic’ using his accent. “Sounds great.”

“Wonderful. I’ll pick you up at eight.”

She clicked off, took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Her reflection in the rearview mirror showed a smile that stretched from one side of her face to the other. By the time she got to Jenna’s, her cheeks were sore.

#

“All right, now. Hold her steady and –”

BOOM.

The shotgun exploded, Maggie flinched, and the butt of the gun smacked into her safety goggles. Next to her, Jenna giggled.

“I think you might’ve hit his right pinky toe.”

Maggie put the safety on and lowered the gun. She was sweating and her arms were tired.

“I thought you said all I had to do was point and shoot.”

“Well, you’ve got the shooting part down. Now all we need to do is work on your pointing.” She gave Maggie a patient smile. “A shotgun sprays buckshot all over the place. All you need to do is focus on the center of your shot. Everything surrounding it is going to feel the heat too. Now come on and reload.”

Maggie put in a fat shell and snapped the barrel shut. She pumped the gauge of the bottom of the barrel, which made her feel like John Wayne, pointed at the chest of her target and pulled the trigger. The gun, held more tightly this time, nudged her a little on the cheek but held on target.

“Hot damn, you got him!” Jenna whooped. “I knew you had it in you, girl. Look at that. You blew his whole left side off!”

Maggie blasted a few more rounds until the target was no longer a silhouette but one big hole held together by tiny veins of paper.

She checked the safety and handed the gun to Jenna who double-checked the safety and opened the barrel. When she was satisfied the gun was unloaded, she set it down at her feet.

“Now the shotgun is good for two things. First, if you can get close enough, you don’t have to be very accurate. But secondly, and more importantly if you ask me, the sound of a shotgun being pumped is recognizable the world over. Some dingleberry hears you pump that thing, he’ll be hightailing it all the way to Abilene.”

“How close would I have to get to the creature that’s going after my chickens?”

“Close enough to zing him on the ass. Just be sure you catch him away from your babies. You fire at him in the pen, you’ll be headed straight to the feed store for a new batch of birds.”

Jenna looked at her and Maggie nodded. She was listening.

“Now this,” Jenna said, picking up the handgun, “is a forty-four. That means it shoots bullets that are almost half a centimeter in diameter. That may sound small but it’s a healthy chunk of lead, especially inside your body. A shot from a gun like this will definitely bring the bogeyman down. Here, hold this.”

She handed the gun to Maggie and clipped a fresh target to the wire. Then pressed the button to run it out thirty feet.

Maggie felt the weight of the gun in her palm. It was heavy and cold, and she was flat out scared of it.

“I don’t need to learn how to shoot one of these. This is the kind of gun that thugs use.”

“Wrong. This is the kind of gun that a woman with a permit carries in her glove box when she is driving around all those dark country roads at night by herself. Now, step aside, cutie.”

She took the gun from Maggie and stepped up to the gate. Jenna popped a fresh clip into the bottom of the handle, pointed her arm out straight and let off three rounds. This gun had more of a POP than a BOOM.

Jenna pressed the button to reel in her target. There was a tight cluster on the chest just right of the middle.

“Breaking their hearts every time. Now you try.”

It didn’t take Maggie long to get used to the handgun. By the time the ammo started running low, she was consistently hitting the upper torso at thirty feet.

Satisfied that Maggie could now protect herself, Jenna returned their safety goggles to the front desk and waited to check out.

The lobby of the shooting range looked like a government administrative building with harsh fluorescent lighting and a linoleum floor. The walls were papered with permits, posters about gun conventions, and a sign that read ‘No loaded weapons allowed outside the shooting range! This means you!’ A small sign on an old music stand offered ‘Gun and ammo sales’ down the hall. The patrons were predominantly male and looked like they could live off the land if required, and by the smell, some of them did. Jenna and she were definitely the odd ducks in this building.

“Now, Maggie, I want you to have this one,” Jenna said, laying her hand on the shotgun.

“Oh, no. I don’t want it.”

“I didn’t ask if you wanted it. You need it. This is a good gun and you know how to shoot it.”

“That’s your gun. When I’m ready to get one, I can buy one for myself.”

“Consider it an early Christmas present.”

A grizzly man standing at the counter next to them leaned over toward Maggie. “I’d take it if I were you. That’s a good weapon.” He wore a down-filled hunting vest, in May, and a baseball cap that read ‘Armed With Pride’.

Maggie was anxious to get out of there. She glanced over at Jenna who was, as usual, completely at ease with the world and her place in it.

“Okay. I’ll take it.”

The man nodded with approval.

The guard at the door checked their weapons and buzzed the door to let them out.

“Not shabby for your first time,” Jenna said as she stowed the guns in the trunk.

“I had a great teacher. Have time for a cup of coffee?”

Jenna looked at her closely. “Maggie, Maggie. You have news.”

Chapter Fourteen

“Well, shut my mouth!”

“I know. I can’t believe it myself,” Maggie said.

“So, tell me about him.” Jenna sipped her café mocha, leaving a bit of whipped cream on her upper lip.

“Well, he works with Nick.”

“Oh, God. Not another computer nerd.”

“No. Well, maybe.” She paused to take a drink. “But a nerd with a cute butt.”

“That’s better.”

“And a Latin accent.”

“Now we’re talking.”

Fifteen minutes later, Maggie had relived the experience of meeting Jack and their Friday night at the ice house. “And he’s picking me up tonight at eight for dinner.”

“He sounds awesome.”

“Yeah.” Maggie looked out the window, staring at the traffic and caught a reflection of herself in the glass. She was casually slung back in her chair and Jenna had her elbows on the table, leaning forward for the details. The excitement of discussing a date, a man. Is this what Matt saw looking down at her?

“Maggie,” Jenna reached for her hand across the table and took it firmly in her own.

“Don’t.”

Maggie chewed her lip.

“It’s okay. You know Matt would want you to be happy.”

At the sound of his name, Maggie’s eyes filled with tears. A painful lump swelled in her throat and she swallowed hard.

“Look. Being happy isn’t a slap in the face to Matt. It doesn’t take away anything from him. From his memory.” Jenna squeezed her hand. “You know I’m right.”

A man in a business suit stood at the coffee stand and stared at them while he mixed in his cream and sugar.

Jenna threw him a nasty look. “Fuck off.”

Everyone in the small room turned to look, first at her, then at him. The man blushed, then scurried out the door.

She turned back to Maggie as if nothing had happened. “Am I right? I’m right.”

Maggie laughed and pulled her hand away. She grabbed a napkin and wiped at her eyes. “Yeah, I know. I’ve read all that crap in those fucking self-help books.”

“Didn’t I give you one of those?”

“Yeah. Bitch.”

Jenna smiled and went to the counter for a piece of cake. She was a firm believer in the ability of chocolate to heal the soul. Maggie rolled her empty cup between her palms.

Was she really ready? Friday night had been great and she was looking forward to seeing Jack again. Was that wrong? Was it okay to want to touch another man, to feel the warmth of his body against hers?

Maggie looked up toward the ceiling. “I hope you understand.”

If Jack tried to kiss her tonight, she just might let him.

#

When the doorbell rang, Maggie jumped like a white-tailed deer in November. Not that she hadn't already heard his car pull into the driveway, heard the sound of his footsteps as he came up the walk, and heard Diana's voice welcoming him inside.

And yet she stayed seated, an unnoticed magazine on her lap.

“You can stop pretending you're not interested,” Nick said as he walked into the room. Maggie gave him a weak smile.

“I'm not sure this is a good idea,” she said, tossing the magazine aside. “God, why am I such a wuss?”

“I've often wondered the same thing.”

“Butthead.”

Nick laughed. “Jack's a good guy. Just relax and have a good time.”

They headed into the living room and found Jack was standing with his back to them, listening to Diana talk about a piece of art she had purchased at a local show.

“I was downtown shopping when I saw this hand-lettered sign pointing to a gallery upstairs. I went up and fell in love with this artist. All of the good stuff was taken during that show, but I was able to get in first with this piece at his next one. He seems to have a knack for capturing the dark side of his figures, exposing a piece of someone they would rather keep hidden.”

Maggie took a deep breath as she watched them from behind. Here we go.

“Hey, Jack,” Nick said, his voice booming into the room.

Jack turned around and Maggie felt herself warm as his eyes landed on her. Thankfully she had been able to do some shopping in Jenna's closet. Her duffle bag held nothing but faded jeans and t-shirts. She was wearing a pair of black cropped pants, strappy sandals and a casual scoop neck shirt in a silver green that set off her eyes. Jack noticed.

"Get you a drink?" Nick asked, heading toward the bar.

"Sure," Jack said. "I'll have whatever Maggie's having."

"That's easy." He took on a fake snobby voice. "A hearty California Cab if you got it. But an Australian Shiraz will work in a pinch."

Maggie wanted to hit him.

They talked a little more about Diana's new artist, then moved on to the recent renovations to the house, followed by whether the Astros would make it to the playoffs this season, which everyone deemed unlikely.

Maggie perched on the edge of a cushion and downed her glass of wine, waiting for the alcohol to calm her nerves. Jack was sitting so close she could smell his cologne, and she closed her eyes for a moment to breathe it in. The smell of a man fresh from the shower was comforting and enticing. She shot him a quick glance and he smiled at her between words. Maybe she had made the right decision.

At the next pause in conversation, Jack set his empty glass on the coffee table and turned to Maggie. "We better get going. Our reservations are at nine."

He opened the door for her and Maggie felt a twinge of excitement. This was a real date.

"You kids have fun tonight," Nick called from the doorway.

Maggie groaned. She was going to whack him for that one.

The restaurant was whitewashed both outside and in, with heavy dark timber beams lining the walls and ceiling, and a collection of tables covered in crisp white linen. A giant chandelier loomed above the room, its pointed spires and amber globes casting a warm glow over the diners. Despite the expensive furnishings, Maggie sensed a casual, relaxed ambience. The patrons at Caracas were in no hurry to eat or leave.

They checked in with the hostess and headed to the bar. Jack conversed with everyone in Spanish, his accent sounding much stronger in his native tongue. With only two years of high school Spanish, Maggie quickly gave up trying to follow the conversations and fell to listening to the seductive rhythm of the language.

Maggie studied Jack's profile as he ordered. He had thick, wavy dark hair that was longer than most, the ends curling up around his ears and collar. His forehead was gently creased, relaxed now but with the scars of intense concentration already embedded in his skin. Furry eyebrows jutted out above those dark wonderful eyes, a deep chocolate brown. He laughed at something the bartender said, a deep laugh with his mouth open and eyes crinkled shut, and Maggie suddenly wished for something to say that would bring out the same reaction, again and again, only this time directed at her.

She turned away from him, feeling mute and awkward.

At the next table, a dark-skinned woman with platinum blonde hair shrieked in enjoyment, her teeth gleaming in the dim light. She wore a bright pink top, worn snug with a very low neckline, her large breasts barely contained, much to the delight of the men at her table. She was draped in gold and diamond jewelry and hung on the arm of a short, balding man with a handlebar moustache. And she was having the time of her life.

Her eyes met Maggie's for a moment and her face split into an instant, friendly smile. Maggie felt an intense energy flow into her, a wordless exchange from this unknown woman that was powerful and comforting. Maggie did belong here, she was a part of life. Gratefully, she returned the smile and turned back to her own table, to Jack.

He was waiting for her and reached for her hand. The shock of his touch sent a thrill through her body and she smiled at him without restraint. The nervousness was gone.

He kept his eyes locked on hers, and with his other hand, picked up his glass of wine and tilted it toward her. "To a wonderful evening."

"Salut."

#

Diana kissed Nick lightly. "I'm going to take a bath."

"Want some company?"

"Maybe later. Right now I just need to soak in a hot tub."

"Call me when you get out and I'll help you dry off."

She went down the hall and paused at the door to the master bedroom. Soon the clicks from his keyboard drifted out of the study.

Diana locked the door to the bathroom, opened both taps fully and pulled Nick's cell phone from her pocket, praying no one would call him in the next few minutes. She dialed into the company phone system and back out again using Nick's access number.

"Talk to me." Loud rock music in the background blared through the phone.

"Charlie, it's Diana. Turn that down."

"Hey, hey, pretty lady. What's up at the old mansion?"

"Charlie, listen, I need to ask you something."

"Hey, speak up. I can't hear you."

Diana sat on the edge of the tub. Was he drunk? “I can’t talk any louder and I only have a few minutes. Turn the music down. Please.”

The volume of the music decreased slightly, but she could still hear him singing along with it, mumbling where he didn’t know the words. *It's all about the he said she said bullshit mmm mm mmm better quit.*

“Charlie, listen to me. The police came and took Phil’s computer today.”

“And?” *Slip mmm mm mm fat lip.*

“And did you get everything off it?”

“Yeah. It’s clean. I took care of it Friday.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, I’m sure. I am in control. The master’s at the wheel.”

“Charlie? Are you okay?”

“Never better.”

Diana clicked off and sank into the tub. Damn him. Charlie was definitely on something. She knew about the steroids, but what else was he taking? He was getting more difficult to handle, more difficult to please. She lay back against her bath pillow and closed her eyes. Honestly, who cared what he was on? As long as it didn’t interfere with his ability to get the money.

The boat was ready in case of emergency, laden with months of provisions, but she still didn’t have enough cash stashed away. After all, it would need to last her a lifetime. Given their current rate of transfer and hoping her luck held out, she would be in much better shape in three or four months.

The thought of leaving Nick brought a lump to her throat, she really did love him. However, the truth would come out eventually and she needed to be far away by then. If she could just get Charlie to hold on.

#

Jack was right about Caracas. The flavors were exotic, unusual but delicious. They snacked on fried plantains, then shared a small plate of crab cakes smothered in a creamy pepper sauce. Between the salads and the entrees, Jack asked her about her family.

“Nick is your only brother, is that right?”

“Yep. Just me and him now. My folks moved back to Greece less than a year ago. Mom was homesick and well, YaYa is getting up there in years.”

“YaYa?”

“My grandmother.”

Jack nodded. “*Abuelita*.”

“*Sí, mi abuelita*. Anyway, I need to go see her. It’s been a few years.”

It struck her then that she really had no other family to talk about. Here she was, in her middle thirties, with an empty home, a single person in a solitary existence. She was no hyper-modern woman who focused on her career, sacrificing it all for her job. She hadn’t always been alone. She had made the right choices, loved a man, dreamed of children. It had all been right there – then gone.

Thankfully, their dinners arrived at that moment; two steaks served with a platter of grilled vegetables and baked sweet plantains. For a few minutes, there was nothing but the sound of silverware on plates as they tasted a little of everything.

“Your turn,” Maggie said. “Tell me about your family.”

She sliced off a generous piece of steak and sat back to savor the taste, glad the spotlight was off her and onto him.

“Well,” he swallowed, “I come from a big family. Many brothers and sisters. Lots of cousins, aunts, uncles. It would take months to tell you about all of them.”

“You better get started then.”

“Okay. My father died when I was very young. I did not know him.” Maggie started to say something sympathetic but he waved her off. “It was long ago. My uncle, Tio Roberto, and his wife, Tia Carmen, were already settled here in Houston. They insisted that we come live with them. They already had a full house, six of their own children. We added five more to the household; my mom, my two brothers, my sister and me.”

“Wow. How did you manage?”

He shrugged. “We just did. Tio Roberto picked up extra shifts. Mama and Tia Carmen cleaned houses. Relatives from Venezuela sent money when they could. The older kids watched us younger ones.”

Maggie thought back to her own quiet house, the afternoons spent reading in the living room with her mother. Sometimes hours would pass without anyone speaking at all. “It must’ve been loud.”

Jack laughed. “Yes, it was loud. Very loud. All the time. Still is.”

“Do you see them much?”

“I have dinner over there once or twice a week. Someone’s always getting married, divorced, having a baby or a birthday.” He looked up at her with a wry grin. “Is the curse of a large family.”

“Sounds wonderful. My yaya’s house is like that. A constant flurry of activity, cousins coming and going, talking and eating. Always eating. Sometimes I wonder if my parents moved to the States to get some peace and quiet.”

Jack laughed at that. “Peace and quiet cannot be translated into Venezuelan.” He speared a yucca puff and shoved it into his mouth. “You should come with me sometime.”

She was shaking her head before he even finished his sentence. “No. I don’t think so.”

“Come on,” he said, leaning toward her. “It will make you less homesick. You can just pretend everyone is speaking Greek instead of Spanish.”

“Well at least I can understand Greek.”

“And how would the conversation be any different than what you would hear in your own family?” He raised his eyebrows, pursed his lips and adopted a falsetto voice. “I think I am getting fat, Tia. What do you *thing*?”

Maggie laughed as he struck a pose.

“Oh, no, Consuelo,” he said, waving his hands around wildly. “You are just now getting to be the right size. Men like their women meaty. Have another plate. And don’t listen to your sister. Her husband is nothing but a skinny worm.”

“Okay, okay. I’ll go,” Maggie said through her laughter. “Just stop. People are starting to look.”

“Good.” He pushed the dish of plantains toward her. “Now eat. You’re too thin.”

#

Maggie and Jack laughed all the way home from the restaurant, mimicking the conversations that ran through the bloodlines of every family, the gossip that could be relived anywhere in the world simply by using a different set of names. They were still giggling as they walked up the pathway to the front door of her brother’s house.

Now, beneath the porch light, the mood changed. Maggie saw the desire in his eyes and felt the same welling up inside her.

“So, um, do you want to come in for a minute?” Maggie offered, gesturing toward the door.

“I would love to,” he said, his voice low as he looked into her eyes. “But if I came in, I might not want to leave.”

Maggie stood there, looking at him, and felt her body tremble. A small part of her clung to the past, telling her to go slow, to not forget. And then Jack stepped forward, keeping her eyes locked on his own, and kissed her. And it was warm and soft and more wonderful than she had imagined. Maggie’s guilt slipped away, replaced by the total sensation of this one moment, and she kissed him back, wholly and fervently. He parted her lips and his tongue was in her mouth, testing for resistance and finding none. Jack slid his arm around her waist and pulled her closer, his other hand going up to the back of her head, his fingers in her hair. She wrapped one arm around his body, the other around his neck, pushing her body against his.

Maggie felt herself opening up, years of buried passion stirring inside her. She wanted nothing more than to stand on the porch for the rest of the night, feeling him against her, his heart pounding in her chest as it pressed into her own.

Jack pulled back just enough to speak. “I’ve changed my mind. Let’s go inside.”

Chapter Fifteen

Maggie wandered over to the antique train while she waited for Carole and caught her reflection in the spotless glass of the engineer's window, the image delighting her as it had this morning in the bathroom mirror. She was smiling, a big toothy genuine smile, and she hugged herself impulsively. Jack had stayed until almost two last night before she had finally kicked him out. Despite only a few hours sleep, Maggie was full of energy and anxious to see him again.

She leaned to the right and peeked into the computer room, searching for Jack's tall figure. It had happened before, but no luck this morning, and within minutes she was riding up to the eighth floor.

"Your brother is a little busy right now," Carole said as they stepped off the elevator.

"The police are here."

"Really? Did they find anything on the computer?"

"I don't know. They've only been here a few minutes."

"Is Nick done yelling at them yet?"

Carole smiled. "I don't think so."

Flueger had gotten to the building ten minutes after the police left with the machine. Calls to the precinct office had been fruitless, but the fact that they were back in the office this morning was a good sign.

Nick saw her through the window and waved her in.

“Morning, Maggie. Come in. You remember Brad Flueger, our network manager?”

Maggie nodded to him. “Yes. Morning.”

Flueger stood stiffly to the side of Nick’s desk, arms crossed over his chest, his mouth drawn up tight. He gave her a slight nod, his eyes silently lumping her in with the other outsiders in the room.

