



HACK

Peter Wrenshall

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In his gripping new Young Adult novel, *Hack*, Peter Wrenshall gets at the heart and soul of the teenage computer criminal. Karl Ripley is lonely and isolated. His mother works the late shift at the local casino, and to while away the time, he begins to hack into other people's computers. At first it's fun and exciting, and by the time he's sixteen, he breaks into the Pentagon computers, an act that the FBI calls the biggest military hack ever. But then Karl's friend turns him in, an act of betrayal that has Karl obsessed with revenge.

Two days before his release from prison, Karl is offered a job by the FBI. They want him to be bait for a terrorist who is recruiting young hackers to steal important state secrets. Karl begins to juggle his FBI undercover work, and his plot to get even with his friend, and all seems to be working until he meets and falls for a young woman. But is she what she seems to be? As Karl wrestles with his old life of crime and his desire for happiness with this woman, he discovers that his life is in danger.

Wrenshall's full-bodied picture of the computer world is real and deeply satisfying, and computer enthusiasts will be glued to every page. He writes characters that are all so thrillingly real that they seem to walk off the page. But Wrenshall has a message about finding a balance in life.

Brilliantly written and filled with hairpin twists and turns, *Hack* is a can't miss novel.

Hack

By Peter Wrenshall



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Chapter 1

After the FBI announced that they had caught the *Pentagon Hacker* in a Seattle high school, the first thing everybody wanted to know was how I did it. How could some high school student, working alone on a home computer, get into a classified area of the Pentagon network, and start quietly looking around?

The newspapers said that I must have been working with an insider. The television news, which called it the *biggest military computer break-in of all time*, said that I was probably funded by a criminal organization.

What could I say to that? I wasn't exactly a computer criminal—more like a computer trespasser. I mean, if you leave your door unlocked, you've got to expect that sooner or later, someone is going to open it to see what's behind it. Besides, I never stole any secrets, I never took any money or credit card details, and I never sent out a single virus or Trojan horse.

But try telling that to the FBI. They interrogated me for days, wanting to know how I had managed to get a privileged user account. What could I say? That I had phoned them and asked them for it . . .

"I.T. Services, good afternoon," said the voice on the other end of the line.

"Hi. Can I speak to Amanda, please?"

Amanda was an older woman who had been helpful the last time I had spoken to her, though on that occasion I had been an office manager.

"I'm not sure if she is in. Who's calling, please?"

"It's John Halsey."

John Halsey was another of my alter egos: a college graduate—polite, well dressed, and well groomed—a guy who might raise a smile among the women in the office, a decent boy they wouldn't mind introducing to their own daughters. He also happened to have recently started work at the Pentagon.

"One minute, please."

There was a click on the line as the call was patched through to Amanda.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Amanda. It's John Halsey. I'm calling about my new user account."

There was a pause while Amanda waited for me to explain.

"I've only been here a few weeks, and I've forgotten my password already. Bill Harlow said you'd be able to help me out." I used a high-level manager's name on purpose; it always amazes me how much of a difference a bit of insider information and name-dropping can make.

"Okay. I'll have to take you through security before I can reset your password."

"That's the problem. My manager sent the security documents to your department, but they didn't go through yet. I just spoke to somebody about it ten minutes ago."

"Oh, I see. I'm sorry, but I can't reset your password without going through security."

"I'm going to get into trouble, then. I just started here, and I can't even log on to my computer."

There was a pause. Amanda, I knew, was wrestling with her conscience. That was why I had chosen to talk to her. Middle-aged women often have children my age—Halsey's age—and they identify with me. They wouldn't want me to get into trouble.

"Who's your manager there?"

“Ray Hollis. Please don’t say anything to him. He gave me a lecture on Monday about security. Normally, I’m good about these things. Could you help me out? You don’t have to change my password. Just reset it to the default?”

“Um . . .”

Of course, I was asking Amanda to do something that was against company policy. The helpdesk policy forbids staff from ever giving out passwords over the phone. That would be crazy. But if you go through the security process successfully, then they will reset it to the default for that department, which I had found out the previous week to be the current date, separated by dashes.

“It’s not like you’re giving out my password or anything, is it?” I persisted.

“Is this a new account?”

“Yeah, I just got it.”

“All right, I’ll reset the password to the default.”

“Oh, thanks. You saved me.”

“Try not to forget your password again,” Amanda said in a maternal tone.

“I won’t,” I replied meekly.

“Have a nice day.”

That was it. I had obtained the next level of security clearance. The next day, I would switch from the phone back to the computer, and within perhaps a month or two I would be all the way inside, with access to systems in the military that many generals couldn’t see. I had done it at other companies, dozens of times. Why should the Pentagon be any different?

Was this illegal? Sure, but at that point, I wasn’t worried about getting caught. I was too careful for that, or so I thought. In the end, my closest friends sold me out. My own crew.

I remember the day the FBI arrested me. It was a quiet and uneventful school day—up to that point. Walking down the corridor, I was daydreaming about my next hack, when I noticed one of my teachers, Mr. O’Meara, standing in the middle of the corridor, looking at me. The students had nicknamed him “Dreary O’Meara,” because his teaching style was one long monotonous drone. Looking back, I can picture him drilling FBI recruits in that same voice, telling them the correct way to handcuff suspects. But at that point, I didn’t know what his real job was.

I stopped walking. Just to play it safe, I turned to go back the other way, and noticed two men in suits approaching me. I knew the day had come. They had found me.

I hit the stairs that led upwards, at full speed. I heard O’Meara, or whatever his real name was, shout, “Get him!”

I burst through the classroom door at the top of the stairs, and went through one room and into another, closing the adjoining door, and wedging a chair behind it. I had ten seconds on the FBI at the most, and had to think quickly. I opened the window, but could see that it was too high to jump.

Every sailor has his ‘ditch kit’—the bag of food, water, and maps that he keeps at the boat’s exit, in case of disaster. I had my own emergency escape plan, too. You never know what you might need, on a rainy day. But since I was nowhere near any of the exits, I knew it wasn’t going to work.

The best I could hope for was to try to hide, and pray that I had enough time to wipe my notebook computer clean of any incriminating evidence left over from previous hacks. I took it out of my backpack, and threw the bag out the window onto the ground below, as a decoy—one of the oldest tricks in the book.

I left the window open, and ran to the exit door. Back in the corridor, I looked down the stairway, and saw O'Meara coming up. He had doubled-back, looking to cut me off. I started running again, and made it to the next set of stairs. Before I jumped the banister, I heard someone shout, "The window!"

Moving quickly among the students, I made my way to the entrance of the school offices. I slowed to a walking pace, and went in. Only staff were allowed past this point, but I knew my way around. After hacking and cracking started to take up most of my free time, I'd had to discuss my schoolwork with a counselor, Mr. Alton. He had arranged for an IQ test, on which I had scored only 71, and he told me that I was probably autistic. I pointed out that I had filled the answers in backwards, as a test for him, which he had failed, and after that he stopped talking to me. But I still knew my way around his office, which he kept unlocked at lunch time.

I went in, and crouched down under the desk. I opened the lid of my computer, and hit the space bar, making it come out of standby mode.

I hit the function key that I had programmed to begin scrambling the RAM disk. RAM disks are much quicker to wipe clean of any trace evidence than hard disks. Then I opened Alton's desk drawer, stuck the computer inside, as it continued wiping the incriminating data, and closed the drawer.

I opened the door, and peeked out. There was nobody around. I tiptoed along the corridor. When I got to the first corner, I peeked around it, and then moved quickly down the stairs, to the outside door. Looking through the fireproof mesh of glass and metal, I could see the pathway was deserted. I opened the door to leave, but immediately someone grabbed me from behind, and shoved me to the floor, with a knee on top of me for good measure.

"Karl Ripley, I am arresting you for computer espionage," said a voice behind me.

Then I heard another voice ask, "Where is it? Where is it?"

That was Agent North, wanting to know where my computer was. I wasn't about to tell him, or anyone else. I was counting slowly to myself: one thousand, one thousand one, one thousand two . . .

Agent after agent turned up, but I didn't tell them, either. They were quick to find my computer, but not quick enough to prevent its memory from being wiped clean thirty-five times over. They would get nothing from it. North had been counting on getting to the hard disk in my machine. But I never used writable disks when I was hacking. Why leave a trail of evidence? My code of practice was: take only memories.

"Get him up," ordered North. With my hands cuffed behind my back, the agents lifted me to face him. I could see the triumph in his eyes. He had finally arrested the infamous Pentagon hacker. But I thought there was something else, too—some confusion, perhaps. Two of the points on the FBI's criminal profile had been wrong. Perhaps it was those two little mistakes that had allowed me to avoid capture for so long. The FBI had been looking for a man with an advanced degree in computer science, and in his mid-twenties. But I was a high school student, and I was only sixteen years old.

After my arrest, the papers went crazy, calling me the most notorious hacker ever, and speculating that I had pulled off the greatest hack of all time. If they had known about what followed—how I worked for the FBI and met Grace, and all that—perhaps they would have had a different opinion. To my mind, that was always my best hack. But, of course, all that was kept secret.

Until now.

Chapter 2

“Sit down,” ordered the burly guard.

I pulled the gray metal chair from under the table, which was somewhat awkward because of the handcuffs, and sat down, facing two men I had never seen before. They looked like FBI agents. After a while, you get to know the business-casual clothes, and the no-nonsense attitude. It had been three months since the FBI’s previous visit. A woman from the forensics division had come to ask for my help in creating a profile of the computer criminal’s mind. I couldn’t help her, but I had gotten a good idea of the profile of law enforcement psychologists.

Neither of these men looked like shrinks, so I figured that they were from the still-young Cyber Crime Division.

“Guard, those aren’t necessary,” said the first man. The guard unlocked and removed the restraints, and then quietly left the room, leaving me alone with the feds.

“Hello, Karl,” said the first man, in a surprisingly pleasant voice. He might have been greeting Karl, the cheerful boy next door over the garden fence. “I’m Special Agent Philips, and this is Special Agent Garman. We’re with the Federal Bureau of Investigation.”

Philips was in his mid-thirties, and had a well-fed look. Despite being a bit heavier than the Surgeon General would recommend, Philips was solidly built and looked like the compulsory FBI fitness test wouldn’t give him any grief. Garman was cut from the same mold, except that he was younger, leaner, and darker, and had a mustache that was probably intended to detract from his receding hairline.

“Hi,” I replied.

“How are you?”

“Fine, thanks,” I said politely. Shortly after my arrest, I had learned the hard way that when the police are being polite to you, they expect you to return the courtesy. In fact, they insist.

Philips nodded, and said, “Good.” He wasn’t smiling, but he seemed optimistic about something.

“So, I guess this is your last week inside. Come Monday, you’ll be on supervised release?”

“Yes.”

“Have you got anything lined up?”

“What do you mean?”

“I guess you’ll need a job to pay the rent.”

“My parole officer has found me a position.”

“That’s good. What are you going to be doing, if you don’t mind me asking?”

I didn’t mind him asking, though the information would have been in my file, which he had probably already read.

“Making pizza.” That was the only job I’d been offered. Making money by writing a book about my ‘exploits’ had occurred to me, but was impossible, since I had been forced to bargain away everything I had just to get out of jail. That included publishing privileges. Anyway, if any publishers had the same idea, they hadn’t mentioned it to me. Being called a terrorist usually has a bad effect on your public appeal.

“I see,” Philips said.

After telling him that the guy who had spent months making his department look bad was going to be making pizzas, I had expected a grin from Philips. But his expression hadn’t changed.

“Are you looking forward to starting?” he asked, seriously.

“Yes, I am, now that I’ve got a second chance. I’m going to make something of this opportunity. My hacking days are behind me. I just want to settle down, and stay out of trouble.”

Both men looked at each other, and Philips’s smile became real at last. Some of his optimism was apparently replaced by the cynical worldliness I had become more familiar with in police officers.

“You can drop the spiel, Karl,” he said. “We’re not with the parole board. You don’t have to convince us of anything. We’re from the Cyber Crime Division. We’ve come to offer you a job.”

“A job?” I echoed. It is not every day that the FBI recruits from the Cedar Creek Corrections Center, which is the Washington State prison in Littlerock.

“Yes, something in your line of work.”

“Pizza?”

“Computers.”

“For the FBI?”

“Yes.”

“You want me to work as a . . . consultant?”

“Right now, we could use your skills.”

I stared at Philips.

After a minute, he said, “What do you think?”

“Do you have a dental plan?” I asked.

Garman frowned, clearly annoyed. But Philips just smiled at the smart-mouth kid who was being a little rude to Mr. Philips.

“No. What we have is a chance for you to wipe some of those black marks off your record, by putting your computer skills and your . . .” he paused, searching for the correct phrase, “social engineering talents to good use.”

“Uh-huh.”

“You see, since your little stunt at the Pentagon six months ago, we’ve been troubled by a series of similar computer break-ins. Young kids, even younger than you, have been targeting sensitive installations.”

“You are a role model to terrorists,” added Garman, finding his voice at last. There was more than a hint of genuine anger in it. Philips gave him a look, as if to restrain him.

“We haven’t had any major breaches of security,” continued Philips, “but it’s only a matter of time.”

I sat up a little more, and rubbed my forehead, like a guy coming out of a dream in which the most bizarre and unlikely events had unfolded. The FBI offering me a job certainly qualified as bizarre. Philips reached down to a black briefcase on the floor, and pulled out three photographs.

“Our last three arrests have been boys under the age of sixteen.”

He spread on the table photographs of three harmless-looking high school boys. Having been in jail for over six months, I had read and heard nothing about this. According to one report I read, computer-related crimes cost the government more than fifty billion dollars a year. But I had no idea that people my age were part of it. High school hackers most often go after trivial targets, just for laughs. I remember a story about some fifteen year old breaking into a well-known take-out food company’s website, and adding Chocodiles and jelly beans to the list of pizza toppings. That was the sort of thing that teens went in for.

One of my own crew, Blizzard, claimed to have worked for money, but he never produced any evidence of it. Also, we had all heard that criminal gangs were paying for college students to get educated, in the same way the military sponsored them. But again, that was people at the college level, not high school.

“Although none of these kids has had any major success,” continued Philips, “we believe it’s only a matter of time before one of them manages to get his hands on serious classified material. You see, unlike you and your group of merry Robin Hoods, looking to score some ego points, these kids are hacking for money—lots of money. You can imagine our alarm when we found a stash of over ten thousand dollars inside one computer.”

You can imagine my alarm, too. I never stole anything.

“What do you think? Are you interested in helping us?”

“It sounds interesting. But I’m sorry I can’t help you. My lawyer has advised against such action. He thinks that I may incriminate myself.”

Philips smiled again. The public defender had been less than computer savvy, and I made an enemy of him by doing my own plea bargaining at the pretrial. At least I had saved my own neck. I had no doubt that Philips had read the negotiation transcripts and knew this.

“The way I heard it, you *were* your own lawyer.”

“As I said, my lawyer has advised me against talking to anybody.”

“At least hear us out?”

I read the time from the upside-down numbers on Garman’s watch—9:47 a.m. I hadn’t been allowed to have a wristwatch, or any electronic or mechanical gadget, since my arrest. That meant no TV, no radio, no computers, and no telling the time. I forget the official reason for this, but it had to do with me starting World War III, just like in the movies. Anyway, I hoped that I would be back for exercise time, at 10:00 a.m. It was the only time I got out into the fresh air. The other twenty-three and a half hours of the day I spent inside, behind a thick steel door. Without waiting for an answer, Philips produced another photograph.

“This man is Malik,” he said, turning the picture so I could see it.

“We know that he’s one of the main players recruiting and coordinating young hackers out of high schools.”

“A terrorist?” I said.

“Exactly.”