“And these are Detectives Galloway and Vance.” Nick pointed to the older man seated in the chair and then to the taller, younger man standing behind him.

“Ma’am,” Galloway said, rising halfway out of the chair. Vance gave her a nod.

“We were just reviewing what they found on Phil’s computer,” Nick said, the frustration palpable in his voice. He was controlled, but ready to spring. Maggie moved away from the detectives.

“And?” she asked.

Vance shook his head. “Nothing. The computer was clean.”

“What utilities did you try?”

“All of the commercial standards. And a few of our own written internally.”

“You should have let us do it,” Nick said. “Who knows what information you have destroyed.”

The muscles in Brad’s cheek flexed as he clenched his teeth and glared at the detectives in silent support of his boss and his network.

“Yeah, that’s right,” Galloway said. “We’re just a bunch of a-holes down at the department who can’t find our ass in the dark.”

“My sentiments exactly,” Nick spat.

“We have good technicians, Mr. Dalakos,” Vance said.

“And a warrant,” Galloway snapped.

“I think we’re looking at a bigger problem.” All eyes turned toward Vance. “The computer was wiped clean. It was too clean. No recent documents. No caches. No history. Someone deleted those files before we got there.”

Maggie felt her stomach drop. Nick turned pale. Brad’s expression didn’t change except to exude more malevolence toward the detectives.

“Oh, God. It is someone inside,” Nick said, his anger replaced by disbelief. “Why?”

“That’s the sixty-four thousand dollar question,” Galloway muttered.

“And who.” Vance said. “Mr. Dalakos, the videotapes we reviewed shows your security cameras were repositioned prior to the attack. We were able to recover some partial prints but they were under several layers of dust.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning the cameras were moved several weeks ago. Whoever did this planned it in advance and waited for their opportunity.”

“So Phil was a sitting duck, for God knows how long, right here in front of us all.” Nick rubbed his hands over his face.

“Do you have any ideas on who might be responsible?” Vance asked.

“None.”

“Based on the videotape of the back door, it looks like someone walked out with Barnes that night. We can’t see the face. We’re going to need to talk to your employees again.”

“I’d like to get the hardware back so we can take a look at it ourselves,” Flueger said, his commanding voice heard for the first time during the meeting.

“Not yet.” Vance hesitated. “We’re still, uh, working on it.”

“But I thought you said you couldn’t find anything,” Maggie said. Brad’s eyes flicked toward her as though she were trying to claim his prize at a raffle.

“Look,” Galloway said sharply. “Someone in this building deleted all the files.” He looked at each one in turn. “And that same someone probably stabbed this poor guy in the parking lot and watched him bleed to death.” His voice was getting louder. “We’re going to hang on to any evidence *at... this... point!*”

“Fine,” Nick said. “What about his home computer?”

“We have that in our lab and are going through it right now,” Vance said. “Are there any other computers the victim might have used within the building?”

Nick shook his head. “No. Our programmers are pretty specific about their computer setups. Kind of like a mechanic’s garage. You have your personal set of tools, arranged just the way you want, your favorite ones within easy reach.”

“Geeks,” Galloway mumbled, but loud enough that everyone heard.

“Look, you bastard –” Nick sprang out of his chair just as Flueger moved toward Galloway, his fists clenched at his side. Vance stepped between them and his partner.

“Can we all work on the same team here?” He said irritably.

Galloway looked off to the side. Nick continued glaring at the older detective but slowly, finally sat back down. Flueger stayed where he was.

“Thank you,” Vance said. “Now are there any other computers where we might find his files?”

“What about a laptop?” Maggie asked.

“We didn’t find one at his apartment. Any chance he left it here?”

“He had one but I haven’t seen it. I’ll double check with the head of his department,” Nick said. “What about his car?”

Vance shook his head. “Nope. We checked the car top to bottom. We don’t think he made it to his car that night.”

“So that leaves the briefcase,” Maggie said.

“Which we haven’t found either.”

“What about his girlfriend’s computer?” Nick asked. “Maybe he used hers when he was over there.”

“Look,” Galloway said with a sneer. “We’re doing our job. We talked to the girlfriend. We talked to the parents. He didn’t use their computers. Too *slow*.” He rolled his eyes dramatically.

“It’s a legitimate beef,” Nick snarled and Galloway threw him another nasty look.

“We’ve taken up enough of your time,” Vance said, reaching out to shake Nick’s hand. “If you guys think of anything that might help, please call me.” He nodded again to Maggie and Flueger, then followed Galloway out the door.

There was silence in the room for a moment after they left.

“Boy, that old one’s a real jerk,” Maggie said.

“No kidding,” Nick said. “Whatever evidence was on that computer is long gone by now.”

“But I agree that the lack of evidence *is* the evidence.”

“Kind of like the dog that didn’t bark?”

“I’ll take them down,” Flueger growled as he stomped from the room. Maggie watched him go and turned back to Nick with a grin.

“Do you think he meant take them downstairs or just take them *down*?” she asked.

“I’m open either way.”

#

In the Support Center on the fourth floor, Curtis tossed a koosh ball up in the air as he discussed last night’s Astros game with Pam, his cubicle mate of almost three years.

“I don’t know why I even bother to watch. They’ve got the players. We built them a huge, multi-million dollar stadium. What’s it going to take to get them to win?”

Pam shook her head. She had watched a made-for-TV movie last night about an abused wife in Pasadena that shot her husband one night after sex. Apparently she’d made the right viewing choice.

“I mean, come on. Eight to one. And against the Cubs no less.” The phone on Curtis’s desk rang but he ignored it. “I really thought we might have a shot at the playoffs this season.”

When the phone continued to ring, he frowned at the console. The other three lines for his team were already lit. Damn, he would have to get this one.

He leaned back in his chair and tossed the ball up in the air. “Support, this is Curtis.”

“Transfer me to the head of your fucking company!” the caller screamed. Curtis missed the koosh and it dropped to the floor, rolling under his desk.

“Who am I speaking with?” Curtis sat upright and looked at his monitor. *G Boitanni. GJB Holdings.*

“I am a fucking client that you are fucking stealing from! Now quit sitting there holding your dick and put on someone important!”

Curtis pulled the headset away from his ear. “Sir... Sir... If you don’t stop swearing at me, I am going to hang up the phone.”

“The fuck you will!” A string of unintelligible phrases – Italian maybe, given the last name – poured forth through the earpiece.

Curtis rolled his eyes at Pam and pointed his middle finger at the phone.

“Sir. My job is to answer your questions, which I will do to the best of my abilities. If you will stop swearing.”

He looked again at Pam who held up three fingers, then four, then five. Department rules allowed them to hang up if a client cursed three or more times during the conversation. Curtis pointed at the phone and then at Pam, signaling to transfer the call. She stuck out her tongue and turned away.

“And you noticed it when? When running a P&L for this month? No, sir. No, we absolutely do not do that. Is there anyone else at your company – ”

He paused while the man vented another long string of foreign words. When he stopped to take a breath, Curtis jumped in. “Sir? Let me see if I can figure out what happened and I’ll get back to you... Today... This morning.” He winced as the slam of the receiver reverberated through the line.

Curtis pulled off the headset and turned to Pam. “Weird.”

“Yeah. I’ve always thought you were weird.”

“That’s the first call I’ve ever had about an error on the funds transfer program.”

Pam turned to him with a puzzled look. “That *is* weird. I had a similar call last month. Never solved it. Kicked it up to the Development Manager.” She made a few entries in the system. “Hmm. That’s funny. It’s not in the queue.”

“Check your closed calls.”

“Doing that right now.” Pam clicked more keys. “Yep. There it is. Closed by the Development Manager herself.”

“What do the notes say?”

“Nothing. Just her initials.”

“Bug?”

“Maybe. But if so, they should let us know about it. We’re the ones taking the heat for it.”

“No shit.” Curtis changed the ticket status to Development Manager Queue, then picked up the phone. “I’m not waiting for her to get around to this one.”

After a few minutes, voicemail picked up. He checked the People Finder. “Damn. Should’ve looked first. She’s logged out for vacation today.”

“Kick it over to Charlie?” Pam asked.

“Nah. That guy’s an asshole. I think I’ll call Jack.”

“Oooo... let me.”

“Back to work, you lustful woman,” Curtis said, pretending to crack a whip.

The phone rang and Pam picked up. “Support Center, this is Pam. Yes, sir. An issue with Portfolio? What version are you running?” She looked at Curtis in relief and began logging the call.

#

“Looks like you had fun on your date,” Nick said, looking at her with a big goofy grin, two fresh cups of coffee on the desk in front of them.

“What makes you say that?”

“I don’t know. The smile that is permanently etched in your face might have something to do with it.”

Maggie tried for a solemn look but failed miserably.

“There. That smile.” Nick laughed, pointing at her.

“Yeah, it was fun. I didn’t realize he had such a large family.”

“Jack has an interesting background. Smart as a whip. The only other person around here that I think could run this place.”

Carole buzzed in. “Mr. Dalakos? Jack’s on the line.”

“Speak of the devil,” Maggie said.

Nick hit the speakerphone button. “Hey Jack. Good morning.”

Maggie was about to give her own greeting but Jack spoke first.

“Nick, pick up.”

Nick grabbed the receiver. “What’s up?”

Maggie watched him from the other side of the desk. His face had turned serious and he started typing furiously on his keyboard. He glanced up at Maggie.

What? She mouthed. But he waved her off.

“Okay. Look. I’ve got a meeting with the other partners right now that I need to go to. I’m going to send Maggie down to work with you on this one.” A pause. “I have actually had her down here looking into some other security issues for the last few days.” He grinned and looked at Maggie. “Yeah. Flueger’s pissed about this, too. They may not even be related, but she can fill you in on what we have found so far. I don’t want to spread panic throughout the company. Let’s keep this tight for now.”

“Well?” Maggie demanded as he hung up.

“We just got a call from a client who claims an unauthorized funds transfer was made from his account to ours last week.”

“When last week?”

“How’s Wednesday night during the wee hours of the morning grab you?”

Maggie’s jaw dropped. “No shit.”

“I told Jack you would bring the printouts down to his office so the two of you can figure out what’s going on. I’m going to keep my meeting, but pull me out as soon as you find something.”

“Will do.”

Chapter Sixteen

Charlie shook two small white pills out of an old Milk of Magnesia bottle and swallowed them dry. Can't get weak. He tightened his abs and flexed his pecs. Too bad they had to wear long-sleeve shirts to work. These women didn't know what they were missing. Maybe he would hit the company gym one night this week, give them a show. He checked the calendar and grimaced. The summer racquetball tournament was coming up and Jack was number one seed, again.

He growled and turned back to his computer. Screw the tournament and screw Rincon. Now that he had decided to build his own empire, there was work to be done. The code as it stood was still too narrowly focused. He needed to wrap it in a platform-independent interface that would allow it to work on any system, as well as develop a cleaner way to change the variables without altering the base code. A good interface would allow his followers to adjust the program for their specific needs without exposing his golden egg.

Yesterday he'd stared at his computer for hours, his fingers hovering above the keys, unable to come up with the solution. He had joined an online game of Doom around two in the morning. The next time he looked up, it was light outside. Today, he had to be disciplined, focused.

He wanted a few more test runs on the OPTIN system and that was always a gamble. Any code changes that produced an error would be caught by someone on the programming team. He needed to build a bug-free interface *before* he tested it.

And he needed some cash. It might take some time to get things rolling. Diana always gave him a cut of the transfers after she cashed out. Next time, he'd demand payment up front. And not his usual piece of the pie. A full fifty percent. He might have needed her to get the party started but they were full and equal partners now. He smiled. This was going to piss her off.

Charlie stared at the computer, his pulse quickening as the amphetamines kicked in. If he could just hit the groove. The groove. He pulled up the module, made a few entries, changed them, then deleted them altogether. Another five minutes passed. Nothing.

He banged the desk with his palms. Damn it. He needed to focus.

Charlie grabbed his coffee cup and lurched out the door, brushing roughly through a trio of programmers walking down the hall. A cup of coffee would cut through this haze.

As he neared the stairwell, the door opened and a woman emerged from the dimness, carrying a stack of printouts. Charlie stopped on the spot, his frustration forgotten. Her jeans hung low on her hips and a flat belly peeked out from beneath her tee shirt. A mass of dark curly hair obscured her face until she bumped into him. Then the face lifted to expose the greenest eyes he had ever seen.

Charlie put on his most charming smile.

“Hi. New around here?”

Her face split into a toothy smile. “Sorry. I wasn't looking where I was going.”

She took a step back. And he resisted the urge to take another one forward. “No problem. You can do that any time.”

As she opened her mouth to speak again, Charlie heard Jack’s voice coming up behind him. “Hey Maggie.”

Charlie groaned inwardly and rolled his eyes. Christ, that guy just wouldn’t go away.

“Hey Jack,” she said, looking over his shoulder. Her voice was soft, almost shy. Charlie looked at her and at Jack, then back to her. She was practically creaming in her pants.

“I’m Charlie.” He thrust his hand toward her and pulled her attention back his way. Jack might have gotten there first, but he was outmatched today. Charlie turned and flexed slightly. “Programming manager for the Accounting system.”

“I’m Maggie, Nick Dalakos’ sister.”

“No kidding.” Charlie kept a tight grip on her hand until Jack reached them. “Well you certainly got the better share of the gene pool.”

Maggie laughed and pulled her hand away. “See ya.”

She gave him another smile, much more platonic than the one she’d flashed earlier, and then walked away with Jack.

Charlie turned for another look at her in those jeans and watched them disappear into Jack’s office. He stood in the hall, fantasizing about seeing those eyes looking down at him, the hair falling around her face as she fucked his brains out. Charlie felt a bulge in his pants and quickly adjusted.

Sleeping with Dalakos’ wife had been fun, but sleeping with his sister – and Jack’s woman – was a new challenge. One that would be as gratifying to the flesh as it was to the mind.

#

“Gerard Boitanni? This is Jack Rincon from OPTIN calling about –”

The other end of the phone exploded into a storm of Italian curses.

Jack sat patiently, waiting for the onslaught to subside, the earpiece pulled away from his ear. Maggie looked at his full lips and wondered if she dared to reach across the desk and give him a kiss. She glanced back over her shoulder through the window in the door. All clear. Just as she moved toward him, his expression turned serious and he spoke authoritatively into the phone.

“I am looking into it right now, Mr. Boitanni. That’s why I’m calling. I need to access your system.”

“*Now* you ask permission!” Boitanni screamed. “*Now!* After you’ve been caught with your hand in my pants!”

“Mr. Boitanni, I understand your frustration. Please, give me some time to find out what happened. It may just be a system glitch. If it is our error, rest assured I will have the funds transferred back to you immediately.”

“If? IF?!”

Maggie winced. She’d been on the end of one of those calls before.

“And why exactly would I steal from *myself*?” Another long string of expletives. Some in English. The others still recognizable. Finally, he wound down. “Get in my system if you must, but I’ll be right here, watching every single move.”

Jack replaced the phone in the base. “That went well.”

Pulling up the call ticket, he clicked on the ‘Connect to Client’ option. A new window opened on the screen and a string of characters rolled out from a DOS prompt. A few seconds later, the interface for Gerard Boitanni’s system was displayed on Jack’s monitor.

“That’s handy,” Maggie said.

“Necessary. What’s the first rule of tech support?”

“Always assume the customer is lying.”

“Why take the heat for your mistake when you can blame the system?”

“I guess it’s the same wherever you go. I can’t tell you how many times I’ve heard ‘I didn’t delete that file’ or ‘I didn’t do anything and it starting running all these commands’. Then they get mad when you have trouble fixing the problem.”

“Users.” Jack shook his head and accessed the banking program. “Okay. Here’s the last transfer to OPTIN. Entered at 2:28 in the morning last Thursday. In the amount of \$200,000.”

“Two hundred grand? Wow. That’s a lot of money.” Maggie said. “I bought a thousand dollars worth of Dell a few months ago after agonizing about it forever. Still upsets me.”

“Some of our clients are very wealthy. If they get a good tip, they act.”

“At two in the morning? Wouldn’t they consult their financial analyst first?”

“What can I say?” Jack shrugged. “Money does weird things to people, makes them feel powerful, in control. We have several, how do you put it, eccentric clients.”

“So a transfer of almost a quarter million dollars in the middle of the night doesn’t set off an alarm somewhere.”

“Afraid not. However, if the client claims they didn’t make the entry...”

“Does your network activity log track internal use of this program? The one that’s used to connect to a client’s system?”

“Definitely. Our clients’ financial information is obviously very sensitive and extremely confidential. If someone within the company is accessing a client’s personal system, we know.”

“Damn. There goes that theory.”

Jack leaned back in his chair and looked at her from under his brows. “All right, Miss Johanssen. Come clean. What are you working on with big brother Nick?”

“Just a sec.” She flipped a page in her printout. “What time was the transfer entered?”

“Two twenty-eight in the morning.”

“That jives.”

“With?”

“With this.” Maggie pushed the printouts across the desk and pointed to a highlighted entry. “Martin’s been sporadically logging into the system in the wee hours of the morning over the last several months. The last login was early Thursday morning. He logged in at 2:17 a.m. Out at 2.31.”

“That doesn’t make sense. Martin doesn’t know how to use a computer any more than my mother. Don’t tell me he accessed the client connect program.”

“According to the system logs, he didn’t access anything. The system shows no network activity after login except the subsequent logout.”

“So what was he doing? Logging in and just sitting there looking at the system?”

“Maybe he doesn’t know what to do once he gets in,” Maggie suggested.

“Now that I believe.” Jack pulled a hand through his hair, stared into space, then spoke reluctantly. “What about Phil? Did you check his activity log for that same period?”

“Yep. No network activity during that time either.”

“Good.” He exhaled loudly.

“Let’s work this from the other end. Can you run an activity report for that program?”

“Sure can.” He entered a few commands and then leaned across the desk. “I had a good time last night.”

He held her gaze and Maggie blushed.

“Me too.”

Maggie thought about her packed bag sitting in Diana's office. She was pretty confident they would figure out the system inconsistencies today and then her part in all this would be over. And she needed to get back to her chickens. Although right now, the way Jack was looking at her, they didn't seem all that important.

The monitor beeped and Jack's eyes flicked to the screen. "Done."

He pulled up the report and they started scanning the list. "Someone connected to a client at 7:38 on Wednesday evening. The next one isn't until 6:52 Thursday morning."

"So who's lying?" Maggie asked. "The system or the client?"

#

Upstairs in the executive coffee bar, Edna Simmons clucked her tongue.

"Well, well. Isn't this interesting?"

She studied the two people on the TV screen. Jack Rincon she knew well. And with him was that little tart who was snooping around last week. She knew there was something fishy about that girl the moment she met her. Edna could smell it.

What were they looking into was the real question. And how was Martin involved? He couldn't operate the computer to save his life. She had made sure of that. Edna didn't want him on the computer any more than Martin wanted to be on it himself. She had culled some good information from his e-mail over the years, although the other partners preferred face-to-face, usually in a room without the video hookup.

But she'd always found a way to get that information. And it had served her profitably.

Edna Simmons was living better than any other secretary in her chapter of the Executive Assistants Society of America. Weren't they shocked this past January when she pulled up to the monthly lunch meeting in her new Mercedes? She relished the memory, especially the look on Doreen Hampton's face. That old hag thought she was the cat's meow just because she worked

for George Bates, the only billionaire in Houston. Edna made sure to park her shiny coupe next to Doreen's two-year-old Lexus, then politely accepted the oohs and aahs from her friends, while smirking at Doreen's fat, red face.