I looked again at the picture. If the man was a killer, it didn’t show. The sharp corners of the table looked more dangerous. He was a nondescript Middle Eastern man in his early forties, who looked a little like Mr. Jarman, a science teacher I once had. Jarman used to liven up his boring classes by sticking too much metallic sodium in a glass of water, and making a good explosion. Rather than terrorizing the class, these mini bombs got a round of applause, and Jarman was considered one of the school’s coolest teachers.

I shrugged. “He looks like a federal informer.”

I had been introduced to federal informers and their role in crime prevention during my arrest. The FBI admitted that this was how they had ‘taken me down.’ I hadn’t got caught because I had been careless, or complacent. On the contrary, I had always been careful. They had found me through Knight, the self-appointed leader of my own hacking crew. The FBI had recruited Knight. I went to jail, while the FBI set Knight up in his own business, as part of their deal. From what little information I had managed to get, I knew that Knight was getting paid to hack into computer networks—in other words, a *white-hat* hacker.

“Sadly, he’s not an informant,” continued Philips. “Malik is a charismatic and well-financed fanatic who knows how to connect with lonely young computer-obsessed kids. And that’s where you come in. We want you to get recruited by Malik.”

“Recruited?”

“Yes. We’ll put you in a house with two agents as your parents, and send you to high school. The rest should come naturally.”

The FBI was famous for their ‘sting’ operations. I once read about how they had gone undercover to trap a businessman who was willing to sell firearms to terrorists. They really did that sort of thing for a living.

“Some of the information on military and government networks that you gave up during your plea bargain would be worth not thousands, but millions of dollars to these people. That’s why we want you. We haven’t been able to get anywhere near Malik. Believe me, we’ve tried. But you might be able to do it. And you could still pass for a high schooler.”

There was a minute’s silence, while we eyed one another.

“Your parole officer has already agreed to turn you over to us. He knows the work you’ll be doing. He thinks that you should take this opportunity.”

“It pays more than cooking pizzas,” added Garman.

“I could earn ten times as much as anything you could pay, by working as a security consultant.”

“Not for two years, you can’t,” Garman said, quickly.

“Not legally, anyway,” added Philips.

As well as a no-publishing clause, one other of the no-contest terms of my plea bargain was a twenty-four-month loss of all contact with computers. I wasn’t allowed within one hundred yards of a computer. Never mind that they had them in every shop. Even cell phones come with operating systems you could reprogram, if you didn’t mind straining your eyes looking at the screen.

“What do you think?” Philips said after a minute’s silence.

“You forgot one thing.”

“What’s that?”

“It’s going to take about ten seconds for someone to recognize me. I got my face on the front pages of the newspapers, and on TV. For all I know, they stuck it on milk cartons, too.”

Philips was unperturbed.

“Trust me, we do it all the time,” continued Philips.

He put two photographs on the table. The first was me in the old days, when I had long hair and fuzz on my face. I was so involved in my favorite pursuits that some weeks, I didn’t even bother showering. The other photo had been digitally doctored. It showed me in trendy clothes with short hair and clean shaven. I barely recognized myself all cleaned up.

“The Witness Protection Program?”

“Exactly. Look, you’re yesterday’s news. We’ve had two hurricanes, a White House scandal, and a stock market crisis since your exploits hit the headlines. So, are you interested?”

“No.”

Philips looked surprised. He seemed to have been thinking that I would jump into the air and start cheering for the FBI.

“No? Can I ask you why?”

“I don’t trust you.”

Philips opened his palms, a gesture that meant he didn't know what I was talking about, as if perhaps the FBI was beyond reproach.

"You told all those lies about me. You said that I may have been working for terrorists, and that I cost the government millions of dollars. People believed it. How many lies are you telling today?"

"Hey," Garman said, "don't sit there and tell us how innocent you are. You did what you did, and you had fun doing it. When you act like a criminal, people treat you like one."

"I'm not a criminal."

"That's what they all say."

"I never stole a dime."

"They say that, too." Garman's voice was steadily rising.

"All right," Philips said. Of the two, Garman was the most intimidating physically, but it was Philips whose personality was most forceful. Garman backed off, and sat back.

"Look, Karl. You hate us. We hate you. That should be the end of it. You go to Pizza Land and instead of chasing girls and going to parties, like other teenagers, you start playing with computers and phones. One day soon we pick you up again when you break your parole by hacking. But we're trapped in the tar with each other. I'll be straight with you, the last time I met Malik, he got the better of me. We need each other's help."

"Can I leave now? Guard!"

"I know what you're planning, Karl. You think that you're going to get out of here, quietly track down Knight, and even the score. But that's impossible. We're giving you a chance here—a chance to put all that behind you, and maybe even start again. You should do something with your potential, instead of—" he gestured at the surroundings, "—instead of this."

I stared at Philips. He seemed surprised by my attitude, but not concerned.

"North thinks you're an addict. And he feels cheated by the way you talked your way out of a serious custodial sentence. He's going to settle his own score. Do this for me, and I'll make sure the next time he bothers you, at least you'll have a get-out-of-jail card."

So, North hadn't moved on. I never understood North's stance; to him, it was personal. He really was out to get me. Even after I had bartered my way out of trouble, North had managed to keep me *pending release* for over six months. I blew a long breath out through my nose, trying to make it as dramatic as the routine that Philips and Garman were giving me.

"How long will it take?" I asked.

"That depends how quickly you can draw Malik out. Given his increased activity, I think we can do it in a few weeks."

"If I do this, I want something more than goodwill in return. I want that 'start again' you just mentioned."

Philips nodded. He seemed to have expected a negotiation.

"I want a new ID, like with the Witness Protection Program. Karl Ripley won't be able to get a job—not with computers anyway—but John Doe will. And I want to go to college and get a degree. I want a normal life."

There was a pause while Philips looked thoughtful and Garman looked annoyed. But I knew they would be expecting me to negotiate. My recent court appearances no doubt left them with that impression. North had presented thousands of pages of evidence, and had petitioned for what amounted to the court making an

example of me. But what it came down to in the end was the plea. I had talked my way out of it, like I had talked dozens of people out of their passwords.

Phillips' eyes moved across the ceiling, as if he was making a mental calculation.

"Just the tuition fees alone would exceed fifty thousand dollars," he said.

"I can do it in a year. I know every single item on the syllabus, and I can graduate early. That's less than twenty thousand."

"Even if that were true, that's still a lot of money."

I shrugged and said, as meekly as I could, "If the FBI can't afford it, maybe Malik can."

Phillips stared at me and scratched his forehead. Then he smiled, as if allowing himself to be amused. Good-natured Mr. Phillips grinning while he threw the football back over the fence to young Karl.

"All right," he said at last, with a nod. Then he added, "On the condition that we get Malik. If we get nothing, then you get nothing."

"Sure."

I allowed myself a little smile, too. Phillips said something about picking me up in the morning. But I wasn't listening. Already my thoughts were whirling around, trying to slot this development into the plan that I had been working on for the last six months: a little something for Knight. North was going to be watching me; I had guessed that. But now I was a white-hat hacker working for the FBI, and that changed things.

I came out of my reverie when the door clanked, and the guard came back in.

"Good-bye, Karl," Phillips said. "We'll be here tomorrow at ten a.m."

I said good-bye. The guard led me through the door, and back into the corridor. Though it was autumn, the sun coming through the barred windows was bright, and the corridor was warm. Looking through the mesh-covered security windows, I could see the guards at the gate, just the wrong side of the real world. The stroll back to my cell seemed like a practice run for the next day's walk to freedom.

The guard next to me said nothing until we reached my cell. Then he spoke.

"Your last day, today."

His earlier coldness was gone.

"Yup."

"How did you know the feds would be coming?"

"Just a guess."

"Take some advice, Ripley. Get a job, and get a girlfriend. Stay out of here."

"Sure."

The guard shut the door behind him, and I was alone in my cell again. I lay on my cot, and stared at the ceiling. There I was, at the dawn of the new electronic frontier, in which, against all probability, I had somehow become a gun for hire.

I had plenty of thinking to do, and only one day to do it in.

Chapter 3

At 10:05 a.m., after getting dressed in my civilian clothes and counting the money I had had on me when I was arrested (\$13.87), I was escorted to the gate of Cedar Creek. Philips and Garman, true to their word, were already waiting for me.

Neither of them bothered with pleasantries.

“First things first,” Philips said, as I got into a black Ford sedan. “We’ll stop by your mother’s apartment.”

“She doesn’t want to see me.”

“I don’t want her to get a rush of maternal guilt and start making waves. Tell her you’re going to be working away for a month.”

Philips turned the car onto the road, and sped up. It was strange after six months in a tiny cell to be free to move around once again, even if it was in an FBI car.

I didn’t look over my shoulder to see the prison receding into the distance, but I felt its gravity decrease. I had already said my *convict’s prayer* last night: “I’m never going back inside again.” But I added another line: “That’s where you’re going, Knight. That’s where I’ll put you.”

We passed through various districts, until we came to the rundown neighborhood in central Seattle where I had lived with my mom before getting arrested. Philips eased the car to a stop on the side of the street, which was strewn with gravel, shards of broken glass, and a graffiti gallery. He and I got out, leaving Garman in the car, perhaps to make sure that nobody stole the wheels, which sometimes happened in that neighborhood. Philips pushed the doorbell, but no one answered.

“It’s too early,” I said. “My mom works late.”

“I phoned yesterday and told her we were coming,” Philips said.

He stood for a moment, looking expectantly at the window. His trust seemed like a sliver of decency showing through the tough surface. He pulled his mobile phone from his pocket, and dialed. No answer.

“The way the FBI told it, I was public enemy number one, right?”

I turned and walked back down to the car.

He ignored my comment. After we both got back into the car, he said somewhat defensively, “It doesn’t matter. We already have all the clothes and equipment you’ll need.”

We set off again, with Philips and Garman saying nothing. In a short time, the car was on the freeway, and we were passing a sign telling us that we were heading out of town, and thanking us for having driven so safely.

“Where exactly are we going?” I asked.

“You’ll find out everything you need to know shortly.”

The rest of the journey was silent, with the early morning talk radio making up for the total lack of any conversation, with a learned discussion on the war against terrorism. I tuned it out, and spent my time thinking through the coming weeks, like a chess player figuring out moves that he might never make.

We had been on the road for two hours when the car wheels hit the sandstone gravel in front of a roadside diner. I came out of my reverie, and looked around. The aging, anonymous place seemed perfect for an undercover rendezvous. It was decorated with all the taste that aluminum and neon allow. Inside, it was quiet, with just a few early morning travelers clogging their arteries with cigarettes and fries.

Garman escorted me to the restroom and back, while Philips sat down and browsed the menu.

An unsmiling waitress came over and took our order. Three coffees, Philips said, without asking me what I wanted.

“Decaf, please,” I added.

My caffeine habit had been a help during those midnight hacking runs that lasted until dawn. But in jail, I had been weaned off it, and there wasn’t any point in re-engaging it. I had gotten used to sleeping at night, instead of in history class. Curiously, my body and brain now woke up several minutes before the jail lights came on, at 6:00 a.m.—something that never ceased to amaze me.

I noticed a newspaper on the counter, and walked over to get it. There were no headlines in it about any Pentagon hacker getting released from prison, either on the front page, the back page, or anywhere in between. Philips had been right: nobody was interested in my existence at all—not the press, not any of my old teachers and counselors, and not even my family. Only the police were interested in me now.

The glum waitress brought three cups, and still no one said anything. Some time ago, I had begun to think the main asset in the FBI agent’s fight against crime is his unwavering persistence in the face of grinding boredom. More than anything else, they simply quietly outwait criminals. I was going to ask what we were hanging around for, when Garman spoke.

“Aster is injured again,” he said, dismayed. I wondered what he was talking about, and then noticed a picture in the newspaper of an oversized football player being carried off the field in obvious agony.

“Yeah, he’s making a career of it,” replied Philips, mildly. I got the idea that he was more interested in keeping the conversation going than in discussing sports heroes.

I had no real interest in organized sports, either. I had always preferred single sports, like cycling, or running, where you compete against yourself. But I knew something about football. At one point, when I was about thirteen—in my pre-hacking days—I became interested in gambling, and had spent some time puzzling over the game schedules, wondering how to predict the winners and make some money. During every boring bus ride, or every time I was waiting in line in the school cafeteria, or every time my mother started complaining, I’d just tune out, and start thinking about my gambling system.

Though I had never made a single bet (being underage), the system had given me something to do. In jail, keeping up with sports was one way of having something to talk to the guards about. I remembered talking about Aster and his knees.

“Isn’t that his third injury this season?” I asked Garman. For a second, both men looked a bit surprised. Garman didn’t say anything, but Philips said, “I think so. He’s got a weak Achilles.”

“It’s his knee,” corrected Garman. “The same thing happened to me. I had surgery, but it never goes back to normal.”

I hadn’t seen Garman limping, but I could believe that he had played football. He looked like he had spent his formative years tackling beer trucks or something.

The two men continued talking about football, and I half listened. A few minutes later, the waitress came back, and smiling weakly now that table number six was so chatty, she asked if we had enjoyed our coffee.

“Yes, thank you,” replied the polite undercover agents. Would we like to order any food? No, thanks. Did we want our coffee topped up? Yes, please.

I saw the waitress give a quick sideways glance at me, curious perhaps as to why the quiet young man was currently sitting with the two well-dressed adults. Then she went back to the counter.

“Either way,” concluded Garman, still talking about Aster, “he’s not worth the money they paid—”

He fell silent suddenly, and stared out of the window, his easy expression gone, replaced by his usual tense grimness.

“They’re here,” he said.

Chapter 4

A man and a woman in their late thirties got out of a black Mercedes SUV, and walked into the diner. These were my new parents, but I hadn't expected them to look so much like a true married couple. If Garman hadn't said anything, I might have thought they were Mr. and Mrs. Smith, stopping for coffee while driving to visit their elderly parents.

The man was stocky, with the beginnings of a beer gut, and what looked like a constant five o'clock shadow on his chin. The woman was fair-haired, slim, and would have been attractive, if she hadn't been dressed in a momsy way, which made her look plain. They were both around the same age as my other fed handlers—or so I guessed, but I'm not much good at these things.

Immediately, Philips and Garman started talking with them as if they were old buddies. Garman's sullen intensity vanished, and he became chatty, acknowledging the woman and talking to the man. Introductions were made. The man was Richard, and the woman was Hannah. They were, Philips said, the Johnsons. I noticed that Philips was keeping his voice low. We were seated away from the other people, but he kept looking around, as if to make sure that nobody was paying undue attention to us.

"This is your son, David," Philips said.

"Hi, Dad, Mom," I said somewhat pointedly.

Philips gave a little shrug, as if to say 'get used to that.' Richard nodded a silent acknowledgement, but Hannah smiled cheerfully.

"Are you ready to go?" Philips said.

"Yeah," Richard said. "But let me get some coffee first."

He looked at Hannah, who nodded her agreement, and then walked over to the counter. "Can I get two regular coffees to go?" he asked loudly to the waitress, who was at the other end of the counter. Philips paid for our coffees, and he and Garman left a tip for the waitress. I left her the eighty-seven cents in coins that had been sitting unused in an envelope with my other possessions for over half a year. When the coffees arrived, we went outside, and got into the two cars and drove away.

Within five minutes, we had arrived at a nondescript motel. We went into a cabin, Garman carrying a case. There were only two chairs in the room, so Richard and Hannah stood, and I sat on the bed. Garman opened his case, and took out various cards and passes, and gave them to Philips.

"Down to business," Philips said. "This is your new identity." He handed me the cards.

"You're David Johnson, a fifteen-year-old student at Elmwood High. Your father, Richard, works as a security consultant. Your mother Hannah is a homemaker, who works part-time in real estate." I nodded, looking at the ID cards. I had put together a few ID cards in my time, just out of interest, but these were perfect fakes.