The talking on the screen brought her back to the present. Jack and – what was her name? That's right, Maggie – were talking about Phil now.

Edna felt a chill run down her spine. Could Martin somehow be involved in the death of that young man? Highly unlikely, but what a lucrative coup that would be! Where had she put the latest copy of the Tiffany's catalog?

After a few more comments about the system activity, they were both standing. Would this be enough? She needed to get the tape to her nephew, let him judge the importance. And come up with a price. But right now, her subjects were headed toward the office door. Better find a reason to visit Carole. Something big was going on and Edna didn't want to be left out of the loop.

She walked over to the machine and was about to turn it off when her subjects moved to the side of the door instead of going through it. What were they doing? From their position in the room, all she could see was the back of Jack's shirt. She didn't hear any talking. And what was this? She watched as two thin arms snaked around his neck.

Edna turned up the volume a few notches, listening hungrily. Had someone finally gotten their hands on Mr. Rincon, the company's most eligible bachelor? It sure sounded like it. She leaned forward, fascinated by the sensual events taking place just beyond her view. Move over, she pleaded silently, just a little to the left. She could see the shape of Jack's muscles as Maggie ran her hands over his back and down to his belt. A weak moan escaped the old woman's lips.

“Edna!” Shale’s voice boomed into the reception area outside his office. Edna jumped, a hot blush spreading up from her chest and across her face. Damn, just when they were getting to the good part.

“Edna!” the voice whined again. She took a deep breath to regain her composure and turned off the television screen. But left the tape running.

Chapter Seventeen

“If that money was transferred to OPTIN, it will show up on the Electronic Funds Transfer statement from the bank.”

Jack was thinking out loud, keeping his voice low as they walked down the hall. Maggie nodded but was not really listening. She was thinking about things far more exciting than electronic crime, quietly indulging the tingle that still flowed in her veins from their brief encounter in his office. She ran her hands through her hair and gave it a quick fluff.

“I think we should check there first,” he said.

They entered the coffee bar and Jack pulled two cups bearing the OPTIN logo from the cabinet.

“Do you have clearance for accounting?” Maggie asked.

“Nope. All the corporate accounting is kept on a separate network.” He checked his watch. “We’ll need Nick for that.”

“Let’s rule out system error first. Don’t want to look like a dumbass.”

Their conversation was interrupted by Elena who stalked around the corner, mumbling under her breath.

“Hey guys.” She put down a stack of papers and fired up the copy machine.

“What’s up?” Jack asked. “You look pissed.”

“Nothing. Just Charlie being a dick. As usual.”

“That’s the guy you met in the hall earlier,” he told Maggie. “Anything in particular or just him?”

“Just him, I guess.” She pressed a button on the copier and the machine whirred and thumped, shooting papers out the side and into the waiting tray. Elena turned around and leaned on the copier. “You know Charlie. He’s always been a little different. But the last few months he’s gotten weirder. You know, meaner.”

“Like how?”

“On my way down here, I stopped in to ask if he was ready for our Monday morning meeting and he just blew up at me. Screaming about how he can’t concentrate. Working on something very important. Blah, blah, blah.” She trailed off. The machine stopped and she removed her originals, scooping the copies out of the tray. “Anyway, it’s not important.”

“Nope,” Jack said. “Blow it off. I’ve noticed it, too. He’s got something going on outside of work. Phil’s death might have been the last straw.”

“I doubt it. He hated Phil.” She grimaced. “Sorry. That was cold. Forget it. I don’t want to stand around bitching.”

“Too late,” Jack said.

Elena flicked him a quick finger then smiled brightly at Maggie. “Did you have a good time Friday?”

“I did, thanks. Everyone here is so nice.”

“Good. I’m glad you had fun. And thanks again for saving me from creepy Larry.” She waggled her fingers at the word creepy.

“No problem.”

“Wait a second,” Jack said. “Doesn’t Larry work in accounting?”

“Y-e-s.” Elena dragged out the word, looking warily at Jack. “Why?”

“Do you think he would do you a quick favor?”

“Ugh. Jack.” She rolled her eyes. “If you haven’t noticed, I’m trying to get the guy to leave me alone.”

“I can vouch for that,” Maggie said.

“Please. It is only a small favor. Very small.” He held his thumb and forefinger apart a half-inch.

“Like what?” Elena asked.

“We need to confirm that an EFT was made from a client’s account to the company last Thursday.”

“Morning or afternoon?”

“Morning.”

Elena looked from one to the other, suspicion glowing in her eyes. “What are you two up to?”

“I’ll fill you in on all the details later,” Jack said. “For now, let’s just say we’re chasing a possible bug in the system.”

But Elena wasn’t looking at Jack. She was looking at Maggie with a knowing smile. She wasn’t interested in what they were up to with regard to work. Maggie felt herself blushing again and Elena gave her a wink.

“Send me the account number and amount of the transfer. I’ll make the sacrifice,” she said.

“Thanks, Elena.”

“But you are going to *owe* me.”

#

Ten minutes later, Elena called.

“Nope. No transfer in that amount from any account last Thursday morning and no transfers at all from Boitanni’s account.”

“Damn,” Jack said.

“But Larry’s going to be at Bobby’s again this Friday and will be saving me a seat.”

“You know I always thought you two would make a cute couple.”

“Bite me.”

He hung up. “No luck.”

“Now what?” Maggie asked.

“His system clearly shows a standard transfer going from his bank to ours.”

“But it never made it here.”

“So where did it go?”

“Someone could have intercepted it during the transfer process. Someone at his bank or at yours.”

“True. Siphoned it off for themselves using the bank’s computer system.”

“But they would still have to be working with someone here. Shale?”

“Shale’s a millionaire, several times over. I can’t see him nipping a little here and there to make ends meet.”

“Okay. Let’s think. If you were stealing money from someone’s account, where would you put it?”

“Under my mattress,” Jack said with a grin. “Just kidding. I’d put it—”

“In my own account,” they said in unison, both of them sitting up straight.

Jack starting typing. “So now we just look for someone whose account balance went up two hundred thousand dollars at two twenty-eight in the morning.”

“Too easy,” Maggie said, leaning forward to look at the monitor. “What are you going to do? Search the system for a \$200,000 entry?”

“No. Way too many transactions for that. Let’s pull up a log for last Thursday between the hours of midnight and three.” The report filled the screen with transaction entries and ran on for almost a hundred pages.

“Wow. That’s a lot of nighttime traffic.”

“This is a full transaction log. Let’s filter for only the accounting ones.” He made another entry and the report redisplayed. Shorter but still several pages. Jack scrolled down to the two o’clock entries.

“I don’t see it,” Maggie said.

“Nope.” He scrolled up and down through the list, then sorted by amount. “Nope. The other half of that transfer didn’t go into the system.”

“Not at that time, anyway.” She chewed on her lip for a minute. “How do you process the EFT’s?”

“Our system polls the clients every morning to check for transfer requests, then runs a batch update to all accounts.”

“At what time?”

“Nine.” He punched more keys and the data displayed again. The batch posting was easy to spot, hundreds of lines all grouped together, timestamps starting at 9:00 and ending 9:03. Not one in the amount they were looking for. He clicked to sort by amount.

At the top of the screen, an entry posted at 9:04 in the amount of \$200,000 sat innocently on the report.

“I’ll be damned,” Jack said.

“Let’s see who it is,” Maggie urged. She leaned forward eagerly in her chair. This was the best part of the chase. Data doesn’t lie.

He clicked on the account number that received the funds and pulled up the customer account screen.

Maggie’s stomach fell to the floor.

The name on the account was Nikolai Dalakos.

#

Detectives Vance and Galloway strode up the front steps of the OPTIN building, squinting as the sun reflected off the mirrored glass. Galloway knocked irritably on the inside door, holding up his badge with the other hand until the receptionist buzzed them inside.

“Here to see a Brad Flueger,” Vance said. They had been halfway to downtown when Galloway decided they needed to go back and talk to Flueger’s men again.

Sue punched a few buttons on her console and spoke into her headset. “He’ll be right down.”

They drifted away from her desk, drawn like all visitors toward the vintage locomotive.

Galloway let out a low whistle as he gazed over the massive engine. “How much do you think something like this costs?”

“More than you and I will ever make in a lifetime.”

“My dad was a real Civil War buff. Wish he was still around so I could show this to him.” He walked around to the other side and read the name painted on the boiler. “*The Cavalry*.

Hmm. Have to look that one up on the Internet.”

“Gee, I didn’t know you had any hobbies,” Vance said with a smirk.

Before Galloway could utter a response, the elevators dinged and the pounding of boots marched across the lobby. Flueger approached them looking nothing short of completely pissed off.

“Here for another piece of hardware?”

Galloway opened his mouth but Vance stepped in first. “We need to talk to your night staff about the night Philip Barnes was killed.”

“Not here. Went home this morning around six.”

Galloway threw Vance a look that said *duh*. “Well, it’s pretty important Mr. Flueger. We are trying to track down a murderer.”

Flueger’s expression didn’t change but they could see his jaw muscles flexing. “Wasn’t one of my guys.”

“We didn’t say that,” Vance said. He looked around and saw a few people watching them. “Is there somewhere we could talk privately?”

Flueger held his gaze. Vance felt his own fists clench as he stared back. God, this guy was an asshole.

“Follow me.” Flueger spun on his heel and stomped toward the computer room.

They followed him through the glass door onto the elevated metal grate floor. The sound of the machines was deafening. There would be privacy here until they started yelling to be heard above the noise. Flueger walked around a portable wall and into a small office toward the rear of the room.

“Reggie, I need your office for a few minutes.” He said to the man seated behind the desk. Reggie nodded, frowned at the two detectives, and took a seat outside the office, glowering back at the officers through the window.

“Think they offer intimidation training to all their employees?” Vance asked.

“What?” Galloway yelled at him.

Flueger shut the door and the noise died. He motioned for them to sit, but he remained standing behind Reggie’s desk, arms crossed firmly across his chest.

“Wow,” Vance said. “I didn’t realize computers were that loud.”

“They aren’t. That’s the sound of the air conditioners. Now what can I do for you?”

“The two guys who were working the night the murder occurred,” Galloway said, checking his notes, “Todd Walker and Bernard Young—”

“Didn’t see anything. Weren’t involved. You guys have already talked to them.”

“They are not currently suspects, Mr. Flueger,” Vance said. “We just need to ask them a few more questions.”

“Well, they’ll be back on duty at ten tonight.”

Galloway let out a loud sigh. “Do you know if either of them parked in one of the executive spots that night?”

Flueger sneered at him. “You want to give them a parking ticket?”

“No. You want to help us out here or down at the station?” The two men glared at each other for a few minutes. “Now pick up the goddamn phone and call them.”

Flueger remained motionless, his lips pinched together so tightly they were hidden under his moustache. But then he picked up the phone and started to dial.

“Bernie? It’s Brad. Hate to bother you at home, while you’re sleeping,” he added, shooting a look at Galloway. “I have some detectives from HPD in here. I’m putting you on speaker.” He punched a button and dropped the receiver back into the cradle. “Can you hear me?”

A sleepy voice came over the line. “Yeah. What’s up?”

“Mr. Young, I’m Detective Galloway. We spoke a few days ago concerning the death of Philip Barnes.”

“Yeah, I remember.”

“That night, did you or Mr. Walker park in one of the executive spots in the garage?”

A laugh came from the speaker. “And get towed? No way. I got better ways to spend my time and money.”

“What about Mr. Walker? Do you know if he parked there?”

“I seriously doubt it. It was his car that got towed.” More laughter. They heard him mutter *dumbass*.

“Alright, thanks,” Galloway said. “Sorry to have disturbed you.”

“See you tonight, Bernie.” Flueger hung up.

They called Walker next and got the same story.

“After what happened last time? Not a chance. Those six spaces are like the holy effing grail, man.” His voice rose in pitch. “Christ, it’s just a parking space and they act like you screwed a nun. One time—”

Flueger hung up and looked at the detectives. “Are we done?”

“Almost,” Vance said. The jaw clenched again. “Walker said there are six reserved spaces. There are only three executives at OPTIN. Who are the other spaces for?”

“The wives.”

The detectives exchanged glances and both stood in unison.

“Thank you, Mr. Flueger,” Galloway said, offering a rare smile. “You’ve been a big help.”

Chapter Eighteen

“This isn’t right,” Jack said, shaking his head. “No way is he involved with this.”

The empty feeling in Maggie’s stomach spread throughout her body. “Check the history.”

Jack clicked the mouse and the screen filled with entries.

“Oh my God. Two hundred, two hundred, one-seventy-five, one-fifty.” Maggie read down the list.

“Each one followed by a withdrawal of the full amount the same day.” Jack scrolled down. “Looks like it started a little more than a year ago.”

“They’re getting closer together, too. Look, the first two are almost two months apart. Then the gap shrinks. Six weeks, a month. The last one happened only ten days after the one before.”

“And he’s getting bolder. The amounts are also increasing over time. They started at fifty grand.”

Maggie swallowed hard and pulled out the activity report for Shale. The dates and times of the logins matched the entries on the screen, the entries that showed money moving into Nick’s account.

“This doesn’t make sense,” she said, looking at Jack. “Why would he ask me to come check out the activity on this account?”

“I don’t know. Maybe he was testing the system security. Bring in a set of fresh eyes?”

“No way. He wouldn’t play me like that.”

“You’re right. He wouldn’t. Besides, this is real money.”

“And a good chance that a real murder is tied in with it.”

“So why would someone put the money in there?” He paused. “And who is taking it out?”

“The only other person who probably has access to that account.”

“You don’t think D—”

Maggie threw up her hands to shush him. “I need a fresh cup of coffee.”

“What? We just got one.”

She was already standing and headed toward the door.

“Come on. You need one, too.”

Jack caught up with her halfway down the hall. “What was that all about?”

“I don’t want to have that conversation on file.”

“What do you mean?”

She looked up and down the deserted hallway. “The recording system in the offices.”

“What?”

“Look, I’m not going to sue for invasion of privacy or anything. I’m not an employee. Although I do think you guys are walking a pretty fine line.”

“What are you talking about?”

“The cameras. In the offices. The ones hooked into the executive break room.”

“In my office?” Jack said, his eyes flaring. “There’s a hidden camera in *my* office?”

Oh crap.

“Yes, in your office,” she said. “And in the conference rooms and in every supervisor’s office as far as I can tell.”

“Oh my God. I knew this company was paranoid, but this is bullshit!”

“Keep your voice down. Please.”

“Keep my voice down? Why? Are there cameras in the hall, too?” Jack turned his head in all directions, waving his hands. “Hi! Hi, whoever’s watching.”

“Jack, stop. I don’t think we should alarm everyone else.”

He spun to face her.

“You seem pretty comfortable with the whole idea. Is this one of your standard security techniques?”

Maggie drew back. “This was not my idea. I found it by accident.”

“Does Nick know about it?”

“Yes, but he doesn’t like it and has never used it.”

“Really? And you actually believe that?”

“Yes, I do.” Maggie retorted.

She looked at his face, set in anger. Betrayal lurked beneath the surface. Nick should have told him. Even better, Nick should have stood up to Shale and vetoed the whole thing.

“Look,” she said. “Nick is just as disgusted by it as you and I are but he isn’t the only person who gets to make decisions around here. He’s a good guy. You know that.”

“What I know is that a man I trusted like a brother is spying on me and stealing money from his own clients.”

“There’s another explanation for that money, Jack, and we need to find it.”

“Wrong. You need to find it. I need to start looking for a new job.” He glared at her one last time before stalking back to his office.

Maggie watched him go, furious with him for doubting Nick; furious with Nick for putting her in this position; and furious with herself for ruining things with Jack within twenty-four hours of their first date.

Let him be angry, the jerk. She could figure this out by herself. All she needed was to get back to the computer in Diana’s office.

Maggie turned toward the staircase and yanked on the door handle. The locked door held fast. She cursed and frowned at the red light on the keypad. Despite the fact that Nick had given her full system access, she still had no authority to walk around the building unaccompanied. Maybe she could find Elena’s office.

“Hey.”

The hairs on her arms stood up and Maggie turned to find Charlie standing inches behind her.

#

Charlie couldn’t believe his good luck. There she was, stuck in the hallway, obviously abandoned by good old Jack, waiting to be rescued. He crept up behind her and breathed deeply. She smelled good enough to eat.

“Hey.”

Maggie turned and took a quick step backward.

“Hi. It’s Charlie, right?”

Charlie gave her a smug smile. Of course she remembered him. “Right. And you are?” He did that little eye tilt thing that drove women crazy.

“Um, Maggie. We met earlier.”

“Right.” He nodded, playing it cool. “Locked in or locked out?”

She smiled. “I’m not sure.”

“And what, pray tell, are you doing wandering the halls alone?” He leaned toward her, turning his head to the right. His hair looked best from that angle. “Can I see your hall pass?”

Maggie took another step backward. “Don’t have one.”

“Well, well.” He couldn’t think of anything else to say so he stood there, rocking on the balls of his feet, casually flexing his biceps. Finally, she spoke.

“I hate to bother you, but I need to get back to Nick’s office. Would you mind giving me access through this door?”

“No problem. In fact, I’ll escort you all the way home.” He moved between her and the keypad, his arm brushing against her breast. “No peeking now.”

He walked in front of her up the stairs so she could get a good look at his glutes. He had been focusing on them at the gym and had found a good pair of khakis that really showed them off.

“So were you at Bobby’s on Friday?” Maggie asked.

He stopped in his tracks and turned around. Maggie almost bumped into him, but caught herself just in time. Damn.

“No, I was... um... working late that night.” He liked the way they were standing, him on the step above, her below looking up at him. She was close enough that he could see down her top. He was trying to think of something to say, a way to keep her positioned like this, but his mind was a jumble of fragmented thoughts and nothing came to him. He turned around and kept going, tensing his buttocks as he went to keep them firm.

They emerged on the eighth floor and Charlie strode ahead of her, smiling and giving a small wave to the receptionist. He marched straight to Nick's office and called out triumphantly, "Look who I found."

The office was empty. His prize went unnoticed.

"Not here," he said. "Let's sit down and wait for him." He headed toward the sofa. A few moments alone, maybe even an hour. She would be eating out of his hands.

Maggie remained at the doorway. "That's not necessary, Charlie."

"Come on, sit with me."

Carole poked her head in.

"Can I help – oh, hi, Maggie. I didn't see you." She looked at Charlie. "Nick is out at the moment. Did you want to leave a message?"

"Only that I found his sister wandering around and brought her back safe and sound." He winked at Carole. She may be old, but she was still a woman.

"I'll let him know," Carole said. "Anything else?"

"Nope." He was losing his steam. "If you need anything else, Maggie, you just let me know."

He gave them both a charming smile as he walked out. He'd let her sweat for a few hours, then come back and ask her to dinner.

#

Galloway sat back in his chair and stretched. "So what do you think about the missus?"

Vance shrugged. "She looks good. Except that she left the building at 5:42 and didn't re-enter."

"Yeah. So she says."

"And no one remembers seeing her that night at the office."

“But they saw her car.”

“They saw a car. No one has said it was hers.”

“Well, we’ll see what she has to say tonight, won’t we?”

The phone rang.

“Detective Galloway? This is Felice Williams. I don’t know if you remember me, but I am... was... Philip Barnes’ girlfriend.”

“Yeah, yeah, I remember. What’s up, Felice?” He caught Vance’s eye over the desk.

“Well, I was going through my computer, deleting old files and stuff and found one that must have been Philip’s.”

“I thought you said he didn’t use your computer. Too slow.”

“It’s a decent computer,” she said defensively. “It’s the dial-up that was too slow for Philip.”