"You're transferring in from your old school in Seattle. No need to lie about that. We have already prepped the relevant staff. They won't ask any stupid questions." I noticed then that Hannah had also brought in a case, a heavy travel bag. That was probably filled with my new identity. One of the things that had constantly amazed me when I had first started hacking and sneaking into computer networks was how important appearance is to laypeople. They often judge a person based on how well he's dressed. That suited me fine, since it had made my job of convincing people a hell of a lot easier.

I remember one time when I was standing in the bathroom at home, in an expensive suit that I had rented. I needed to imitate an office worker on a hack that required me to take a *field trip* to a local office, to get some server details. I was checking out my new hairstyle when my mother walked in. She looked startled, as if her home had been invaded by a well-dressed burglar. I could see her eyes working, trying to figure it out. Then she realized who I was. She didn't ask, but I felt that I should volunteer an explanation.

I made up some lie about a job interview, and she seemed to accept it. Later the next day, I took that field trip and managed to get the server information I needed, and on the way home, took the suit back to the shop. But I kept the idea that people sometimes judge a hacker by their appearance.

"On to the subject's history," Philips said.

He reached over to Garman's briefcase, and started shuffling through a bunch of photos.

"You know Malik," he said, spreading out the photos—ones I had not seen before. Then he placed another photograph on the table, of a high school boy, thin and unkempt.

"This is Abdul Zaqarwi. He is fifteen, and happens to be in your computer class at Elmwood High." I studied the photograph. If the photo of Malik I had seen in jail looked harmless, then Zaqarwi was even more so. He was a stereotypical nerd. He looked like he would have the most fashionable gadgets, but not a fashionable girlfriend. I raised an incredulous eyebrow, which was getting to be my favorite expression. Philips picked up on my doubt.

"He looks like an ordinary kid, but don't get the idea that he is not in this up to his neck."

I put down Zaqarwi's picture.

"He's my contact?"

"That's right. With your overdeveloped computer skills, you should soon attract his attention. Just do your stuff."

"Did you have anything in mind?" I said.

"What do you mean?" Philips said. He sounded genuinely surprised at my question.

"Hacking is all about stealth, about not being seen. Now I'm supposed to get caught?"

I wasn't really concerned. Hackers are like any other group. They find each other by animal radar or something like that. But I didn't want to undersell my task. I needed some breathing space, and like any businessman going into a deal, I wanted to put the worst light on things.

"For a man with your talents for improvisation," Philips said a little testily, "it should be simple. Like I said, these people have their eyes out for any prospects. They'll find you."

I nodded, without speaking. But now Philips was spooked.

"Are you sure you can handle this?" he said. It was as if he had taken my concerns seriously. Whether he doubted my ability, or was prodding my hacking ego to see if I doubted my ability, I couldn't tell. Either way, I let some of my natural arrogance back into my voice, and I smiled.

"No problem." I decided to change the subject.

"What about my equipment? I need a phone, a notebook computer, and some money."

Philips looked at Hannah, who reached into her bag. She took out a notebook computer and a cell phone, and put them on the bed next to me. They didn't look like anything special—not the toys that a computer hacker would have. I powered up the notebook.

"It's been rigged with a key logger?" I asked. "So you can see everything I'm doing?"

"It won't stop you from doing it," was Philips terse reply.

"It just means you get to watch," I said, feigning annoyance. I wasn't concerned about that, either. I powered down the notebook, and put it back into the bag, where, apart from a few uses—to keep the FBI thinking that they were tracking me—it would remain. The phone got the same treatment.

"I guess you know that we'll be tracking every phone call you make," Philips said, as he picked up the phone.

"If I know that you're listening to everything I do, it's going to freak me out."

"You don't have any choice," Garman said. I decided to tackle the subject now. I knew that at some point I would have to argue my way into getting some free time, to devote to my Knight agenda.

"Look," I said, "I'll do what you want me to do, but we agreed that I could do it my own way. If I see anyone following me, or trying to interfere, I'm out."

"Nobody is going to interfere with you in any way whatsoever. We can't afford to. Once Malik shows an interest, they'll probably put you under twenty-four-hour surveillance. Directional microphones and bugging devices mean that Malik could be listening in to any conversations you have, even in the house—especially in the house. That's why from now, until the end of the play, you're always the Johnson family. You can never make a single slip, do you understand?"

I nodded.

"The only place you can be out of character is in the car, which has anti-surveillance equipment. If you need to talk business, or to make a report or a request, then tell Richard or Hannah that you want to take a ride to the mall. You can talk in the car, and only in the car."

I wondered about what anti-bugging device the car had. That sort of thing interests me, but I never get to play, because it is so expensive. I had considered attending one of those private investigators' conventions, where the latest hardware is demoed by the industry leaders, but had never got around to it.

"If anybody tries to listen in, all they're going to hear is what sounds like white noise interference from the engine."

"What if somebody pulls a gun on me, or something?"

I wasn't worried by that prospect; I just wanted to know how much leeway I had. Philips had to have people pretending to be teachers. The question was how many and where.

"That's unlikely," answered Philips.

"Do you have someone I can contact at the school?"

"We have one agent working on the school staff who'll be looking out for you if anything happens at the school."

"Who is it?" I asked, not expecting an answer.

"That doesn't concern you. This agent is only there to keep an eye on you. You won't see him, and he won't talk to you. You do not need to contact him. Ever."
Did that 'him' mean the agent was male?

I nodded. "Okay."

I took the wallet off the table. Apart from the ID cards, I noticed some money tucked into the rear flap. I counted fifty dollars.

"I'll need more money than that." Taking out a bank card, I asked, "How much is in the account?"

"Five hundred. The access number is the last four digits of your library card. I can't see you using more than that. But if you have a genuine need, then you can have what you want. You just have to discuss it with Richard first."

I stuck the wallet in a back pocket.

"Any other questions?" Philips asked.

I said nothing. Philips looked disappointed that I hadn't asked anything, as if it was a bad sign. I was supposed to be an eager beaver, a smart guy.

"You might like to know where Zaqarwi's group meets," he said.

"Let me guess. He has a habit of changing meeting locations, and it's never the same group twice."

Knight was the same: cagey. In the old days, Knight had a lot of fun picking bizarre places for us to meet—paranoid the cops or some shadowy organization would be bothered enough to listen in to his delusions and misdemeanors. But I guess in the end those fantasies had turned out to be true.

"Wiretaps show that he's used the local Internet cafés," Philips added. I nodded. Back then, it was a big deal that coffee shops had just started offering free Internet stations and access to customers, if they paid extortionate rates for a half-gallon cup of coffee—almost the same as a jar of instant. But those spots were so popular that I had seen hackers (who wouldn't dare use their own Internet connections) in there at 2:00 p.m., and they were still there at kicking-out time. What used to annoy me about those places was that the college students who worked there could see on the log where you were surfing to, and you had to expend time evading their amateur surveillance.

They had a big board above the counter, with two dozen supposed varieties of coffee on it, to foster the consumerist "choice" illusion, which presumably was as addictive as the caffeine. We used to annoy them by asking for a coffee with milk.

"You mean an Americano?"

"No, I'd like a coffee, with milk, and no sugar."

"Milk is on the counter."

"Can't you put it in?"

"You might like to choose how milky you like your coffee."

"Just average, thanks." It went on. They annoyed us hackers, and we annoyed them.

"Anything else?" Philips said.

"No."

"Let me warn you, you're going to be cooped up in a house for the next month with Richard and Hannah, and I expect you to try to treat them with some respect. They're experienced federal agents. They deal every day with the worst that society has to offer. They have both made major busts and received citations for valor. So, any sarcastic remarks are going to roll off them like water off a duck's back. My advice to you is to be good and try to get along. Soon, this will be over, and we'll all be smiling."

"Okay," I said. "I'm not going to make waves."

"I'm glad to hear it. Go with Hannah. She's going to change your hair. Then put on your new clothes."

I went into the bathroom as Karl Ripley, and emerged fifteen minutes later as David Johnson. Philips nodded without speaking, as if to say, “I’m right about nobody recognizing you.”

That was true enough. In the mirror, even I didn’t recognize me. I looked like a chatroom junkie. I stood in the middle of the room, while Philips, Garman, Richard, and Hannah looked me over. But they were not just judging whether my new image would be good enough to pass as an ordinary high school student. They were weighing *me* up. Was I up to the job?