Galloway pressed his lips together then let out a breath. “Okay. So he did use your computer.” Vance was paying attention now. He pointed at the phone but Galloway shook his head. “What’d you find?”

“A text file from last Tuesday morning. It looks like he was up working on it in the middle of the night. Must have gotten up after I fell asleep and come back out here.”

“Did you open the file?”

“Well, yeah,” she said, a hint of sarcasm in her voice. “It looks like a software program. A lot of lines with shorthand and variables. Gibberish to me.”

“That sounds promising. Can you email it to me?” He gave her the email address. “And Ms. Williams, please don’t delete any more files. I’m sending a tech out to pick up your PC.” He hung up.

“Well?” Vance asked.

“She’s got a file that might be related to our victim.”

“I thought he never used her computer.”

Galloway shrugged. “Better call the parents again, too.”

A few moments later, the email popped into his mailbox. Galloway opened the attachment, waited for the virus scanner to declare it safe, then looked at the file.

“Yep. Looks like code.”

Vance looked up with interest. “What does it do?”

“Fuck if I know. I’m going to send it downstairs and see what they can do with it. I’ll copy you.”

#

Charlie sat down at his desk, flushed with energy. Oh, yeah. This girl was a two-fer. He could stick it to both Nick and Jack in one shot. He wiggled his ass and shook his shoulders, doing a little pre-victory victory dance. She was lusting after him, he was sure of it. He flexed his biceps and giggled as he watched his sleeve pull tight against his skin.

He shook a smooth black capsule from the antacid bottle and popped it into his mouth, tilting back his head and washing it down with his saliva. His mouth was dry again and the pill stuck in his throat. He started working it down using his tongue and throat muscles, like a snake, pushing a rat down his body, the tail trailing along the inside of his mouth—

When the phone rang, he choked on the pill. Damn it. He needed a secretary.

“Charlie, it’s me.”

“Well, hello stranger.” He was still giddy from his earlier thoughts of Maggie. “What’s happening?”

“You tell me. What’s going on at the office?”

“Does this mean you’re not coming in today? You know, you have to call in by 8:30 if you’re going to be out. Otherwise, it goes in your file.”

“Very funny,” Diana said. “Have you talked to the police recently?”

“Hell no. They can’t catch me. I’m the Gingerbread Man.” He heard a sigh of relief from the other end. “You still have the CD?”

“Yes, but I want to get rid of it.”

“No!” He screamed, then calmed his voice. “I need to see how he figured it out so I can plug the hole. Otherwise, this is just going to happen all over again.” Silence on the other end.

“Okay?” He waited. “Okay, Diana?”

“Fine. But I think we should do another transfer tonight.”

Charlie growled. He would decide when they did the next transfer, and he wasn’t ready with the new version of the code yet. “Are you sure that’s a good idea? I mean, we are currently under investigation for a *murder*.”

“Those two items are completely unrelated as far as the cops know.” She paused. Charlie could feel her thinking on the other end, contemplating whether or not to say something.

Apparently, she chose not to. “Well, even if Maggie is there—”

“What about Maggie?”

“She’s some sort of network security genius. She and Nick were going over the system logs while we were out on the boat.”

She rattled on some more but Charlie wasn’t paying attention. He was thinking about Maggie. Flirting with him, and the whole time she was trying to sneak up on him from behind. Clever girl. Very clever. But no match for the master. He’d have her humped and dumped before she knew what was happening.

He realized then that Diana was still talking on the other end. Would these women never shut up?

“Diana.”

“What?”

“Okay,” he said.

“Okay what?”

“Okay. I’ll make another transfer tonight. And I’ll make it a big one.” He could feel her smiling on the other end. He dropped to his sexy voice. “So when will I get to see you again?”

“How about tomorrow night?”

“I’ll be waiting.”

They hung up and Charlie leaned back in his chair. There would be no transfer until he got the CD and a little up front cash. Man, was she going to be pissed. But it was about time she realized who exactly was in charge.

Chapter Nineteen

Maggie fidgeted in her chair, switching her attention from the computer screen to the open doorway every few minutes. Where the hell was Nick? She'd left two messages on his cell already. It would be hard enough having to break the news about Diana. Doing it over the phone seemed particularly harsh. Hey Nick, guess what? Your wife is robbing you blind. Oops, there's my other line.

She sighed in frustration and pulled up Google. Eventually she would be heading home, who knew when, and the chickens, if there were any left, were going to need better protection than what she was currently providing.

A search on *dogs killing chickens* turned up a mixture of articles and personal accounts. Apparently dogs did kill chickens and had to be trained not to chase them. Suggestions ranged from spraying them with a water hose to making loud noises to beating them.

All great ideas if you actually caught them doing it. What she needed was some way to keep the dog out in the first place.

Maggie went to the next page of results, scanning the descriptions associated with each of the listings. More of the same. She was about to change her search criteria when an entry caught her eye.

"...wasn't a dog but actually a wolf-dog hybrid that was killing the chickens..."

"Wolf-dog?" Maggie mumbled. "The hell?"

A search on *wolf-dog hybrid* turned up over three thousand hits. She scanned the list and chose a link that looked like a governmental study.

The wolf-dog hybrid was just as it was named, the combination of wolf and dog in the same animal. The percentage of wolf to dog varied within the hybrid depending on the breeding pattern as did the physical characteristics. Some animals had the larger, bulkier frame of a dog while others kept the leaner, smaller size of a wolf. The hair color and texture were also indicators of which animal lineage prevailed. One thing that all wolf-dogs had in common was their yellow eyes.

She had seen those yellow eyes.

Maggie scanned the other entries, searching for photos and locating several that looked very much like the creature on her property.

While no one questioned what made up a hybrid or what they looked like, most of the articles were written with a definite bias.

On one side of the table were the hybrid breeders and owners. These groups claimed the animals made great pets and could be trained just as easily as regular dogs. There were countless personal entries on the loyalty and affection a family could expect when choosing a hybrid over a dog. There was even an official wolf-dog association which lobbied for the rights of breeders, hybrids and their owners.

But for every positive report, there were at least two that spoke out against the animals. Maggie came across multiple stories from people who claimed the animals were unpredictable and could not be trusted around livestock or small children. She read with sick fascination, the stories of parents whose kids had been playing with the animal one moment only to be mutilated or killed minutes later.

According to one researcher, the reason behind this behavior lies in the dichotomy of the animal itself. A hybrid has both the social acceptance of humans that has been bred into domesticated dogs and the killing instincts of a wolf. The wolf-dog faces extreme internal confusion when faced with conflicting natural impulses, particularly those regarding survival such as food and protection, making the animal mentally unstable and therefore, physically volatile.

Maggie shivered. How would Nick react to the news of Diana? Would he face the same conflicting emotions? Would he lash out at Diana or would he fight to protect her?

Maggie grabbed her cell and went for a third cup of coffee.

#

To her relief, the break room was empty. She put on a fresh pot and stared at the VCR while the coffee brewed. The whole system pissed her off. Spying, taping. Who had the right? Edna had been doing both for sure, but who had given the orders? The display showed no tape in the machine. Whatever Edna had been recording was safely in her possession. She probably had an entire library of tapes, kept under lock and key, just waiting for the opportunity to bust somebody.

So who was the last victim? Maggie picked up the remote and clicked on the set. The image of Jack sitting at his desk appeared on the screen and Maggie groaned. No way. How much had Edna seen? Was she smart enough to understand what they were talking about with the reports? Did she catch the part about Nick's account? Or worse, had she seen Maggie and Jack making out like a couple of rabid teenagers?

She sank into one of the chairs and watched Jack, banging on his keyboard, his face set in a deep frown. He was furious and she couldn't blame him. First Philip, then the theft, and now the cameras. Their fight probably didn't even make the list.

As if reading her thoughts, he looked right at her.

Maggie jumped, then watched as his eyes swept the room. He was looking for the camera. He knew it was there but had stalked off before she could give him more information. Based on her current view, it was in the same place as the other one she had found, tucked into the door jamb out of sight. She needed to tell him, or maybe he needed to ask.

#

Bryan was sweating down in the computer room, a sick, nervous sweat; the kind that carries an acrid stank.

Rashid had so far borne the brunt of the fallout over the backup tapes, but the internal investigation would put him in the spotlight all too soon. Why had he ever agreed to do this?

The phone rang and he checked the display. It was Charlie. Bryan squeezed his eyes shut for a minute then picked up the receiver.

“I need another tape.”

“Charlie, I can’t.”

“You can and you will.”

“I can’t. Flueger is watching everything right now. I can’t even pee without him knowing about it.”

“That’s your problem, not mine. Get me the tape or I go to Flueger with our little secret.”

“Can’t it wait a few weeks?” Long enough for me to find a new job.

“No. It can’t. Get it for me tonight or I’ll tell Flueger about your favorite pastime. He’ll probably be very understanding. Up there with nothing to do all weekend but watch his network. Who wouldn’t sneak off for a little ganja break?”

“All right. I’ll try.”

“In my mailbox. In the morning.”

Bryan hung up the phone and dropped his head on the desk. Charlie was bluffing. He wouldn't go to Flueger with the info. He would think of something much worse.

#

Maggie drove through Nick's neighborhood, pissed that he hadn't called her back. Diana may be a thief, but she was no programmer. Someone was helping her. And she wanted to break the news to her brother before going to the police.

Maggie pulled past a blue sedan parked on the curb and into the drive. Company? As soon as Maggie entered the house, she realized this was no dinner party. Nick, Diana and the two policemen she recognized from this morning were seated in the living room.

"Hey, Maggie." Nick said, rising to greet her. "You remember our detective friends."

She nodded to the room. "Nick, can I see you for a minute?"

"Can it wait?"

She hesitated. The policemen were looking at her with interest.

"It won't take long. Promise."

Nick stood up but Diana grabbed his hand. "Nick, honey. Please don't leave me in here. I really need you right now."

"I'll be right back."

He went into the foyer. "We're a little busy right now, Mags. What is it?"

Maggie looked over his shoulder. Diana glared at her. She pulled Nick out of view.

"We found Boitanni's money."

"That's great news."

"Yes and no. It's —" She paused.

"It's what, Maggie? Come on, spit it out."

Maggie took a deep breath. "I think that Di —"

“Everything okay in here?” Detective Vance walked into the foyer.

“Everything’s fine,” Nick said. He turned to Maggie. “We’ll talk about this later.”

“I really think we need to talk about it now.”

“Nick!” Diana’s voice called. “Honey, can we wrap it up?”

“Later.” Nick said to Maggie and strode back to the living room.

Vance looked at Maggie. Here was her chance to go to the police.

Instead she turned and followed after Nick, taking a seat on the chair across from Diana.

Galloway looked between the women. “Perhaps you want to talk to us in private?” he asked Diana.

“That’s okay,” Nick said quickly. “Maggie’s family.”

Diana gave Maggie a warm smile, but there was a warning in her eyes. Maggie

“Okay,” Galloway said. “So what time did you leave the building Wednesday night?”

“Between five-thirty and six. Nick and I were planning a weekend on the boat and I went down a little early to get things ready.”

Vance made a few notes on a spiral pad. “The keypad reports show you punching out at five-forty-two.”

“That sounds about right.”

“Then you went straight down to the boat?”

“Yes.”

“Did you leave the boat for any reason, to run any errands or anything?”

“No.”

“To get groceries, maybe? Go for a jog?”

“No. I didn’t leave once I got down there.”

“What about during the night? Did you get off the boat any time after midnight?”

“No. I am quite sure I would know if I had left the boat. What’s your point?”

“Do you know a Mr. Howe?”

“He’s one of our slip neighbors at the marina.”

“Did you see him that night?”

“No.”

“Well, according to Mr. Howe,” Vance flipped a few pages in his spiral, “he saw you walking down the pier around three a.m. Thursday morning.”

Diana looked confused. “Why would he say that?”

“You tell me.”

“You’re the ones who talked to him. I don’t know why some crazy old man would make up a story like that. Maybe he needs some excitement in his life.”

“What kind of excitement?”

“Look, Detectives,” Diana said. “I am willing to answer your questions to help with the investigation, but I don’t need your sophomoric insinuations.”

“Diana, honey,” Nick said, reaching out for her arm. She threw him an icy look and he withdrew his hand.

“So you weren’t on the pier early Thursday morning,” Galloway said, eyeing her closely.

“No. I wasn’t.”

The detectives both made more notes.

“Where do you park in the office parking garage?” Vance asked.

Diana gave them another baffled look. “Where I always park. In one of the places up front.”

“One of the executive spaces?”

“Yes. Is that a crime?”

“Diana.” Nick was again silenced by her glare. He turned to the detectives. “Are we about done here?”

“Almost. Mrs. Dalakos, did you park in that spot Wednesday?” Vance asked.

“Yes, she did. She parked right next to me,” Nick said. The detectives and Diana all turned to look at Nick. “Only trying to speed things up a little.”

“You’ll get your turn,” Galloway said with a snort of frustration, then turned back to Diana. “Mrs. Dalakos, do you carry any type of self-defense items? Pepper spray? Rape whistle?”

“A small can of Mace.”

“Anything stronger than that? Something more powerful maybe? A small pistol or a stun gun or anything?”

“Absolutely not!”

“Mr. Dalakos?”

Nick shook his head.

“Well, I guess that about wraps it up,” Galloway said, giving Vance a meaningful look.

“Oh, can I use your bathroom?” Vance asked.

Nick stood up. “Sure. Down the hall on your right.”

“Long way back to the station,” Galloway said. He stood also, as did the two women.

“So do you have any new leads?” Nick asked.

“As a matter of fact,” Galloway said, looking at Diana. “We do. Mr. Barnes’ girlfriend found a file on her computer that we think belonged to him. Our lab is checking it out right now.”

“You know that anything you find on that computer related to OPTIN is highly confidential,” Nick said, rolling backward onto the heels of his feet and crossing his arms. “It would be financially devastating to our company if any of our proprietary information leaked out.”

“I assure you that we are being very careful. Our lab is top rate.”

“I want a look at it anyway. Forward a copy to me as soon as you get in.”

Detective Vance came striding back down the hall and nodded to his partner.

“Thank you both very much for your time,” Galloway said. “If you think of anything that might be useful, please give us a call.”

Maggie stared at Diana, not sure what to say, as Nick walked the detectives to the front door. They had certainly thrown around a blatant suspicion of guilt. Even had an eyewitness to back them up. That information, tied in with the stolen money, painted a pretty vivid picture.

Nick came back into the room and wrapped an arm around Diana. “Honey, sit down. You look like you’re going to faint.”

“I’m sorry. It’s just all so upsetting.”

“I know. They’ll figure out what happened and we can start getting our lives back to normal.”

He was looking at her so tenderly that Maggie wanted to scream.

“Nick, do you have time for the rest of that conversation now?”

Diana started sobbing and buried her face against Nick’s chest.

“It’ll have to wait, Maggie,” he said.

#

The detectives pulled away from the curb and headed down the quiet street.

“Find anything?” Galloway asked.

“Yep. Two small bottles of perfume from a store called Gabrielle.”

“Is that French?”

“Yep.”

“Think we have a match?”

“It’s looking good. We’ll see what the lab says.”

Chapter Twenty

“Mr. Dalakos? Hello? Hello?”

“I’m here.” Nick sat at his desk, staring open-mouthed at the screen.

“Well, does it mean anything to you?” Galloway asked. “Our tech said it looked like part of an electronic funds transfer program.”

“It is. It ties in directly with our system.” He shook his head. Damn it to hell. There was no way he could keep the theft quiet now. “We had a customer call yesterday complaining about money being transferred from his account without his consent.”

“Mr. Dalakos, when I asked you to call if you thought of anything that might help, this would have been a good thing to report.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t think they were related.” He was still in shock. The file sent to him by the police clearly showed funds being diverted upon transfer. How could this have gone unnoticed in the system?

“Whose account was the money taken from?” Galloway asked.

“Does it matter? Our client list is confidential.”

“Yes, Mr. Dalakos. It does matter. Has it occurred to you that one of your clients might have killed Philip Barnes because he was stealing from them?”

“Oh, God. No. Not Phil. He wasn’t behind this.”

“The name, Mr. Dalakos.”

“Boitanni. Gerard Boitanni.”

“Did I hear you correctly? Gerard Boitanni, with a B?”

“Yes. That’s him.”

Nick heard the detective’s muffled voice speaking to someone else in the room. *Fucking Boitanni. What kind of idiot would steal from him?*

“Mr. Dalakos,” Galloway said. “Gerard Boitanni has been linked to a number of organized crime cases in the Houston area.”

“Oh shit.” Nick mumbled.

“Yeah. ‘Oh shit’ is right. Listen. Have you traced the money yet? Do you know where it’s going?”

“Not yet. I have someone looking at it.”

“Well, I’d tell them to step on it. Whoever’s stealing that money needs to worry more about Boitanni than the police.”

#

Charlie sat in his office, his face flushed as his fingers flew over the keys. He was riding high and the anonymous blog he kept was his favorite outlet. Everyone who was reading his personal web log could experience, albeit vicariously, his success. His mind raced faster than his fingers could keep up, trying to find the best phrases to put his emotions into words. The program was complete and ready for sale. And the woman was now working under his conditions.

Diana had called this morning. The money wasn’t in her account and she wanted to know what had happened. She hadn’t been very nice about it either. Little did she know that Charlie had uploaded his modified code and successfully made the transfer last night. He just transferred to a different account, a holding account, until their meeting tonight, after he had gotten the CD

back and after the sex. *And it had better be good or you will see nothing.* He had thought this last part without saying it. No matter how good the sex was, she was still only going to get half.

But he was more excited about the code than about the woman. It was neatly bundled and ready to be transferred to eager hands. He still needed to come up with a price, which was harder than he originally thought it would be. There wasn't a whole lot of code for sale on the underground market that he could use to test the current value. Other hackers might think all code should be freely traded, but he had to draw the line. His work was genius, head and shoulders above what any of those other dorks could write. They could all scream about working against the institution. Charlie was working for himself. He had taken more from Boitanni last night, an even mil. By the time anyone noticed it missing, he would be long gone. All he needed was to get his hands on that CD.

#

Downstairs in the OPTIN lobby, Maggie waited for Carole and wondered if she would ever make it home.

She had several requests from her regular clients stacking up in her Inbox, and one new one that she needed to follow up on soon if she wanted the business. Most of all, she just wanted to get out of Houston. Go home and pretend this was all just a bad dream.

She glanced toward the computer room through the glass walls, not sure if she wanted to see Jack standing there looking back, but it didn't matter. The room was deserted, no one but a lone tech walking back and forth through the rows of servers, pacing the floor and looking agitated.

“Maggie?”

She turned to see the executive floor receptionist standing behind her.

“Hi, Lily.”

“Good morning, dear. I have come to escort you upstairs this morning.”

“Thanks. Where’s Carole?” she asked as they entered the elevator.

“She’s covering Mr. Shale’s phone for Edna this morning.”

“Oh?”

“Yes. Mr. Shale plays golf every Tuesday morning. Has ever since I started working here. Edna uses that opportunity to have a late breakfast with her nephew. The cutest boy. And such a dear to remember her.”

“That’s nice.” Maggie couldn’t imagine anyone wanting to share a meal with Edna.

“They must be pretty close.”

“Oh yes. They are now. It wasn’t always that way,” she said, shaking her head. “Edna used to complain about her family all the time, how much money they were making and how much they ignored her. Her nephew is a financial advisor, you know. He was making investments for the family, several that paid off handsomely, and poor Edna was getting left out of everything. I felt so sorry for her.”

“So what happened?”

They had reached the eighth floor and Lily stopped just inside the door.

“Well, I told Edna, ‘You need to be the bigger person here and reach out to that boy. He is part of your family.’” She leaned forward and winked at Maggie. “Especially if you want a piece of the pie.”

Maggie smiled back and kept silent.

“Well, I guess she took my advice because the next thing you know, she was having lunch with her nephew all the time and was happy as a lark. Bought a new Mercedes, you know.

One of those fancy little sport coupes.” She leaned forward again. “Personally, I think she’s too old to be driving a showy little car like that.”

“Wow, that’s a wonderful story. Her nephew must be pretty talented to be able to make money in this economy.”

“Oh, he is. He is.” Lily grinned. “Why, I haven’t heard Edna complain one time about losing any money. And believe me, dear, if she had lost even two dollars, I would know. I am hoping to invest a little with him myself, you know.”

“Sounds like a good plan,” Maggie said absently, her mind spinning. Shale’s login. Missing money. A woman murderer. But Edna? That didn’t add up. She might be greedy enough, but there was no way she could have overpowered a young man in his twenties.

“So when did all this happen for Edna? All this good luck?”

“Let’s see.” Lily thought for a minute. “It’s been about a year, I think.”

“Interesting.”

That would explain the accounting. Thank God that cop had interrupted them last night. Nick was already pissed at her for being suspicious of Diana. He’d never forgive Maggie for blaming this on her. Relief washed over her. Maybe she’d get home sooner than she thought.

“Thank you for coming to get me, Lily,” she said, hurrying toward Nick’s office. “Good luck with your investments.”

Maggie released the tension in her shoulders and she walked. She would break the bad news about the money going into Nick’s account, then offer up Edna as the culprit. A little searching would turn up proof. They could let the police solve the murder.

She rounded the corner and saw Nick at his desk, a look of utter despair on his face. Jack was sitting across from him. Maggie quickly assessed the situation and threw Jack a look of irritation. That ass just couldn't wait to break the bad news.

“Nick, it's not what you think,” she said, rushing to the desk.

“Why would she do this?”

“She didn't.” Maggie looked over her shoulder at Jack. He wouldn't meet her eyes.

“Nick, it's Edna.”

“What's Edna?”

“The one who's been stealing the money. The person who's been logging in as Shale and transferring money out of your clients' accounts.”

“Maggie,” Jack said softly from behind her.

She didn't look at him. “I just finished talking to Lily. She told me Edna has been rolling in money for the last year. It all fits. She has Shale's login info.”

“Maggie,” Jack said again.

“What?” She hissed, turning on him in frustration.

“We just checked the bank records. It's Diana.”

“You're wrong.” She turned back to the desk. “Nick, no. He's wrong.”

Nick shook his head.

“It's true. She's been transferring money out of our trading account into her personal bank account. The dates and amounts match.”

“But...” Maggie stumbled over her words, looking back and forth between the two men.

“But, Edna. She fits. I mean...”

“I don't know what's going on with Edna, but she's not the one.”

Maggie sank into a chair, speechless and confused.

“It gets worse,” Jack said. “The money was stolen from a mafia guy.”

“He’ll be more relentless than the cops in tracking her down,” Nick said. “Jack, transfer his money back ASAP.”

“Consider it done.” Jack looked at Maggie. “That’s not all. The police emailed over a file this morning. It contains the modified code to make the transfer. They found it on Phil’s girlfriend’s computer.”

“Oh my God. You don’t think Diana could’ve...”

“No. I don’t,” Nick barked. “I know she couldn’t have. I just need to reach her. I need to talk to her.”

Maggie chewed her lip. Something didn’t add up.

“But, Nick, why would Diana be stealing money? You guys don’t seem to be doing that bad. I mean, look at the boat.”

“I think that boat might’ve been what started it all,” Nick said. “She was talking about it from the first time I met her. After we got married, she picked out the one she wanted. We planned our first vacation. Then the market tanked and the money was gone.”

“I’m sure she didn’t marry you for the boat.”

“Maybe,” he said miserably. “But she wasn’t ready to give up on the boat. She said she had experience with overseas trading so I set up an account for her and she started investing. Pretty soon she was making a profit, a really good profit.” He ran his hands roughly through his hair. “I should’ve noticed. I was so busy trying to keep this place afloat and she was happy and...”

His voice trailed off and the three of them sat in silence, each caught up in their own thoughts. Maggie looked at Nick and tried to decide their next course. Following this through to the bitter end was going to be hard on him and harder still once they informed the police. Better to figure out as much as they could first.

“Not to sound rude,” Maggie said. “But I didn’t get the feeling that Diana’s much of a programmer. I haven’t seen the file yet but I’m guessing it’s a pretty complex little program.”

Nick turned the screen around so she could see the file. Jack glanced down her top as she leaned forward to study the code. Despite the current situation, Maggie was pleased to see he was still interested.

“Definitely not the work of an amateur,” she said.

“Which means she couldn’t have written it on her own,” Jack said.

“So who was working with her?” Nick asked.

“Maybe Edna,” Maggie suggested. “She’s also had access to cash over the past year.”

Jack snorted. “Edna Simmons? No way.”

“Well, what about her nephew? She meets with him all the time according to Lily, and ever since then she’s had money to burn. Not to mention the fact that she controls Shale’s user account.”

“Worth looking into, I guess,” Nick said. “I think I’ll go ask her.”

When he stood up, Jack and Maggie both jumped to their feet.

“I don’t think that’s such a good idea,” Jack said. “We don’t know the role she played yet, if any. Better to keep our cards close to the chest for now.”

“The police are looking at my wife! Do you understand that?” Nick’s eyes were wild with emotion. “She is being set up to take the fall for murder.”

“Alright, if she didn’t kill him, who did?” Maggie asked.

“I can’t believe you just said that. Diana didn’t kill Phil.”

Maggie wasn’t convinced. “I think it’s time we called the police.”

Nick sank back into his chair.

“I am going to kill the bastard who’s behind this.”

“We don’t know who that is. We need to call the police. Do you have that detective’s card?”

Maggie watched the conflicting emotions on his face. He needed to turn her in, he needed to keep her from harm. Just like the wolf-dog, bound by two loyalties. Which way would he turn?

“I need some time alone,” he said finally.

Maggie stood. “Email me that file and let me see if I can get anything out of it. These guys usually have a distinct signature in their code, their way of taking credit. I might be able to find something online.”

Jack gave her a look that said he was impressed. Hell, if the cleavage didn’t work, maybe she could win him back through professional respect.

“Two maybe three hours, but no longer. Then we go to the cops,” she said.

#

“Thanks.” Detective Vance hung up the phone. “We have a match.”

Galloway looked at him. “The perfume from the Dalakos house? The Gabrielle stuff?”

“Yep. Same fragrance compounds that were found in the traces of lotion on the body.”

“Let’s go pay Gabrielle a visit.”

They headed toward Rice Village, the collection of shops and bars that were clustered not far from Rice University. Historically, the area had been full of bohemian pubs, shops that sold

original pieces from local artists and jewelry makers, used and rare book stores. In the past few years, the corporate giants had started moving in, bringing large clothing chains and coffee houses, displacing the smaller stores and driving out the college crowd.

Gabrielle was in the middle of a strip center, tucked between a Thai restaurant and a bead shop. Through the windows, they saw neatly stocked glass shelves, fresh-cut flowers and luckily, no customers. A bell tinkled on the door as they entered and a small thin woman emerged from the back.

“Good morning, gentlemen. I am Gabrielle. May I help you find something?”

Galloway flashed his badge. “Yeah. We’re Detectives Galloway and Vance from HPD. We need to ask you a few questions.”

“Certainly.” She crossed her arms over her chest and looked at them with interest.

“Do you keep a sales log of all your customers?”

“Yes. I use it for promotional purposes.”

“We have a bottle of perfume from your store and are trying to track down the person who bought it.”

“Follow me.” Gabrielle turned smartly on her heel and headed to the left side of the store.

“Here are my fragrances, along this wall. Do you know which scent was purchased?”

“No. The bottle didn’t have a name.” Vance shook his head. “Something sweet.”

“Yeah, like flowers,” Galloway said.

“I have several floral fragrances, messieurs. Here is one of my more popular ones. Springtime.” She sprayed a little on her wrist and held it out for them. “Lovely, no?”

Galloway leaned in for a smell. “Very nice.”

“Was that it?” she asked.

“I can’t tell.” He shrugged. “They all sort of smell the same to me.”

Vance rolled his eyes. He knew what was coming next.

Gabrielle pursed her lips and snatched back her arm. “I assure you that each of my fragrances is hand-blended for a unique scent. To a woman, the differences among them are quite pronounced. Perhaps the subtlety is lost on someone of your, ah, nature?”

“Mind if we just look them over?” Vance asked. He started along the wall, scanning the various bottles and neatly aligned boxes on the shelves. “It was in a little round glass bottle with a silver ball on top.”

Gabrielle pushed past him and strode toward the other end of the wall. She lifted up a bottle and held it out.

“That looks like it.”

“Can we smell it?” Galloway asked.

She raised an eyebrow. “And what purpose would that serve, monsieur?”

“What about a smaller bottle?” Vance asked. “The one we have is about half that size.”

“I am sorry. This is the only size I carry.” She replaced the bottle on the shelf. “Are you positive it came from this store? I have to compete with many, what is the American term, ah, copycats.”

“Pretty sure it came from here.” Galloway looked around. “What about lotion? Do you carry a hand lotion in that same smell?”

Gabrielle walked to the other side of her small shop. “Here are our lotions and creams. Powders are farther down. There is the lotion in the same fragrance.”

Vance pointed to a box on the top shelf. “What’s that?”

“That is a gift set. It contains one each of the lotion, powder and cologne.” She reached for the box. “In smaller sizes.”

“That’s it,” Vance said.

Galloway pulled a photograph out of his pocket.

“Do you recognize this woman?”

Gabrielle pulled it close to her face, then shook her head. “No. But I do know this man.”

The detectives exchanged glances.

“Yes. He came in one day looking for a gift for his wife. He was from Greece and I had recently been there on holiday. A very nice man. Knew his fragrances.” She shot Vance another piercing look, but it missed.

He was looking at the photograph of Nick and Diana Dalakos.

“We need to see your sales log.”

#

Nick stuck his head in the office door an hour later. “Find anything yet?”

“Nothing definite. I’m checking the hacker sites. Found some similar stuff but nothing close enough. I’ve got a call in to a good source.” If Randy couldn’t find it, it wasn’t there.

“Keep looking,” Nick said. “I’m going home to talk to Diana. She’s still not answering the phone and, well...”

Maggie looked at him closely. “Do you want me to come with you?”

“No. I need to handle this alone.”

“What are you going to say?”

Nick shook his head. “I’m not sure yet. First and foremost, I want to make sure she’s okay. Then, I don’t know. That’s why I need you to keep digging. I need to find out who’s doing this with her. Someone else must be forcing her to do this.”

Maggie was skeptical, but didn't say so. This wasn't her battle to fight.

“Be careful.”

She watched him leave and then checked her watch. They could only buy so much time before they told the police about Diana's theft. She would almost certainly go to jail. Nick would spend everything on a good lawyer. This was going to devastate him and there was nothing she could do about it. Except give him a reason why.

Maggie turned back to the computer. Carole hadn't known the name of Edna's nephew and she couldn't risk asking Lily for more information. That would surely get back to Edna. Instead, she pulled up Google. Edna had never married. No big surprise there. If she had a brother, the nephew would also be a Simmons. If she had a sister, who knew? She entered 'Simmons Financial Advisor Houston' and started digging through the links.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Maggie worked her way through the first three pages of search results with no luck. Every click seemed to spawn at least two windows for discount travel or disguised spyware.

“Damn these pop-up windows. What has she downloaded on this computer?”

Maggie checked the cookie files. The first dozen were set by advertising services and identified Diana’s computer to every mass marketer on the web.

“No wonder.”

She deleted these files and scanned down the cookie list. Several high-end online shopping stores. A few on boats. Maggie switched back to the browser and entered the web address of one of the boat sites. Then paged through the thumbnails until she found the one Diana owned. It was gorgeous – and expensive.

Maggie returned to the list of cookies, deleting as she went, until another one caught her eye. This link was for self-defense products. She began entering the address in the browser when the auto-complete feature dropped down a list of options. The pages Diana had visited were on stun guns.

She clicked the first link. The page showed a small stun gun and came with instructions on how it should be used, basically zap and run. She paged through the other models on the site before returning to the cookies list.

She found several more sites covering stun gun usage for self-defense, including a police report site that specifically addressed placement of the stun gun on the body for maximum impact.

One of the sites greeted her by name.

Welcome back, Diana. We hope you are happy with your purchase of the Model 500 NB stun gun. Other people who bought this stun gun were also interested in the following products.

“Oh my God.” Maggie was breathing so fast that she was getting dizzy. Diana bought one two months ago and lied about it to the police. There could only be one explanation for that, and it wasn’t a good one.

She needed to get in touch with Nick.

#

“Diana’s not here,” Nick said into the phone. “She must be out shopping. But I did find her cell phone, still in the charger.”

“Well, that would explain why she’s not answering it.”

“Yeah.” There was a pause. “You know, Maggie, I’ve been thinking about this all morning and I’ve decided that I can forgive her. I think I already have. The dot-com bust affected people in lots of different ways. Diana is just another victim and I’m sticking by her.”

“Um, Nick...” Maggie bit her lip.

“Yeah?”

“I just found some—”

“Hold on. Diana’s phone is ringing. She might be calling me.”

Maggie heard him walk through the house, the beeping tune of the phone getting louder. “Hello?” A few more seconds passed. “Diana?” Then the sound of him putting the phone down.

“Maggie, did Diana come in after I left?”

“Not that I know of.” She checked the People Finder. “The system doesn’t show her punching in.”

“Go peek in my office, will you?”

“Okay. Just a sec.” Maggie walked around the corner to Nick’s office. It was empty. She called down to Carole. “Have you seen Diana this morning?”

Carole shook her head.

Maggie picked up the phone. “No. She’s not here. Why?”

“Because she just received a call from the office, from my extension.”

#

Charlie slammed the phone down in frustration. Bitch. Where was she? He had waited at the apartment for an hour and a half and she hadn’t shown. More importantly, she still had the CD with the program on it. He needed to get his hands on that disk. If Barnes could break the code, so could another programmer. And then his work would be worthless.

He cursed and kicked his file cabinet, paced around the small office, and glared at the phone, willing it to ring, hoping to hell it would be Diana. He was going to rip her a new one. Maybe he should head over to her house and pick up the CD for himself. But he had already taken a long lunch. He didn’t want to do anything else to draw attention to himself, nothing out of the ordinary.

He dropped into his chair and pulled up the holding account where the money was. He had set it up early this morning and rigged it to accept payment without going through the usual security process. It was a brilliant move, a bit of code he could tuck away in his library, but a temporary solution. The account would be caught tonight when the automatic programs kicked in, if not sooner. Who knew when some little do-gooder in accounting might stumble across it.

Charlie needed to get the money out before that happened. If Diana had just shown up with the CD, he could have transferred it to her account and collected his share. But now what?

Charlie pulled out his pillbox and took a hit of meth to get his mind going. He needed to think clearly, had decisions to make. He leaned back in his chair and waited for the drug to kick in.

What to do? He could put the money back in Boitanni's account and hope he didn't notice, but it was the middle of the afternoon. There was no way he could guarantee that Boitanni wasn't on the computer right now.

Maybe he should transfer it to an untraceable account. An offshore account like they did in the movies. After the transfer he could delete the temporary account and wait for the CD. Good idea. Yes, this was a good idea.

He pulled up Google and did a search on 'opening offshore bank accounts'.

#

"I still can't come up with anything for motive," Vance said, tossing a pen up in the air and catching it with his other hand. "Why would a woman with that much money be hacking into the computer system and stealing from the clients? The stock she owns as wife is worth millions."

"Yeah, way more than she was pilfering," Galloway said. "But how accessible was it? She couldn't go down to the bank and cash in her stock certificates. The company's privately held."

"Can't check her bank records without a warrant."

"We got someone parked in the executive parking spot that night and we know she parked there during the day. We got a match of her hand lotion to the victim. And we got an eyewitness that saw her arrive at the dock at three a.m."

“Yeah, but we also got no murder weapon, a parking spot that was accessible to every employee, and samples of lotion that could have been sold to any rich bitch in Houston.”

“There was no unusual activity in Barnes’ bank account. If he was behind this whole scheme, where’d the money go?”

Vance sighed. “I think we need to talk to her again.”

“This time let’s see if we can catch her without the husband around. She might be more willing to open up about any indiscretions.”

#

Maggie bookmarked the site where Diana had purchased the stun gun, waiting for Nick to return to the office. The phone call from his extension had freaked him out and he had hung up quickly, saying he’d be back within the hour. She had tried his cell with no luck.

“Knock, knock.”

Maggie looked up to see Jack standing in the doorway holding two sandwiches.

“Peace offering?” he asked.

Her heart did a little flip-flop. “Sure. Come on in.”

“About yesterday,” he said.

“It’s okay, Jack, we—”

“No. I was angry and took it out on you. I know you had nothing to do with the whole video setup. Anyway, I’m sorry.”

“Forgiven.”

There might be hope yet.

“Turkey and swiss.” Jack said. He pushed a sandwich across the desk. “Eat up.”

Maggie held his gaze while they ate, feeling that funny sensation in her stomach. His eyes conveyed so much – eagerness, tenderness, wariness. She wanted to throw down her

sandwich and wrap herself in his arms, tell him it would be okay. Instead, she opened the bookmarked site on stun guns and turned the monitor on her desk so he could see it.

“What’s that?” he asked, leaning toward the screen. A shred of lettuce fell from his sandwich onto his lap.

“That’s the place where Diana purchased her stun gun.”

“Huh.” He leaned back in his seat and took another bite of his sandwich. “I didn’t know she had a stun gun.”

“Neither does she. She told the police last night that she didn’t own a stun gun.”

“That’s interesting. Why’d they ask?”

“Don’t know. Maybe one was used in the attack. Nick told me that they suspected a woman. I didn’t get all the details. You don’t seem very shocked.”

“I think lots of women worry about being attacked. And with all that’s happened, aren’t you? Some women carry mace. Some carry other stuff. A woman has a right to protect herself, you know.”

“That’s true. But she doesn’t have a right to kill someone else. Well, unless her life is in danger.” She shook her head. “But you’re getting off track. She lied to the police about it.”

“Maybe she forgot that she bought it.”

“What? Are you insane?”

“All I’m doing is trying to offer another point of view. You can’t go around accusing everyone who pops into your head. First it was Edna. Now it’s Diana.” He waved his hand in a who-will-it-be-next gesture.

“You ass. You come up here offering me food then—”

He leaned forward and whispered. “Shh. They’re watching.”

Maggie's eyes darted toward the door jamb. "You don't think they would spy on this office, do you?"

"It is a guest office. I bet you could get all kinds of information by watching what goes on in here."

Maggie stiffened in her chair and thought back on her recent conversations.

"Pisses you off, doesn't it?" Jack said with a twinkle in his eye.

She had to smile. "Yes, it does."

They exchanged a look of understanding and Maggie felt like something had been settled between them.

She walked over to the jamb and ran her fingers along the sides until they bumped against the mini-cam. Then she ripped the camera from the wall and dropped it in the trash.

"Better?" she asked.

Jack locked the door and turned to face her. "Much."

He stood inches from her body, looking down into her eyes, and Maggie felt everything fall away. All she wanted was for him to kiss her. He leaned down and pressed his lips to hers, gently at first and then with more feeling. She closed her eyes and let the warmth flow through her. Her pulse quickened and she wrapped her arms around his neck to keep from falling.