It reminded me of that time in drama class, when Mr. Ronsen unexpectedly picked me to play Horatio in the school’s dismal production of *Hamlet*. I could see everyone staring at me, wondering who this nerd was, and why I had been given an important role in their play. Come opening night, I gave a good-natured performance that was neither good nor bad, and somehow got the loudest applause, much to everybody’s surprise, and my indifference. The gorgeous and popular Anne Noble even said hi to me. But apart from its use in hacking, being an actor sent me to sleep.

I stared back at the feds, and kept the idea in my mind: it’s just another hack—no sweat.

“You’ve heard everything we have to say, and now you know almost as much about Malik and his organization as we do. This is your last chance to call this off. You can leave now, and get a job making pizza. It’s up to you.”

Well, maybe I did have a couple of reservations about what I was doing. But I looked again at the pictures of Malik and Zaqarwi that were still on the table. For all I knew, the FBI had their information right, and these men were the front of an organization dedicated to murder and mayhem at any cost.

If that was true, then I had no problem with doing what I had to do. Then the FBI would crack the case, and I’d have a free ride to college. Win-win, as they say. Sure.

“It sounds like a good plan,” I said. “I’ll need to download some hacker tools and stuff.”

Philips nodded, and I set up the notebook, connected to the motel’s broadband connection, and started surfing.

I soon realized that being away from the game for over six months had made me rusty. I had by then forgotten many of the details of the warez sites I had used for downloading tools and uploading my own contributions, hacker to hacker.

I rolled my eyes upwards, navigating through the universe of memory where I had left several important details hidden away. With a bit of effort, I managed to grab them. Within a minute, I was downloading the sort of scripts and hacker programs that would have incriminated me in a court of law, if it weren’t for the fact that the FBI was paying for the line.

Still floating around the Internet, despite the hacker crackdown, were some of my own old scripts. Once I had my old tools, I ran one of my programs that let me see the vulnerabilities on the notebook that the FBI had just handed to me. It soon came up with a list:

- | | | |
|---|--------------------|---------------|
| 1 | sttd vulnerability | DOS |
| 2 | zty overflow | possible root |

I was going to say something about the FBI giving me a computer that was full of security holes, but then I saw it hadn’t been booted for weeks. It was new, and had never had any updates at all. I checked the history logs, and saw the only website that it had ever visited was the FBI home page.

“Brilliant,” I said. “You’re giving me a machine with the FBI site in the cache.”

No one answered. I wasn’t worried about it. I was just looking for an excuse to stamp my authority, even if it was trivially.

“Apart from that, it’s cool.”

I turned the notebook off, and stood up.

“Okay?” Philips said.

“Okay,” I said.

“All right, then, this meeting is over. If we’re lucky, within a few weeks Malik will be in the bag, and we’ll all be happy.”

We went outside to the cars.

“Be sure that I’ll be keeping track of everything,” Philips added.

As if on cue, the other three got into their cars, leaving just me and Phillips standing in the autumn breeze. He leaned toward me, talking confidentially.

“I want to trust you, Ripley. You’re the only teenager I know bright enough to pull this off. That’s why I came to you. I’m depending on you. Don’t let me down.”

“I won’t,” I said, matching his serious voice.

We walked over to the Mercedes, and Philips opened a rear door for me.

“It’s all in your hands now.”

It suddenly hit me how true that was. It wasn’t just a saying. This whole project was my responsibility. Philips, Garman, Richard, Hannah—they were there just to watch over me. The job of drawing out an international terrorist, and getting him to stick his head in the noose, was mine. Nobody could do it for me. But I knew I could do it. I had to do it. Richard, Hannah, and I left the motel and made our way to what would be my home for the next month or two.

Chapter 5

The car turned off the highway, and shortly afterwards we pulled into a leafy suburb, where the elm-lined roads were wide enough to land a small plane, and the lawns were big enough to park one.

Richard and Hannah got out of the car, and started up toward the house. I walked the opposite way, to the end of the driveway, to stretch my legs after the long journey, and to take a look at my new neighborhood: moderately affluent meets middlebrow-blandsville. Trim lawns and manicured bushes. Browning leaves, and graying executives. I couldn't wait for Christmas, to see the place all lit up in the snow. *But how come such an up-market place?* I wondered. *What did the FBI have in mind?* But I didn't, or couldn't, ask.

A squirrel darted out from behind a tree, saw me, and then darted back. I heard it scurry up the back of the tree. It was Tuesday afternoon, and apart from the squirrel, the place was deserted. I turned around, and found Richard watching me expectantly. I followed him inside. The interior of the house was as tastefully understated as the outside. Hannah led the way into the living room. It was so clean and neat that I didn't want to sit down without checking my clothes first, to see if perhaps a stray leaf had attached itself to me, ready to dirty the new furniture. My new mother asked me to follow her upstairs.

"This is your room," she said, opening the door to a football-field-sized apartment. Compared to my jail cell, the room was enormous. It might have been bigger than my mother's apartment. I gave the bed the bounce test, and it passed. Not too hard, not too soft. Everything was just perfect.

"While you were at Uncle Mike's, I got you some new trousers and shirts. I hope you like them."

From my bed, I watched Hannah open the closet, to show a bunch of trendy shirts and cargo pants, stuff I had never worn in my life. I looked them over. The trousers weren't the functional sort you get in the military, but the ornamental variety, with extra pockets, in case you were out on recon at the mall.

"Okay," I said.

I took out my belongings: an architect's pencil and eraser, and a small note pad, still with details of a 'bash' script I was going to write. Somehow, the FBI hadn't confiscated it as evidence. I put these on the nightstand, along with my wallet.

"If you need anything, I'll be downstairs," Hannah said, as she left.

I sat on the bed, getting used to my palatial bedroom. When I was young, I had lived in a big house like this one, and since then my life had been spent in a series of rooms of decreasing size, culminating in the prison cell, a guest of the Washington State Department of Correction.

I walked around the room, looking for dust or fluff, but there was none to be found. I walked over to a door, and opened it, to find my own bathroom, sparkling clean and lemony fresh. Behind another door was a linen closet, with shelves of neatly folded, color-coordinated bed sheets, and a basket for laundry.

I looked out window onto a large garden, where Mr. and Mrs. Ripley had once played with their child, pushing him on the swing. No, that was another house, another life, another time. I had only been back to that house once since my parents split up. I stared out of the window, looking and listening to the library-like silence. The house was so silent that it was eerie. I crept onto the landing, just to check that my feds were still there. Sure enough, I could hear Hannah or Richard in the kitchen. I went back into the bedroom and closed the door. As I did, I noticed that someone had

made a stab at suburban camouflage. On the back of the bedroom door was a poster of a hairspray-rock group that I hadn't heard of before.

It made me think, *Are my new parents expecting me to bring my school friends home for after-hours hacking sessions? Homework help? Sleepovers? Oh, god, I'm back at high school.*

I made a mental note to get some proper décor, then went to the bed, and for an hour lay there looking at somebody else's musical heroes, holding expensive guitars with exotic finishes, and letting my thoughts whirl around. Knight, college, FBI, hacking, Malik, the Washington State prison, North, coffee, and back to Knight.

Always back to Knight.

Chapter 6

Unlike other schools I had attended, Elmwood High was modern and neat. It had no graffiti, no litter, and no broken windows. Its smart tree-lined paths and clean buildings showed no signs of urban decay.

But it did have the familiar school cliques. Grouped around the courtyard were the sports freaks, the chatroom junkies, the goths, the skaters, the slackers, the head-bangers, the no-hopers, and of course the queen bee and her wanna-bees.

Somewhere around would be the latest addition to that list of subcultures: the computer hobbyists and hackers—my people. But they hung out only in cyberspace.