Jack pulled her close until their bodies were touching. She could feel the bulge in his pants as he pressed into her, one hand on her lower back to keep her up next to him. His other hand dropped to her breast and began caressing her. Maggie dropped one hand to his waist and pulled his shirt up. She ran her hand up under his shirt to his chest. He let out a small moan and dropped his mouth to her shoulder, kissing her along her neck and down to the curve of her collarbone.

Maggie pushed into him, feeling the heat between her legs growing stronger. He maneuvered a hand around to the front of her jeans and popped open the button, his hand slightly caressing her skin around her navel. She gave a little gasp of pleasure at the touch.

He pulled his head back and looked at her, desire burning in his eyes, the same hunger that Maggie felt deep inside her. She was breathing heavily and managed a small encouraging smile. He reached out and turned off the light as Maggie pulled him to the floor.

Chapter Twenty-Three

An hour later, Maggie found herself brimming with energy. She glanced at the computer, but was unwilling to delve back into her brother's misery just yet, knowing that road would pull her back down to earth, from a place she wasn't ready to leave. Instead, she stared out the window, across the pastureland that surrounded the office building and watched the stream of cars on the interstate.

Was Matt happy for her? She stretched her mind toward his memory and felt him pulling away, his image fading from view. Life goes on. Some people leave and the rest are left to carry on. Maggie felt a strange desire to call Phil Barnes' girlfriend and see if she wanted to get together, just to talk.

She glanced at her watch. Nick should have been back by now. Unless Diana had come home. Her heart lurched as she considered the conversation they were probably having. Nick loved her so much. Would he truly be willing to forgive? Would he ever be able to forget?

The money was one thing, but Maggie hadn't told him about the stun gun yet. When she had caught Diana looking through the reports Saturday night, for a brief moment, Maggie had actually felt fear, a physical fear for her safety.

She shook her head to break her concentration. Perhaps this was all imagined. Time had a way of warping memories. What she needed was incontrovertible proof. Something that said absolutely yes or no. Maggie sat in front of the computer and started typing.

She pulled an activity log on Diana's username and scanned the entries. The last one sent a jolt of fear and disbelief through her. Diana had logged off the system at 2:48 a.m. on the morning of the murder.

There it was. Just like that.

No one had thought to check Diana's account. She had punched out dutifully that evening. According to Diana and the keypad system, she left the building at the end of the day and headed to the harbor. According to the log files and the old man on the boat, she had stayed here until a few minutes before the murder and then arrived in Kemah almost an hour later.

Maggie picked up the phone, her hand shaking and tried calling Nick at home. There was no answer. Damn. He had been so worried about Diana getting hurt that he might have placed himself in danger. She tried his cell. No answer there either.

#

Maggie raced down the freeway with a short stack of papers next to her. Before leaving the office, she had printed the first page of the stun gun sales site which showed Diana's name and the first page of the activity log. She wasn't sure how much proof Nick was going to need, but this should get him started.

She dodged a few cars and flew through a red light as she sped toward the house. Turning onto the tree-lined street, she almost hit a dog, slamming on her brakes just in time. The dog stopped in the middle of the road and looked at her through the windshield. Maggie closed her eyes and exhaled loudly. She had come within feet of taking a life. Was the difference between living and dying that small? Did we all walk the line on a daily basis? As easy as crossing the street. By the time Maggie opened her eyes, the dog was no more than a tail disappearing behind the neighbor's tree.

She let her foot off the brake and eased the car home.

“Nick?” She called as she stepped in the cool foyer. “Nicky?”

The house felt unnaturally quiet.

Maggie started down the hall toward the kitchen. “Hello?”

She jumped as she passed the living room. Nick sat on the sofa, a glass of wine in hand.

“God, Nick. You scared me.”

“Sorry.” He didn’t look at her.

“What’re you doing?” Maggie asked. She looked at the bottle of wine on the table. It was almost empty. “Where’s Diana?”

“She’s gone.”

“Does she know the police want to talk to her? Does she know that she might be in danger from this Boitanni guy?”

Nick stood up and poured the rest of the bottle into his glass.

“Be right back.” He left the room and headed for the kitchen.

Maggie dropped her purse, keys and papers onto the coffee table. She sat on the ottoman across from the sofa and listened to the sounds of Nick opening a bottle of wine – the twisting of the corkscrew, the gentle pop of the cork as it pulled free from the bottle. He came back into the room carrying another glass. He filled one for her and refilled his own before sitting back down.

Maggie took a sip. What was going on inside his head right now? Where to start? She looked over at the papers lying beneath her purse. Just jump right in with *Your wife is a murderer*? Seemed a little harsh. Instead she went for the middle ground.

“This is good, smooth. Is it French?”

“A Bordeaux. Seemed appropriate.”

Maggie bit her lower lip. “For what?”

Nick looked at her for a minute, his emotions impossible to read.

“She’s gone,” he said again. This time his meaning was clear.

“Gone as in gone-gone?”

“Yeah.”

“As in left-not-coming-back gone?”

“As in packed-up-a-suitcase-and-took-the-boat gone.”

“Oh, Nick.” Maggie looked at him, trying to figure out where he was with all this. “Are you sure?”

“I’m sure. She must’ve known something was coming down. I wanted to talk to her before the police came back.”

Maggie took a deep breath. “I ran an activity log for her user account. It shows the last time she was logged in to the system.”

“I saw that, too.”

“So you knew.”

“Yeah.”

“You know the police are looking for both of you.”

“I figured.”

“Maybe you should call them. They can call the Coast Guard. I bet they can catch her before she gets too far.”

Nick shook his head.

“But the longer you wait, the farther away she gets.”

“I’ll call them later.”

Then it hit. He was letting her go. While she and Jack had been living large in Diana's office, her brother had stood next to an empty slip, scanning the horizon, knowing his wife was gone. By the time the police found out, she would be hundreds of miles away.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Detectives Galloway and Vance pulled their car into the harbor parking lot and looked around.

“There,” Vance said, pointing to a Mercedes parked in the third row.

Galloway pulled in behind it and called in the license plate number.

“It’s hers. Let’s take a look.”

They walked around the car a few times, bending down to look in the wheel wells and underneath the chassis. The vehicle was spotless.

“Nothing here.”

“Yeah. Me neither.” Galloway tried the door. “Locked.”

Vance looked at the pier. “Let’s go have a talk with Mrs. Dalakos.”

They walked down the concrete steps to the wooden decking and followed the walkway around to pier number nine. A few seconds later, Galloway let out a low groan. The slip was empty, nothing but the endless ripples of water lapping against the beams.

“Damn it.”

“You think they took off?” Vance asked.

“Probably.” Galloway looked back toward the parking lot. “But where’s his car?”

“Maybe she picked him up at the office.”

“Maybe.” He paused. “Something doesn’t smell right.”

“It’s a harbor. Nothing smells right.”

“Funny. Do you have the specs on the boat?”

“Nah. We’ll have to call it in when we get back to the station. Let’s see if we can find anyone who knows what time they left.”

“Yoo hoo!” A shrill voice called out from the next slip. Mrs. White was making her way down the steps of her boat. Two little furry balls scampered down before her, yapping at the detectives.

“Poopsie. General. Hush. Hush, now,” she scolded.

“Morning,” Vance said, raising his voice to be heard above the noise.

“Good morning, Detectives.” Mrs. White stressed the word detectives to show how impressed she was. “What brings you back down here?”

“We’re looking for Mr. and Mrs. Dalakos,” Galloway said.

“I haven’t seen Nick since Sunday. I saw Diana this morning.” She gave a particularly negative influence to the name and rolled her eyes in disgust.

The detectives exchanged glances.

“What time did you see Mrs. Dalakos?” Vance asked.

“Oh, I don’t know. Sometime around nine or so.”

“Was she alone?”

“Yes. And she was lugging two big suitcases. Looked like she was taking a long trip. Not that I was too sorry to see her go.” She added dryly.

“Yeah? And why’s that?”

“Well, she almost ran over poor Poopsie here.” She gestured dramatically at one of the fluff balls still rolling around her feet barking. “She had one of those suitcases on wheels and just came barreling down the pier.”

Mrs. White bent down and stroked one of the fur balls, murmuring gently.

“Did you talk to her?”

“Heavens, no. I was so furious, I could barely speak. Besides, a good Christian woman cannot always share her thoughts aloud.” Mrs. White gave them a knowing smile, looking anything but pious. “Although she did exchange words with Mr. and Mrs. Howe.”

“Did you happen to hear what was said?” Vance asked, knowing full well that Mrs. White had either heard or discussed the interchange in great detail with Mrs. Howe and any other neighbor who was willing to listen.

“Well, I don’t really know all the details,” she said grandly. “But, I understand Diana stopped on her way down the pier and started yelling at Mr. Howe, calling him all sorts of names. Well, Mrs. Howe won’t stand for anyone to talk to the mister like that, so she got out on deck and called Diana a rich tramp. Then Diana started using foul language. I’m glad I wasn’t close enough to hear that.”

“I’ll bet,” Galloway muttered. “And where were you when all this happened?”

“I was on my way down the pier with the children—“

“Children?”

Mrs. White motioned impatiently to her dogs.

“Of course.” Galloway threw Vance a look of exasperation.

“We heard the commotion and started down toward them.” She looked at the detectives.

“Well, to see if we could help, you understand.”

“And were you able to help?” Galloway asked, stressing the last word.

Mrs. White pursed her lips. “As we approached, Diana made a very rude hand gesture to Mrs. Howe and tried to run us down. She lugged all those bags onto her boat and was gone within fifteen minutes.”

“Do you have any idea where she was going?”

“No. But I hope she stays gone for a good long while. We will not tolerate that kind of behavior in our neighborhood.”

The detectives talked to several other boat owners, including the Howes, and got the same story. Angry woman, several bags, definitely alone.

“So where is Mr. Dalakos?” Vance asked as they climbed back into the squad car.

“Good question. Let’s call in the boat, then head up to OPTIN.”

#

Maggie sat in Nick’s home office and cycled through her various email accounts. The first two turned up repeated requests for her services. She needed to get back to her own company before she lost her small income. Helping Nick was important, but it wasn’t paying her bills.

The third account held an email from an anonymous no-name source. Randy.

Maggie had sent him a copy of the file in hopes he could help track it down. He only responded when he came through.

M. Ur in luck. I found that code on 1 of my fave sites. Posted by someone named Zeus42 if that means anything 2 u. Hopefully not. I checked out his blog and this is 1 messed up dude.

Here’s the link. Good luck.

Maggie clicked the link and was directed to a site identified only by its IP address, the series of numbers used to identify locations on the web. It was a bulletin board for hackers where users could post and respond to various programs. The software she was interested in was posted two days ago with some grandiose text announcing the *final version* of the code.

There were already more than two dozen replies to the posting. Most of them criticized the code for being compiled in certain areas; the users asking the publisher to “open up or shut up.” The rest were complimentary, remarking on the strength of the code. While the critical ones had been ignored, the publisher had responded to those who “appreciated the complexity” of the code.

Maggie chewed on her bottom lip for a minute then started typing.

Great stuff! I've never seen anything like this before. You are amazing! Do you have a live implementation?

She gave herself the screen name of ‘Aphrodite69’. Better to play this from both sides. If her technical interest wouldn’t hook him, perhaps another type of interest would.

She clicked on his UserID and was transferred to another part of the site where users could run web logs, or “blogs.” She had never felt the desire to share her daily personal thoughts with the world, but online diaries of one sort or another had been a constant on the web for years. Some sort of voyeurism or maybe just the need to share with an anonymous listener.

The one for Zeus42 was long with three or four postings a day. Most of them posted in the early hours of the morning. She felt a slight chill. The timestamps were becoming too much of a pattern for her. She started with the most recent entry.

It is here! After months of production and thorough testing, my unsurpassed sneaker code is ready for widespread use. The global

importance of this program will rock the foundation of every financial institution in the world!

The entry continued on, trumpeting the code and its creator. It was really no more than a sales ad. She skimmed the next few entries, stopping on one posted two days ago.

Why am I forced to work in an environment that totally and completely suppresses my intellect. My moronic boss wouldn't recognize great code if it bit him on the ass. When the code is complete and I am gone, who is going to look the fool then? Wacko Jacko. That's right.

Maggie's pulse quickened. They had suspected someone was working with Diana from within the company. Was there a rogue programmer downstairs who reported directly to Jack?

She clicked on the next entry instead.

What would it be like to have two women at once? I know D is a wildcat, but what about M? Would they get along? Could I get them to...

Maggie drew back in disgust as the blog detailed the maneuvers this guy was hoping to see. Could D be Diana? Would make sense. But who was M? Her? The acrid taste of bile surged in her throat. He knew her.

She continued reading the entries which mostly revolved around either the brilliance of the code or the sexual prowess of the programmer. Both of which became boring. Maggie was about to leave the site when the next entry caught her attention.

What kind of an idiot kills someone just as you are nearing the pinnacle of your success? Does the phrase 'Don't break the law when you're breaking the law' ring a bell?? Has the big D ruined it all? Time will tell.

Maggie felt a flame of fear in the pit of her stomach. This was definitely him. She had initiated contact. Now she needed to see if he would bite.

#

Charlie stood in front of the urinal and felt his balls as he peed. He was pretty sure they were getting smaller. He had heard this might happen from the roids but he hadn't noticed it before now. It's not like he had measured them before. How would he know?

The door opened and Charlie quickly pulled his hands away. He nodded to the programmer who walked up to the other urinal. As he zipped up, he stole a furtive glance at the guy's package. Yep, he was definitely shrinking. Like he needed any more stress right now. He was already developing his own little set of bitch tits, something Diana always liked to tease him about. He washed his hands and looked at his reflection in the mirror above the sink. He still looked good. Once he started selling the code, he would buy himself a good plastic surgeon to take care of some of these nasty side effects.

Back in his office, he rummaged through his briefcase, looking for a pill that would chill him out. Diana had never showed and he hadn't been able to figure out how to set up any type of offshore bank account. He had taken a chance and dropped the money back into Boitanni's account, erasing the temp account in the process. Now he was back where he started, no money and no CD.

Charlie dumped a Benzo into his palm and swallowed. That would help.

He looked at his Inbox. The program requests were really starting to stack up now. He had a long list of service follow up calls to make. Not to mention the software problems that had been kicked up to his level. Come on, he urged the little blue pill. Kick in. Soon this will all be a distant memory.

Charlie switched over to the Internet and accessed the hacker site. One new message had been posted to his thread. Another impressed comrade. Now this was the type of thing he liked to work on.

#

“They’re here,” Nick said. “Are you sure you don’t want to sit in?”

Carole had called thirty minutes ago to say the detectives were on their way over.

“No,” Maggie said. “And I think it’s time you came clean with them. I understand what you’re trying to do Nick and it’s wrong.”

“Trust me on this one, Mags, please.”

“It’s wrong.”

“Stay on task. If you leave the door open, you can hear everything. Now go.” He pushed her toward the study and then opened the front door.

Galloway and Vance pushed past him into the house.

“Where is your wife, Mr. Dalakos?” Galloway asked, without preamble.

“Detectives. Good to see you again. Have a seat.”

His calm demeanor pissed them off. “Cut the crap, Dalakos. Where is she?”

“She took the boat out.”

“We know that. Where did she go?”

Nick paused. Maggie held her fingers suspended over the keyboard.

“I don’t know. Probably just out into the Gulf a few miles.” Damn it, Nick. “We had a fight yesterday morning. She was upset about your visit. I... I might have said some things I shouldn’t.”

“What’d you say to her?”

Nick took a deep breath. “I asked her if she was involved in any of this.”

“And?”

“And, of course, she’s not.” Maggie heard him gaining confidence. “Anyway, she got angry. I can’t blame her. Said she was taking off for a few days.”

Another pause. Maggie was now half-turned in her chair. Then she heard Nick again.

“This isn’t the first time she’s done this. Why do you think she got the boat?” He tried a short laugh. “Where does your wife go when she’s mad at you, detective? To her sister’s? Her best friend’s? Well, my wife didn’t have either of those. That boat is her refuge.”

“Mr. Dalakos, have you tracked down the theft problem that your company is currently experiencing?” Vance asked.

“No. Not yet.”

“We’re going to need your wife’s banking records,” Galloway said.

“Why?”

“Do we need to get a subpoena to do this?”

“Maybe you should.” Nick said. “Unless there are formal charges being presented, I don’t care to expose my financial statements. Anything else?”

“Yeah. Don’t leave town. And if you hear from your wife, call us immediately. Or we will charge you as an accessory.”

“Accessory to what?”

“To murder.”

Chapter Twenty-Five

He was nibbling.

Maggie had traded three replies with Zeus42 over the last hour, each time feeding his ego and asking for details on the software. So far he had wallowed in the praise, but remained vague on the software and its implementation. She had ventured to say she lived in Houston, but none of his replies had addressed the issue of location. Her last post hinted that she may have a monetary interest in the code.

Now she sat watching the site, pressing F5 to refresh the screen every few seconds.

“How’s it going?” Nick walked in and looked over her shoulder.

“Slow. Conversing with this guy is creeping me out.”

“Want me to take over?”

“No way.” In spite of her earlier resistance, Maggie was hooked now. She had gotten into the rhythm of the discussion thread. She could almost predict his responses. She glanced at the screen. “I’m waiting for a reply right now. Last one I posted was more than ten minutes ago.”

“Anything conclusive?”

“Not yet. This guy’s no idiot.”

“We know that,” he said. “I’m going to take a shower. And Maggie,” he added.

“Thanks.”

He left the room and Maggie hit refresh again. This time she was rewarded with a new entry.

Want to chat?

A small square icon blinked next to the message.

Maggie took a deep breath. It's now or never. She clicked the icon and another window opened on the monitor. Her username showed in the window followed by a colon and a flashing question mark. Maggie typed 'hi' and pressed Enter.

Aphrodite69: hi

Immediately his response displayed on the line below hers. And then another.

Zeus42: hi

Zeus42: tks 4 coming

Stay calm and get the info.

Aphrodite69: what up?

Zeus42: anyone else there?

Aphrodite69: just me

Aphrodite69: alone. interested.

Zeus42: in what?

Aphrodite69: what do u have 2 offer?

Zeus42: what do u want?

Aphrodite69: u 1st

Zeus42: lets start w/ software

Zeus42: still interested?

Aphrodite69: more info pls

Zeus42: ??

Aphrodite69: have u used it b4

Zeus42: yes. s/w in operation.

Zeus42: very \$\$\$

Aphrodite69: cant see total code

Aphrodite69: will need 2 make changes

Zeus42: i can do that 4 u

Aphrodite69: no way. my biz.

Zeus42: cool. want 2 buy?

Aphrodite69: cost?

Zeus42: 100k

Aphrodite69: 2 much

Zeus42: u could program better??

Crap. Don't piss him off.

Aphrodite69: no. no1 could.

Aphrodite69: short on \$

Zeus42: price stands

Aphrodite69: trade?

Zeus42: 4 what?

Aphrodite69: % of take?

Zeus42: whats total?

Aphrodite69: 750k

Aphrodite69: paypal u 150 after

Zeus42: could make 0

Aphrodite69: could make 1.5m

Zeus42: 300

Aphrodite69: 200

Zeus42: 250

Aphrodite69: deal!!

Zeus42: and insurance

Aphrodite69: what kind of ins?

Zeus42: meet me IRL

Aphrodite69: what??

Zeus42: tonight

Zeus42: black cat. downtown

Aphrodite69: k

Zeus42: me n red t

Aphrodite69: slinky black dress

Zeus42: slinky? i might buy u a drink

Aphrodite69: who knows where that might lead

Aphrodite69: keep your imagination running!!

Zeus42: full speed

Maggie closed the window and sank back into her chair.

She had a live one.