Hannah had told me to find Mr. Stony, who had been prepped and had agreed to cooperate (the word she used) by slotting me into high school life as quickly as possible. After five minutes of wandering around the administrative complex, I finally found a door marked “Mr. E. Stony” and knocked on it. I got no reply, and looked at my watch. It was 9:04 a.m.; Stony was late. I sat on a chair outside the door, and for the next few minutes, I watched a member of the staff walk to each office, delivering mail. Across from me, a door with “Mr. N. Harmon” on it opened, and a good-looking, fashionable girl came out. She said good-bye to the office’s occupant, and then strode past me with purposeful steps, and then out into the corridor. I’d had talks with teachers, too, but I was guessing that they were a different sort of discussion. Teachers were always on me for wasting my *potential*. My mother had signed ten years of grade cards with *must try harder* on them.

My grades got even worse when I started hacking seriously, and ditching anything not necessary. The way I figured it, I didn’t need to study subjects like Spanish. I already knew half a dozen languages. Yes, they were all computer languages, but you get my point. Geography? I chatted over the Internet with hackers in Russia, Sweden, and a dozen other countries. I picked up more information about their lives and countries by talking to them online than I ever could have in a classroom. Home Ec? I didn’t consider that necessary, because I had spent my formative years cooking for myself.

I heard the computer screen in Harmon’s office ping as he hit the power button, and then the keyboard’s quiet clickety clack as he typed away. From the other direction, I heard a door slam shut, followed by a rustle, and then Stony came around the corner holding a bunch of papers and a briefcase. He was tall and thin, and was dressed in a light brown suit, with a vest. He looked harassed.

“You must be David Johnson,” he said without smiling.

“Yes,” I replied.

“I’m Ed Stony. I spoke to your . . . father, Richard.”

“Yes.”

He put a key in the door, unlocked it, pushed it open, and said, “Come in.”

I followed him in and closed the door behind me. Thankfully, he didn’t bother with small talk, and instead opened his drawer and took out a stack of cards and passes. He sighed.

“These are the items you need.”

He handed over the documents, and a locker key.

“Thank you.”

He took out some more papers, looked through them, and then handed them to me.

“Here is your class schedule, and your user account for the computer network. This hall pass will allow you to go where you need to go.”

I stuffed all the documents into my jacket pocket.

Frustration suddenly appeared in Stony's voice. "I had some difficulty in preparing these. I wish I had been told a little earlier about your arrival," he said.

"Yes," I said, just to be saying something.

He eyed me dubiously, and I got the idea that Philips had railroaded him into complying, and he resented it. That made two of us.

"I'm told you're bright," Stony said.

I shrugged.

"Well, then, you'll be able to understand my position. I expect you to act responsibly and sensibly. I will not have anything going on in this school that threatens the safety of the students or the staff."

I nodded thoughtfully.

"You already do," I said, referring to Malik and his operation, with just enough drama to cut the conversation short. Stony cleared his throat. Philips would have told him not to discuss such things. Stony stood and walked to the door.

"Follow me," he said bluntly.

We passed another girl outside Harmon's door. Despite the chilly autumn air, she was wearing a T-shirt that didn't quite fit, showing her midriff. I smiled at her. At school, I used to get pinged by girls to tell me about social events that I never had time for, and never went to. But when Philips had put his plan to me, I decided to become much more sociable. I knew that I'd have to make time for a girlfriend. Using girls wasn't something I wanted to do, but I knew that they would be good cover. I'd have an excuse whenever I needed to get away from the constant surveillance.

I gave the girl an admiring glance that was genuine and she saw me looking and didn't look away—but already Stony was ushering me down the corridor.

"You were supposed to have English first period, but you're already late. Rather than burst in, I'll show you around, and you can sit in the library until your next class, which is computer studies—something I believe you know a bit about."

He said it a bit sarcastically, but I let it go. I could imagine Philips and Garman sitting in his office, both glaring at him.

We wandered a series of corridors, and eventually stopped at a classroom, which looked like it had been built the week before. "Our new IT suite," Stony said. This was more my scene. I looked through the window at rows of shiny new computers that would have impressed every parent in the country. I wondered briefly why high schoolers would need such powerful machines. Even in those days, I could have done a PhD in computer science using a refurbished computer that cost less than twenty-five dollars, combined with free software downloaded from the Internet.

I followed Stony to the library, where he left me. After that, I never saw him again during the whole time I attended the school—not even in the corridor. I did think about sneaking into the staff room, but I never got around to it.

The library was surprisingly small and unsurprisingly badly stocked. The entire computer section consisted of just a dozen books titled "Computers for Beginners" and cheery can-do stuff like that, full of pictures and cartoons. So I spent my spare time gazing out of the window, watching the breeze playing with the leaves. When the school bell rang, I walked back along the hallway, to the computer room.

I figured Zaqarwi might already be sitting somewhere in the classroom, and I didn't want to make eye contact just yet. So when I went in, I didn't look around, but walked straight up to Mr. Logan, and introduced myself. He said that he would come to talk to me later, and told me to find an empty seat, which I did. He put a spreadsheet up on the big electronic whiteboard, and started to talk about

spreadsheets. I listened for a few minutes, which is the time it takes for my brain to switch off when bored, and then took a quick look at the coursework. Then I turned to my machine.

The computers had been arranged in the classroom so the teacher could see what most of the pupils were doing. But with Logan turned toward the board, I would be able to work in unseen spurts. As quietly as possible, I logged onto the machine with the username and password that Stony had handed me. The machine was running Microsoft Windows, an operating system that I had become familiar with over the years.

I did a quick check and found that it had been locked down, to prevent students from tampering with it, either accidentally or deliberately. That meant that with my standard user account, I wouldn't be able to make any major changes, such as altering the Internet proxy server, so I could surf the Internet without being watched.

I changed my password then logged off. My goal was to upgrade my new user account from a standard user, which wouldn't allow me to look at anything interesting, to a domain administrator, and I knew a simple way to do it. On Windows machines, passwords are stored locally, in case the network fails. All I needed to do was to get someone to log onto my machine, and then I could use that person's user ID. That person would be Logan, but would his user account be a domain administrator account? If so, then he would have access to every computer on the network.

I reasoned it through. Would a teacher need that access? An English or chemistry teacher wouldn't, but Logan was an IT teacher, meaning that he might have to set up computers and perform administrative tasks. High schools are known by hackers for being understaffed, and regular teachers sometimes have to do the work themselves. In the end, I decided that it was worth a shot.

It had also occurred to me that I could have simply asked Philips for a domain administrator account on the school computer, and he would have probably arranged it for me. But where would the fun be in that? My stay in state prison had kept me out of hacking and cracking for the best part of a year, and I wanted to get my kung-fu working once again of its own accord, like it had once been: an instinct.

I raised my hand, and asked, "Mr. Logan?"

"Yes, David?"

"I can't log on."

"When did you get your username and password?"

"Mr. Stony just gave it to me, but it doesn't work."

Logan frowned a little.

"Did you forget the password?"

"No."

I held up the slip of paper.

"This is the one they gave me. It's just 'password.' But when I typed it in, it wouldn't let me log on."

Logan tried logging on with my username. He sighed nasally. He moved to the next machine, and tried again. That didn't work either.

"Are you sure these details are correct?"

"Mr. Stony just handed them to me. Can you change my password?"

Logan logged on to my machine, using his system administrator account, and reset my password. He then logged in using my account, to verify that the new password worked.

“That should take care of it. Let me know if you have any more problems.”
“Thanks.”

I then logged in using my student account, and started working on the assignment, which took me almost no time to complete.

For the next thirty minutes, I listened to Logan drone on at the front of the class, using electronic slides on a large computer whiteboard, to explain the use of spreadsheet formulas.

Logan’s nonexistent enthusiasm was infectious, and eventually my mind switched off. Logan was what some of my old crew used to refer to as a *COBOL Charlie*, the generic programmer who had worked in commercial computing, doing tedious bean-counting projects on mainframes and other soul-destroying mundane stuff.

That was one of the things that made me so keen to start working as a paid hacker, a white hat, someone who broke into banks for money, to help them test their security. At least it was fun. When you worked in the real world, sooner or later, the boredom and office politics slowly corroded your idealism and your enthusiasm for computing, and you eventually became like Logan. You spent thirty years eking out your living teaching high schoolers BASIC and looking forward to the day when the final bell rang and it was the long summer vacation.