#

“I don’t think so,” Nick said as Maggie laid out the plan. “Way too dangerous.”

“Oh, bullshit. I’m going to be in a very public place. All I’m going to do is look around and see if I recognize anybody in a red t-shirt. That’s it.”

“Are you nuts? I know I’m the one who said don’t call the cops, but this might be taking it too far. I don’t want to put you in any physical danger.”

Maggie laughed. “I think you’re exaggerating the situation a little bit. There won’t be any danger because there isn’t going to be any confrontation. I’m not wearing the black dress. He won’t even know that I’m there. I’m sure we could quickly find something in the system to nail this guy if we knew where to start looking.”

“Then I’m coming, too,” Nick said.

“Uh-uh.” Maggie shook her head. “Whoever it is knows you are trying to track him down. They don’t know me. I can be anonymous.” She didn’t tell him about the blog entry.

“You can’t go alone.”

“I’ll take Jenna with me.”

“Now there’s a woman who can take care of herself.”

“We’ll just be a couple of girls, out on the town, scouting for guys in red shirts.”

“I don’t know, Maggie.”

“Look, do you want to catch this guy or not? We could always bring in the cops.”

“Take your cell. And don’t do anything stupid.”

#

Charlie stood in front of the bathroom sink and wiped the steam off the mirror. He had taken a hot shower after working out, didn’t want to cramp up in front of Aphrodite. Hot name. He had checked a few mythology sites this afternoon and found several accounts of little Aphrodite’s creation. His favorite story depicted her born of sea-foam after one of the gods had his balls cut off and cast into the sea. The goddess of sexual rapture. Now that was cool.

He looked himself over in the mirror. Not bad. He wouldn’t shave, keep his five o’clock shadow. Women liked that scruffy look. He squeezed some hair gel out of a tube and rubbed his

hands together before pulling them through his hair, then gently curled the tips of his hair around his pinky finger to give him those baby curls women found so appealing. He'd been browsing the women's magazine rack at the bookstore over the past few weeks. What he saw was the wild, untamed, rugged look. Something that said this guy can handle anything.

Charlie looked at his reflection and let his eyelids droop a little. Then furrowed his brow and let his lower jaw go slack, his mouth slightly open. There. That was it. He relaxed his face and struck the look again. A few more tries and he was satisfied that he could turn it on at the bar when the time was right.

He pulled a red Houston Rockets t-shirt out of the closet and tugged it on. He loved them fresh from the wash when the fabric was tight, how they conformed to his body. His oldest, most faded jeans went on next. The men in those magazines always wore jeans. Or tuxedos. But that seemed a little much for tonight.

Charlie was pleased with the result. Definitely rugged. Even the dark circles under his eyes helped the look. He sat on the edge of the bed and laced up his new hiking boots. Completely impractical in Houston where the only mountains were freeway overpasses. But if people felt the need for four-wheel drive SUVs, he could get away with boots. He jumped up and down a few times to ease the stiffness of the new leather.

Charlie paused for a moment to think about Aphrodite and what she was doing right now. Was she taking as much care dressing herself as he was? He couldn't wait to see her sexy little dress.

But what if she didn't look as good in her dress as he expected? What if she bulged out in all the wrong places? Or she didn't shave her pits? Well, that would really suck. He would still

take her money, but that would sure put a damper on the evening. Important to see her first, before she saw him, just in case.

Charlie reached back into his closet and pulled out a button-down shirt with a subtle Hawaiian print. He put this on over his t-shirt and buttoned it up. Once he got in and got a look at her, he could decide whether or not to take off this shirt. That way he stayed in control.

He dumped an assortment of pills into his hand and decided on a shiny betty to get the evening started, a little something to sharpen the mind. He swallowed it dry, then slipped the pill bottle into his pocket.

Tomorrow, he would settle up with Diana. Tonight, he was going to make Aphrodite one happy goddess.

Chapter Twenty-Six

The Black Cat was one of Houston's latest downtown urban pubs. Built two years earlier on a vacant lot, the brick walls and concrete floor were artistically scarred with a century of distress. Dim lamps cast a sultry glow over the gathering. Low ceilings and multiple rooms filled with second-hand furniture completed the aged appearance. The music and clientele, however, were anything but aged.

Maggie shook the rain from her hair as the wooden door creaked closed behind her. A single woman, she had been ushered past the line of men waiting for entry into the bar. As her eyes adjusted to the darkness, she took a brief inventory of the group, or what she could see through the haze of smoke.

Shabby chic was in and most of the crowd had apparently come straight from a yard sale. The women wore tight flowered tops over their ripped up jeans. The men were in faded tees sporting vintage slogans. She counted at least three red shirts from the doorway.

Damn. Maybe she should have brought Jenna just to speed up the process.

She weaved her way through several small groups. The plan was to make an initial pass to see if she recognized anyone. She had the company directory in her purse and had studied the programming section before heading out. Now that she was here, they were all starting to blend together.

Maggie slowed as she neared the first red tee, suddenly not quite as brave as she wanted to be. His massive back was to her and she could see the muscles beneath his shirt. He could snap her in two. She stopped as he turned his head to the side, then blew out her breath at the sight of his neatly trimmed goatee. All of the programmers at OPTIN were clean-shaven.

One down, who knew how many more to go.

She passed two other red tees, both sitting in groups and engaged in conversation. Her man would be alone, waiting for her.

Then her eyes fell on an image in the shadows, a man, clean-cut, good-looking and alone. He stood against the far wall, partly hidden by the stairwell, and scanned the bar, his eyes moving slowly and deliberately over the crowd. He was waiting, for someone.

Maggie dug her nails into her palms of her hands to ease their trembling and started toward him. This was why she had come. To identify the hacker. The thief. The killer. She shivered and glanced around the bar. They were in a public place. She was safe in here. Just get a good look at his face and then walk away.

When she turned back, he was staring at her. His lips curved into a seductive smile, his dark energy pulling her forward.

Someone pushed past her and Maggie watched in disbelief as a bubbly blonde jiggled up and threw her arms around his neck. He gave Maggie a slight apologetic shrug before he buried his face in that pile of blonde hair.

That one was not her Zeus either.

She needed a drink.

Maneuvering her way to the bar, she scanned the taps that covered the wall and placed a five on the counter in exchange for a Bass.

“Mary?”

Her heart skipped a beat and she paused before turning around. She knew that voice. Charlie, the freak programming manager, stood next to her.

“Maggie.” She gave him a quick once over. No red tee.

“Right. Right.” He scooted closer. “Maggie.”

She fought the urge to move backward. “Didn’t expect to see you here.”

“Well, I guess you got lucky.”

Guess not. Suddenly Maggie was hit with an image of Bobby’s from last Friday and groaned. What if this place was packed with OPTIN employees?

“So is this another company hangout?” She gestured to the room with her glass.

Charlie gave a snort of disgust.

“Those dweebs aren’t Black Cat material, if you know what I mean. I come down here to get away from them.” He downed his drink. “So how’d you find out about this place?”

“Um, I used to come here a few years back.”

#

Right. This place didn’t exist ‘a few years back’. Such a terrible liar. At least get your facts straight.

Charlie had spotted her the minute she walked through the door, had watched her work her way through the room, had seen her study every red t-shirt she passed. She wasn’t wearing a slinky, black dress, but this was his Aphrodite alright.

A mixed blessing. There would be no money changing hands tonight. But he could still have a little fun.

“So, Maggie. Here by yourself?”

“No, I’m, uh, meeting someone.”

“That’s funny. I’m waiting for someone, too.” He slid his empty glass on the bar.

“Another Forty-two Blue. Easy on the ice.”

#

Forty-two? As in Zeus forty-two? She doubted it. Based on their earlier encounters, Charlie was too worried about his looks to risk getting blood on his clothes.

“So what’re you drinking?” she asked.

“Forty-two Blue. Vodka, Blue Curacao, with a soda topper. It’s the perfect drink. Get it?”

Maggie shook her head.

“The perfect drink? Forty-two. The answer to life, the universe and everything.

Hitchhiker’s Guide? Read it?”

Maggie shook her head again. “I guess not.”

“You should.” He sipped his drink, watching her over the rim of the glass. “Maybe I was wrong about you.”

“What do you mean?” Another red tee passed by and stood at the bar a few feet away.

Maggie shifted so she could see past the people between them.

“Every programmer worth his shit has read The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy,”

Charlie said.

“And?” Maggie watched the red tee get his beer and then join his friends at the dartboard.

Damn. Another false alarm.

“And I heard you were some hot shit systems analyst come to bail your brother out.”

Maggie turned back in genuine surprise. “Help him out of what?”

Charlie gave her a smug smile and shrugged. “Who knows?”

“Who does know?”

He shrugged again. “Maybe I know.”

“Yeah, why don’t you fill me in and then we’ll both know.” She was getting pissed.

Wasting time here with Charlie when she should be searching the bar.

“Hey, chill out, babe. Just trying to pass the time until our *friends* show up.” He leered at her. “Let me get you another beer.”

Maggie finished her beer in one gulp and placed the glass on the bar. She would buy her own drink and go look upstairs. As she reached for her purse to get another fiver, her elbow bumped into Charlie’s chest.

“Oops, sorry.”

He smiled and swelled his chest a little more. As he did so, the top button on his shirt slid open from the strain and the collar of a red t-shirt peeked out from underneath.

Maggie gasped and turned away.

“Your beer, Maggie,” Charlie said, handing her a glass. He moved closer until his body was almost touching hers. “You know, I’m *really* glad we ran into each other tonight.”

She ignored him and leaned toward the bartender.

“Where’s your ladies’ room?”

“You okay?” Charlie asked.

Maggie didn’t look at him. “Your ladies’ room,” she demanded.

“Upstairs to the left.”

“Thanks.” She managed a weak smile at Charlie. “Be right back.”

#

Charlie set her beer back on the bar. Something was up. There had been fear in her eyes when she smiled at him. He looked at himself in the mirror behind the bar and saw the red of his shirt.

She knew.

He turned in the direction Maggie had gone and saw her pushing through the crowd.

Charlie took off after her.

“Maggie!”

She glanced over her shoulder, saw him coming and bolted for the stairs. She had a head start but he could catch her. He shoved his way through the mass of bodies, following in her wake. He could see her dark hair bouncing a few people ahead of him. He pushed harder and stretched out his arm. He was inches away from wrapping his fingers in that hair when she burst through the other side of the crowd, sprinted up the stairs and lunged through the bathroom door.

Charlie was seconds behind her.

He flung himself through the door.

The small room was packed with women. None of them Maggie.

“Get out!” One of them screamed.

“Where is she?” he screamed back. “Maggie?”

“Get out, you fucking bastard!” Another woman started toward him. Two of her friends were behind her. “Get the fuck out of here before I call the cops.”

This wasn't how it would go down. He couldn't get to her in here. And he couldn't risk making a scene. Patience, Charlie. She would have to come out sooner or later.

“Bitch,” he spat. The woman crossed her arms and raised her eyebrows.

Charlie gritted his teeth and left.

#

Maggie emerged from the safety of the stall and leaned against the wall to light a cigarette.

“Thanks,” she said to the room, not quite sure which of the women had stood up to Charlie for her. A woman dressed entirely in black, including her makeup, stepped forward.

“No problem. Watch yourself.”

The woman left with her friends and Maggie wished again that she had brought Jenna with her tonight. She studied a wisp of smoke as it headed toward the ceiling. How many women had sat against this wall, scared to leave, sucking down tar and nicotine until their lungs were black?

She glanced toward the door and knew Charlie was waiting on the other side. Maggie had promised Nick no confrontations and she didn't want one. But she really had no choice now. What the hell had she been thinking, trapping herself in here like this?

#

Charlie paced the floor in front of the restroom.

That bitch. That liar. Who the fuck was in control? He was. Charlie was in control. Not her. Him. In control. Get control.

The bathroom door opened and he spun toward it, ready to pounce. Instead of Maggie, the woman in black emerged, flanked by her dyke friends.

“Fuck you, asshole,” she sneered. She challenged him with her eyes for a second or two, then stalked off down the stairs.

Charlie resisted the urge to go after her. Get control. Figure out what to do about Maggie.

He fished a pretty Paulie from his stash and ordered a beer from the upstairs bar. The coldness of the glass felt good against his palm and he lifted the beer to his forehead, rolling it back and forth. Now think.

#

She couldn't stay in here forever.

She watched a few women leave singly or in pairs before she found her chance.

Four women gathered at the mirror and passed around a tube of lipstick before heading toward the door. Maggie followed close behind them, her head ducked low. If she could make it out of the club, she was home free. She'd call Nick from the car and have him call the cops. If they moved fast enough, they could pick up Charlie before he left the bar.

As Maggie reached for the railing at the top of the stairs, a hand clamped down on her wrist and wrenched her backward. She twisted violently, trying to get free, but Charlie's grip was hard, unmerciful.

"Are you my Aphrodite after all?" he sneered, dragging her into the upstairs bar.

Maggie yanked at the hand around her wrist. "Let go!"

"Not until we have a little talk."

"I don't think so."

"But we were having such a good time downstairs."

"Let go, asshole. I know what you did."

"Do you?"

She turned away from the stench of his breath. "I know you killed Barnes because he cracked your two-bit code."

"Wrong! Diana killed Barnes. Although I can't say that I miss him."

She knew it was a long shot. But somewhere, somehow, she had so wanted to be wrong about Diana.

"So who else did you bring with you, *Aphrodite*?"

Charlie tightened his grip on her wrist. Any minute now she would hear the popping of her bones as they snapped in two.

"Jack. And Nick. Better run while you have the chance."

Charlie looked over at the stairs, then glanced wildly around the bar.

“Come on,” he growled, shoving her toward the emergency exit.

Tiny streams of rain raced down the panes of the door in front of her, the darkness beyond turning the glass into a foggy mirror. Maggie could see their reflection as they approached the door, Charlie pushing her forward while she struggled against his grip. She couldn't let him get her outside. Maggie planted her left foot and kicked backward with her right against his shin. He stumbled for a second and then spun her around.

“Bitch!” He raised his hand, palm open, ready to slap her when a man came from behind, raised one massive arm over his head, then brought it down sharply into the back of Charlie's neck.

Charlie flew into Maggie and they both crashed through the emergency exit door and onto the small landing. The metal crate flooring was wet with rain and Maggie slid, with Charlie on top of her, to the edge of the railing, then smashed into a support post. Pain shot up her back as the door alarm let out a deafening shriek.

Maggie shut her eyes against the falling rain. Charlie lay slumped across her, the weight of his body pinning her to the ground. As she struggled to get out from underneath him, the man from the bar burst through the open door. He kicked Charlie hard in the gut with a thick square boot, dangerously close to catching Maggie's face on the follow through. Charlie moaned and started to stir.

The man grabbed hold of the railing for added support and kicked Charlie again in the stomach, this time flipping him off her. Charlie's head hit the grate with a loud *thunk*.

“Boitanni sends his love,” snarled the man as he leaned over Charlie's body, his words clear despite the shrill reverberations of the alarm.

Charlie lay still on the landing but Maggie saw his eyes open slightly, a tiny tensing of his muscles. As the man leaned down for a closer look, Charlie's foot shot into his crotch. The man groaned and fell to his knees. Charlie struggled to his feet, found an empty beer bottle on the landing and smashed the man across his temple, showering the landing with shards of glass, before turning to Maggie.

“Get out of my way, you fucking bitch.”

Charlie shoved her aside, limped his way down the fire escape stairs and disappeared into the alley.

Maggie sat up and tried to clear her head.

The pain was intense. She was having some trouble breathing. And that damn alarm wasn't helping any. She needed to get in, back in the bar.

The henchman next to her was also getting to his feet. She turned in his direction and saw nothing but a huge gold nugget ring as his fist slammed into her jaw, knocking her off her feet.

Maggie fell backward and rolled down the fire escape, her body banging against the metal steps, until she hit the wet pavement of the street below.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Maggie lay on the sofa in Nick's living room and stared out the window at two squirrels racing among the branches of the live oak trees. They had an intense game of tag going, constantly switching directions, hiding on the other side of the trunk until whoever was "it" flew around the trunk, sending them both into a mad race through the treetops.

She turned toward the stack of magazines on the coffee table, all of which she had already flipped through two or three times. She was bored. And daytime TV, including cable, was wearing thin.

Maggie had survived her fall down the fire escape stairs – she was in too much pain to be dead – but had suffered a mild concussion, a broken arm and a sprained ankle.

Other than that, she was fine.

When she sat up, the blood rushed to her head and throbbed against her temples. She glanced at the clock. Still two hours until she could take another pain pill. She waited a minute for the dizziness to subside and struggled gingerly to her feet. She couldn't lie on the sofa forever. Besides, she had to go to the bathroom.

Maggie limped down the hall, pausing every few feet to lean against the wall and rest. The muffled sound of Nick on the phone came from his study. She managed to use the bathroom, but decided to skip the ordeal of washing her hands, then peered into the mirror.

She sported two black eyes, a puffy lip and a large nasty looking cut on her forehead above her right eye. That, combined with her limp greasy hair, made for a very depressing image. She returned to her spot on the living room sofa and collapsed against the soft cushions.

The moment her eyes closed, she fell asleep.

#

“Maggie. Maggie, wake up. The police are here.”

She opened her eyes to find Nick leaning over her. Behind him, she saw the two detectives.

Maggie sat up, carefully moving her battered body, as Nick arranged the pillows behind her back.

“Take it easy, okay,” Nick said. “She’s still pretty weak.”

Detectives Vance and Galloway sat in the two chairs across from the sofa, in the chairs that were once Nick’s and Diana’s, and now just Nick’s.

She looked at Nick. What a pair the two of them made. Both alone with dreams left unfulfilled, plans thrown off-track by things out of their control. A tear rolled down her cheek.

“Ms. Johanssen,” Vance said gently. “How are you feeling?”

“I’m okay.”

“We want to ask you a few questions about what happened.”

They stayed for almost an hour as Maggie told them all of it. The late night logins, the stolen money, the online chat with Charlie that led to the confrontation at the bar.

“You should’ve told us about the meeting at the bar. We could’ve had someone go in your place.”

Maggie tried to laugh but it hurt.

“I know that *now*.” She looked at Nick. “It wasn’t supposed to happen like that.”

The tears flowed freely now.

“It’s okay, Mags.” He wrapped an arm around her shoulder. “It’s over now.”

“Well, not entirely over,” Galloway said. “We have a warrant out for your wife’s arrest. You are required by law to contact us if you hear from her.”

Nick nodded.

“What about Charlie?” Maggie asked.

“We’re looking,” Vance said. “It looks like he left in a hurry so we’re sure to find something in his apartment.”

“If we had known he was a suspect, we could’ve been waiting for him.” Galloway threw Maggie a pointed look.

“Hey, ease up,” Nick said, pulling Maggie closer. She winced from the pain but kept quiet. It was so easy to just sit there, doing nothing, and let him speak for her.

“We’ll find him,” Vance said. “Guys on the run always screw up at some point. And he didn’t have that much of a head start.”

“He didn’t say anything to you about where he might be going? Anything during your online chat or at the bar?” Galloway asked.

Maggie shook her head.

“All right, then,” Vance said, standing up. “We’re done. Thanks for your time.”

After the detectives left, Nick sat down in one of the empty chairs.

“How’re you doing, Maggie?”

“I’ve been better,” she said, giving him a lopsided grin.

“Well, get some more rest. Jack’s coming by in a few hours.”

Maggie groaned. “I don’t want him to see me like this. I look awful.”

“I don’t think he cares.”

#

Jack showed up at six with flowers in one hand and a pizza in the other.

“Figured you might be getting nothing but Jell-O around here,” he said as he set the pizza down on the coffee table. “I also brought you these.”

He held out the flowers to Maggie, who was suddenly shy and embarrassed.

“Thanks.”

“How are you feeling? You look like shit.”

Maggie laughed. “Feeling about the same as I look.”

“I’m glad you’re okay,” he said softly, a world of emotion packed into those four words.

#

They ate pizza while Jack filled them in on the events at the office. Someone had downloaded Charlie’s blog before the police had a chance to remove it from the site and the file was being circulated through email. Diana was the second favorite topic of conversation, her theft both legendary and frustrating to the programming department. A team had been assembled to review security and scour the code for impropriety functions. And while Maggie had told the police the truth about Phil’s murder, that information had somehow been kept under wraps. In the halls of OPTIN, Diana was a sophisticated thief, and Charlie bore the brunt of cold-hearted killer.

“What about Edna?” Maggie asked. “Did anyone ask her about the tapes?”

“Yeah, Jones confronted her on Wednesday, and she fell apart, confessed everything. Seems she was turning over the recordings to her nephew, who in turn was selling the information to his trading partners.”

“What did Shale do when he heard the news?”

“Let loose with a string of profanity that would make a sailor blush.”

“Did he call the cops?”

“Worse. He called the SEC.”

“She’s toast.”

“Yep.”

“Is anyone getting any work done?” Nick asked.

“I pass through and crack the whip every so often,” Jack said. Then more seriously, “It’s going to take a while, Nick.”

What Jack didn’t tell them was that Nick’s future with the company was also one of the hot topics around the office. Nick had been working from home for the last several days to be with Maggie but surely he was facing heat from his partners.

“I’m not sure I’ll be there to see it. As you can imagine, I’m pretty much *persona non grata* with the other partners right now. After all, it was my wife.”

“Nick, you didn’t know,” Maggie said.

“Doesn’t matter,” he said, shaking his head. “Clients are threatening to leave the firm. Some have filed lawsuits. Even if the company survives, I won’t.” He sighed. “Martin and Bill have made an offer to buy me out, and I’ve accepted.”

Jack was stunned. “But you can’t leave.”

“I have no choice, really. From a public relations standpoint, the company is doomed if I stay.”

“The company will be doomed if you go.” Jack said. “Who will provide the vision for the software? Fucking Shale?”

“That’s where you come in. I’ve recommended that you take my place.”

“Me? I can’t do your job.”

“Oh come on, Jack. You know the software and the industry as well as I do. You’re a perfect fit.”

Jack looked to Maggie and then back at Nick. “It just wouldn’t seem right.”

“You’ll get over it. It’s time for me to move on.”

“To what?”

“Don’t know yet. But the buyout offer was big enough to give me some time to think about it. Besides, I know you’ll do great. And here,” Nick said, picking a brown package up off the table and handing it to Jack. “Is a little something to get you started.”

It was a padded mailing envelope. Jack reached in and pulled out a jewel case with an unlabeled CD in it.

“What’s this?”

“That, my friend, is the breakdown of the compiled module that Charlie was using. Phil burned it before he left the office that night. You can use that to fix the hole in the code.”

Maggie grinned. “That’s awesome, Nick. Where’d you get it?”

“It came in the mail.”

Maggie picked up the envelope. It was postmarked three days ago from a station in Kemah.

#

That night, after Jack had left and Maggie lay sleeping soundly, Nick sat in his darkened office, a half-empty bottle of wine on the desk. He stared out the window, looking at the trees that lined the bayou, and watched the leaves tremble in the hot evening breeze. The house was silent except for the rhythmic ticking of the grandfather clock.

Setting down his glass of wine, Nick opened the left-hand drawer on his desk and pulled out a small black case, flipping open the lid. The miniature screen glowed green in the darkness, the coastline of Central America visible on the left. A small dot blinked a quarter of an inch to the right of the coast. The longitude and latitude coordinates displayed beside it.

The GPS device in the hull of the boat had been his idea, installed without Diana's knowledge by the manufacturer during production. In case of emergency. An undisclosed gift of compassion, from a husband to his wife.

The coordinates changed.

It looked like Diana was somewhere near Honduras.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Jack arrived early in the morning as promised to drive Maggie back to Driftwood. She sat on the sofa, a small duffle bag at her feet, and hoped she looked better than she had last night. She had managed to wash her hair and now damp ringlets curled loosely around her face. She smiled at him over her coffee cup as he came into the room.

“Hey, Jack. Here to help the cripple?”

“Couldn’t think of anyplace I’d rather be.”

He wrapped an arm around her waist to support her as they walked to her truck. Maggie was supposed to stay off the ankle but her broken arm prevented the use of crutches, and she had absolutely refused a wheelchair. His body felt strong and warm against her own, and she snuggled in close, breathing in the clean scent of his skin.

After a quick stop for gas and beef jerky, they hit the interstate. Maggie tried to keep up her end of the conversation, but after dozing off twice, she fell asleep.

#

They pulled into Maggie’s place three hours later.

“Drive over to the chicken coop. I want to have a look at what’s left.”

Jack rounded the garage, pulled off the gravel drive, and followed her direction across the field. The rocky terrain bounced them around inside the truck, a sensation that Maggie had come to expect. This time, however, her bruised body cringed in pain with each jolt.

“Maybe we should do this later,” Jack said. “You don’t look so good.”

“No. I need to see them.” These were her babies. Her companions. Her link to the past.

The pen was empty. At the back corner closest to the tree line, there was a large hole under the fencing, a hole big enough for a dog to get in and chickens to get out. Despite the fact that she had expected to find things like this, Maggie felt a lump rise in her throat. She looked around the large yard, hoping to see the familiar bobbing of little heads, and felt her eyes start to water.

Jack reached across the seat and took her hand. “Hey.”

“I’m sorry,” she said, looking at him as a tear rolled down the side of her nose. “It’s just that—”

“It’s okay,” he said, reaching up to wipe away the tear. “Let’s drive around the property for a minute and see if we see anything.”

She swallowed and nodded. “I mean it’s stupid to be upset over chickens, right? They’re just stupid birds.” She was embarrassed to be crying in front of Jack and turned her face to her window.

He eased the truck along the tree line and asked questions about the property. As they talked, she felt herself pulling it together. He was impressed that she managed to take care of this place all by herself, especially the fact that she mowed five of her ten acres every week.

“Have to, otherwise the chiggers are terrible. The scorpions and ground wasps are bad enough.”

“Scorpions?”

“You get used to them.”

Something moved in the trees about ten yards ahead.

“There.” Maggie pointed to a small clump of brush. “Did you see that?”

He shook his head. “No.”

They crept forward, and as they neared the spot, a brown rooster came strutting out of the grass, its wing held at an awkward angle.

“Rocky!” Maggie squealed. “He’s alive!”

Two more heads popped out of the trees and followed the rooster toward the truck. “And some of his ladies made it, too!”

Jack shifted into park and opened the door.

“Wait,” Maggie said. “Rocky looks like he’s hurt but he’ll still come after you. Let’s drive back to the pen.”

“Come after me? He’s a bird.”

Maggie didn’t say anything. The three birds followed the truck in a loose group across the yard.

“They’re probably starving.” Maggie said. “Would you mind feeding them?”

Jack looked at her and then at the rooster racing toward the pen. “Um, what about him?” He hooked a thumb toward Rocky.

“See that big stick leaning against the side of the pen? Pick that up on your way in and don’t turn your back on him.”

“You’ve got to be kidding.”

“Do you want to chance it?”

Maggie gave him instructions from the open window and soon he had fresh seed and water out in the pen. The chickens had all made it in by this time and were furiously pecking at the ground.

“Whew! It stinks in here.” He turned toward Maggie.

“Look out!”

Jack whirled around and saw Rocky striding toward him, swaggering across the ground like a runway model.

“The stick,” Maggie said. “Use the stick.”

Jack swung the stick in Rocky’s direction. The rooster took a step back, then started for him again, this time a little bit faster.

“Get out of the pen, Jack,” Maggie commanded. “You’re too close to the hens.”

Jack started backing out of the pen. He held the stick in front of him, waving it back and forth in front of the rooster. Just as he reached the gate, Rocky leapt forward and turned his body midair to expose the sharp, pointed spurs on the back of his ankles. Jack swung the stick and hit the bird, knocking him to the ground, then yanked the door across the opening and latched it in place. Rocky stood, looked at him for a split second through the fence wire, and began calmly pecking seed off the ground.

Jack leaned against the truck, trying to catch his breath. Inside, Maggie let out a stifled giggle then burst forth into a full fit of laughter.

“Did you see that?” Jack asked. “Did you see that crazy bird attack me?”

“Yes, and you did great. I wish... I wish I had a video camera...”

“Easy for you to say. You were safe in the truck,” Jack mumbled. He leaned the stick up against the fence and gave the rooster a dirty look.

Rocky took a few steps in his direction. Jack flinched and Maggie exploded into another fit of laughter.

“You can give yourself the tour,” Maggie said when they entered the house. “I’m warning you, though, I wasn’t expecting company.”

“That’s all right. Where’s the bath? I need to clean up after my first chicken lesson.”

“Down the hall on your left.”

Maggie hobbled into the kitchen and pulled open the fridge. Some week-old pasta salad and soured milk.

“I’m afraid I can’t offer you anything for lunch,” she said as he came back into the kitchen. “The cupboard is bare.”

“Why don’t I run into town and pick up some McDonalds?”

Maggie laughed. “Um, there are no fast food restaurants in Wimberley.”

“Chinese?”

“No Chinese ones either.”

“Oh. Well, shall I go out back and catch a rabbit or something?”

His eyes twinkled at her and Maggie sat there for a minute, soaking it in. The laugh lines slowly faded, replaced by a seriousness that made her heart beat faster. He walked over to the kitchen chair where she sat and leaned over her. She closed her eyes as his lips touched hers. His kiss was light and warm.

Jack pulled back. “I’m not hurting you, am I?”

“No. My lips are okay.”

He smiled and kissed her again, this time stronger, deeper. When he pulled away, Maggie wished he was already kissing her again.

“All right,” he said. “I’m going into town to get us some food. Surely there’s a grocery store.”

“There is that.”

She drew him a quick map.

“If you get lost, stop and ask. Anyone can tell you where it is.”

He kissed her again. “You be good while I’m gone. No wild parties or anything.”

Maggie went into the bedroom that she used as an office and turned on her computer. She looked out the front window as Jack headed down the drive and heard the alarm sound as he pulled through the gate. She had about half an hour to check email before he got back.

#

Charlie watched Jack pull out of the side street and onto the county road that led into Wimberley. Jack was by himself in the car. That meant he had left Maggie alone in the house. Wiping the sweat from his greasy forehead, Charlie pulled his car out from behind a grove of trees where he’d been parked off and on for the last few days and turned onto the side street that led back to where Maggie lived. He had been up and down this stretch of road at least a dozen times, checking to make sure Maggie had not slipped past him when he had dozed off. For three days, he had sat parked in that grove of trees, slipping speed and amphetamines out of his trusty bottle and washing them down with warm Dr Pepper. Waiting.

He drove through the second dip in the road and turned right at the old wagon wheel. Then he crept down Maggie’s street, the trees close on either side. He saw no one. The houses were quiet, the yards empty except for a few small goat herds. And they wouldn’t tell.

Maggie’s driveway came into view. Charlie checked the rearview mirror once more, then pulled into the gravel drive.

#

Maggie heard the gate alarm sound again just as she logged in to the computer. Did Jack forget something? She looked out the window, but the car had already passed, leaving behind a trail of dust that drifted up from the ground.

She hobbled out to the front of the house and into the kitchen. A dirty black Nissan had pulled up next to her small barn and parked in the shade. Her pulse quickened as the door opened and a man stepped out of the car.

Charlie, looking dirty, ruffled, and a little bit crazed, took a baseball bat from the back seat of his car and started toward the house.

Maggie grabbed the duffle bag lying by the back door and limped frantically down the hall to her bedroom. She locked the door and sat on the bed. Inside the duffle bag was the pump shotgun that Jenna had given her.

“Just keep it around and do some practice shooting with it. I worry about you up there with that rabid dog running loose,” she’d said.

Charlie was as close to a rabid dog as Maggie needed right now. She dug in the bag for the box of shells, another gift from Jenna.

When Charlie knocked on the front door, Maggie jumped.

“Maggie!” He screamed. “I know you’re in there. Open the door! I need to talk to you.”

Maggie kept digging. Finally she found the box of shells and fished one out. She paused for a second to listen. The house was quiet.

Charlie knocked again. This time on the sliding glass door in back. “Maggie! Open the door!”

She didn’t respond but laid the shell on the bed next to her and picked up the gun. It was long and heavy. She pointed it barrel-down on the floor, braced it behind the heel of her foot and

pressed down on the stock with her good arm. It wouldn't open. She pressed down harder, leaning her body against the butt of the gun.

The sound of glass shattering startled her again, causing the tip of the gun to slide across the floor. She heard him unlatch the door and slide it open.

“Maggie? Where are you?” The sound of broken glass crunched beneath his feet as he walked into the dining area.

Maggie was sweating now. She righted the gun and used her full body to crack the barrel, then picked up the shell and shoved it in. She could hear Charlie making his way down the hall, checking the bathroom, the spare bedroom where her office was. Then he was right outside her bedroom door. The knob turned slightly and stopped.

“Maggie?” he called softly from the other side of the door. “Open the door, Maggie.”

She flipped the gun around with the end of the barrel still touching the floor and pulled back on the stock until it closed with a solid click. Then holding the stock with her cast, she pumped the gauge.

“Well, well,” Charlie said. “Sounds like the time for fun and games is over.”

Maggie lifted the gun and laid the barrel across the cast on her right arm for support. She pointed the end toward the door and clicked off the safety.

Charlie threw his body against the door, cracking the framing, but the door held. He threw himself against the door again and this time Maggie fired.

The sound of the blast was deafening in the small space and Maggie jerked backward from the recoil. There was a five-inch hole in the door and she could hear Charlie cursing on the other side of it.

Maggie quickly braced the gun between her legs, barrel down, and started to reload. She leaned on the stock, but was sore from the last round. And scared. Her palms were sweaty and she couldn't get a good grip.

"I see you, you little bitch," Charlie snarled. Maggie looked up and saw him looking through the hole in the door. "I should've killed you the other night."

He stood up and snaked an arm through the hole, finding the doorknob and fumbling with the lock.

Maggie frantically leaned on the gun. Tears of frustration ran down her face as she threw what little strength she had against the barrel. Finally it broke, a split-second before Charlie popped the lock and opened the door.

Maggie froze, staring at Charlie. His blood-shot eyes were jumping in their sockets, his whole body trembling. His right thigh was covered in pockmarks and blood from the shotgun blast. He stood, pale and disheveled, in the hallway, glowering at her. Slowly, she reached for the box of shells.

"Don't," he said. He twirled the bat in his right hand.

She stopped, hand in midair.

"You ruined it," he said. "You ruined it for me."

Say something, stall for time. "It wasn't going to work anyway, Charlie. We have the CD."

Charlie stopped swinging the bat. "The CD. Where'd you get that?"

"She sent it to us. Diana mailed it to us before she left."

Charlie nodded as he considered this piece of information. “She was stupid, you know? I was going to have to leave her behind anyway. I mean, I was the one who wrote the code. She didn’t do shit but spend the money.”

“You might be able to find her. See if you can get some of your money back.”

“Yeah.” He nodded. “I’ll track her down next. But first, I’m going to take care of you.”

He stepped forward.

“Hello?” A deep male voice came from the back door. “Hello? Everyone okay in here?”

When Charlie turned toward the sound, Maggie snaked her hand across the bed toward the box of shells.

“Who’s that?” Charlie asked, looking back at her.

Maggie shrugged and shook her head. She had no idea who it was.

“Don’t move,” he said, pointing the bat at her. He turned and walked down the hall. “Hey man, what’re you doing in here? This is a private conversation.”

“Heard a shotgun blast. Wanted to see that ever’one was okay.”

Maggie shoved a shell into the gun, spun the barrel and threw her body against the butt until it clicked shut.

“We’re fine, dude. Who are you, the fucking cops?”

“Concerned neighbor.”

Maggie stood and cautiously made her way to the door. She peeked around the corner and saw the back of Charlie’s head. She couldn’t see the other man.

“Well, get the fuck out then,” Charlie said.

“Look, man—”

“I said, get—the—fuck—out!”

Charlie swung the bat, but it must've missed its target. He stumbled and cursed. Then righted himself and leapt forward with a growl, disappearing from view.

Maggie crept down the hall. She could hear the grunts and punches of a full-blown fistfight going on in the kitchen and wondered again who had come to her rescue. She turned the corner just as Charlie swung the bat full force. It hit the other man in the stomach and dropped him to the floor.

“Fucking bastard,” Charlie muttered as he stood, wiping blood from his nose, and turned back toward the bedrooms.

Maggie stood at the edge of the kitchen, the shotgun propped clumsily against the wall.

“Maggie, Maggie.” He pointed to the gun. “Be careful with that or you might hurt yourself.”

She used her good hand to pump the shotgun, leaned against the wall for support, raised her right arm, and laid the barrel across her chest.

“What're you going to do, shoot me?”

Charlie took a step toward her and lifted the bat.

And Maggie pulled the trigger.

He froze with his arm suspended over his head and stared at her with wide eyes. Shit. She only had one shot. That was it. Charlie took another step forward, swayed, then reeled backward. He tripped over the body of the man lying on the floor and went down hard, the bat falling to his side.

Maggie stared at him, morbidly fixated on the big red hole in his chest. She watched silently as it filled with blood, watched as it overflowed onto her carpet. Charlie took a final breath and lay dead.

There was a moan from the other body which lay half-under Charlie. Maggie immediately recognized the faded overalls and crusty work boots.

She had never been so happy to see J.Clark.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Maggie and Jack sat on the back patio and watched the sun come up over the trees. It was a quiet morning, the first one they had enjoyed since coming to Driftwood. He reached for her hand and Maggie realized how glad she was that he was here. He would have to go back to Houston eventually, but right now, he was here.

“You know,” Jack said. “They have some new chicks down at the feed store if you’re interested.”

“I’m going to have to reinforce the chicken pen if I have any hope of beating that wolf-dog,” she said, her free hand dropping to the shotgun that lay across her lap. At least now she had an ally in the battle. J. Clark had shown a keen interest in her story of the beast after he had regained consciousness, and downed a few beers. Maggie wasn’t sure if he wanted to try and keep it as a pet, or eat it.

“Well, I’ve got a couple of days with nothing to do.”

Maggie laughed. “You’re a city boy. You don’t know nuthin’ ‘bout fixin’ no fence.”

“Oh, I can fix it. It might take me a few days.”

“Maybe I should just hire someone to do it.”

Jack threw her a hurt look. “Are you doubting my manhood? You don’t think I can build a fence?”

“Whatever. Build it then. In fact, I dare you.”

“I’ll build the best damn fence you’ve ever seen, woman. Then we’ll have a barbeque and a bonfire and invite all the neighbors over so they can admire my handiwork.”

“Done.”

Jack settled back into his chair and frowned. “I can build a damn fence.”

The phone buzzed against the wrought iron table.

“How you feeling this morning, superwoman?” It was Nick.

“Like I’ve been run over by a truck.”

“Sucks to be you.”

“Thanks for your sympathy.”

“How about taking a trip to get your mind off things? I’ve got two tickets to Central America, exact destination to be determined.”

“A little fun in the sun?”

“Trying to catch up with an old friend. You interested?”

Maggie looked over at Jack. She could still feel the warmth of his body against hers last night, the scratch of his day-old beard against her cheek this morning.

“Make it three, little brother, and you’ve got yourself a deal.”