I leaned back in my chair, and looked around at the rest of the class. There was the usual mix of students. Did any of them look like recruits for a dangerous terrorist who might want to gain access to all of the Pentagon’s computer systems? I spotted a dark-skinned guy, in the far corner, sitting alone, and reading through his textbook. I guessed he was Abdul Zaqarwi. I later learned that my instincts were right.

My gaze slowly drifted around the room. I saw a boy at the front of the class frowning in exasperation at the sheer difficulty of what was an easy assignment. I saw two trendy girls, trying hard to stay awake. I saw another boy sat with his arms folded in ostentatious boredom. I saw a hopelessly attentive girl stick her hand up, only to be ignored.

After finishing his discussion on the sum function, Logan handed out a sheet, and told us to type in the ten numbers on it, and work out the sum and the average. I completed that task as fast as I could type, which is pretty darn fast, after years of intense keyboarding. For the other five minutes, while the others caught up, I let my eyes drift around the room some more.

They finally stopped at the front of the classroom, resting on Logan’s electronic whiteboard. The interesting thing about it was that it might somehow be incorporated into my plan. Philips had told me to get Zaqarwi’s attention. One possible way to do that would be to connect to Logan’s whiteboard, and remotely control it somehow. I imagined Logan’s mouse pointer flying uncontrollably over the screen, or drawing a picture of Elmwood High being nuked to bits, getting a laugh from the class.

That would definitely get Zaqarwi’s attention. Of course, it had the risk of getting unwanted attention from Logan, as well. I sat back, thinking it through. I came out of my daydream when Logan came over and asked me how I had done with his assignment. We talked politely about my previous experience with computers, leaving out the spicier details, and then he went away.

The bell sounded, and people scattered. On the way out of class, I thanked Logan, and dawdled just long enough to get the manufacturer’s name and model of the whiteboard. I had never heard of the company, Research Machines, but I knew that I could look them up on the Internet. After biology class, I headed back to the

tiny library, and found an Internet terminal. The school and the FBI might be watching my Internet activity, but of course I was deputized for doing such work.

I surfed over to the website of Research Machines, and found that they made four models of whiteboards. I looked over the specifications for the one I wanted, and realized that it was nothing more than a glorified monitor with a network connection, and that it would be as difficult to hack into as a damp paper bag.

At lunchtime, I went to the cafeteria and got a sandwich, which seemed to be made mostly of wet bread with some tasteless white spread.

Around me, hormonal development unfolded in surround-sound. Boys were pretending to be cowboys, so as not to be Indians. Girls were pretending to be prickly thorns, so as not to be wallflowers.

On the far side of the room was a big, modern-style painting, attached to the wall. A ball of foil suddenly flew past my ear, hitting the boy on the table across from me. *Perhaps*, I thought, *I had been a little too harsh in my judgment of jail after all.*

After eating lunch, I walked around the campus, looking to see if I could spot any of the local players. I needed a computer and a phone of my own, but before I got them, I needed somewhere to keep them. It was obvious that whomever Philips had on the staff would be doing a nightly check of the locker that Stony had assigned me. I wouldn't be able to use it without Philips knowing in detail what I had stored in it. But someone in the school would have a locker to rent, at the right price.

I made my way outside, and looked around all the places that provided blind-spots for the smokers and the hard cases—the future inmates of the prison system.

I walked around the perimeter of the grounds. A football flew across my path, nearly hitting me. I picked it up, and threw it back to a group of guys playing tag football.

At last I caught sight of two guys talking beside a garage. Whatever they were haggling about, it was no business of mine. But I watched them, and something changed hands. The guy doing the deal had a cigarette dangling from his lips, like some 1950s actor—too cool for school. He was neatly dressed, and his hair was styled in a trendy way. So he wasn't exactly one of the slackers—more like an enterprising young businessman.

“Hey, man,” I said to him.

I put a bit of computer nerd in my voice; I didn't want him to think that I would be storing anything but electronic gadgets in his locker. The guy looked at me like I was a tobacco beetle that was about to chow down on his cigarette.

“How's it going?” I said.

“Do I know you?”

No, he didn't know me. But money talks, and it says, “Where there's a bill, there's a way.”

For twenty FBI dollars, he hooked me up with someone who knew someone else, who was willing to rent me his locker. That guy wanted fifty for only two weeks, but I negotiated up to a whole month. I think I did the taxpayers proud.

I walked back inside, to finish off my schooling for the day, feeling like at least I had made a start. All I needed was to get hold of a computer and a phone, and that could wait until the next day.

Chapter 7

I got off the bus early, partly because I always hated riding the school bus, and partly because I wanted to scout the local district. I was thinking about my ditch-kit again, about getting ready for whatever emergency came at me. I wanted to know how I could get away, and where I could hide, if it came to it. I didn't think I'd have to run, but you never know.

I walked through the noisy sub-suburbs and into my own good-looking but boring neighborhood. I walked past wooden fences, holly bushes, elm trees, and garages the size of small houses. Somebody had left a bike out, propped up in their porch, obviously not concerned about it getting stolen.

I passed a house where a little girl dressed in a coat and scarf was playing on a swing. For some reason, I again found myself wondering why the FBI had chosen such an up-market place to conduct their latest sting. They could have found some other house in the school district, for a quarter of the price. Maybe it made them feel safe up here on the hill, driving round in an SUV. Or maybe there was some other reason. I got back to the house, went to my room, and lay down, listening to music, and thinking over the day.

When I went down an hour later, Richard was watching the news on TV from an easy chair. He didn't pay any attention to me when I sat down. A few minutes later, Hannah came in and said hello.

"How was school?"

"It was okay, but boring."

"Boring?"

"Nothing much happened."

"What were the teachers like?"

"Just teachers."

"What did you have for lunch?"

"A sandwich."

When Richard went upstairs, I picked up the remote and flipped the TV over to the movie channel. I like movies. If I need to switch my brain off for a couple of hours, I just watch a movie.

The movie was about some guy working in the French resistance during WWII. I like those movies. I had vague memories of watching movies with my dad, when I was young. He would come home, stick his feet up after a hard day at work, and watch a movie. That's about the clearest memory I have of him. That, and him and my mother arguing. When Richard came back, he picked up the remote and, without saying anything, turned back to the news.

"We were watching that," Hannah said, staring at him coldly.

"I was in the middle of the news," Richard said.

"It's my fault," I said. "Sorry."

Hannah got up, and went into the kitchen. After the news finished, Richard followed Hannah, then they both came back in.

"We're going into town for a quick look around before dinner," Hannah said. "You coming?"

I couldn't say no. The car was our safe haven, and they wanted me there, to question me. How did that old wartime poster go? Loose lips sink ships. Remember! The enemy may be listening. We were out of the neighborhood and rolling down the slope into the town, before Richard turned to me, and asked me what had gone on that

day. He was no longer my father; he was Special Agent Richard Johnson, of the anti-teenage cyber terrorist squad, or whatever they were calling themselves that week.

“What do you mean?” I said.

“What happened?”

“It’s my first day. Nothing happened.”

“You didn’t see Zaqrwi?”

“Yeah, I saw someone that probably is him, but I didn’t rush in and start saying hello. How would that look?”

“Drop the attitude, Ripley.”

I didn’t think I had an attitude. I was just telling him that nothing had happened.

“I didn’t agree to give you a nightly report.”

“You’re here to work with us. That means keeping us informed.”

“I agreed to work with Philips.”

“You think that you are going to keep us out of the loop?”

“I don’t know what you are talking about.”

“Just tell us what happened today. You don’t need the attitude.”

“What did I just say? Nothing happened.”

“He’s right,” Hannah said to Richard. “It doesn’t make sense to waste time giving reports, when there is nothing to report.”

Richard frowned at Hannah. “I thought you were working with me.”

“Now who’s got the attitude?” Hannah said.

“Look,” Richard said, “this isn’t a democracy. He’s the criminal, in case you forgot.”

“I will give you a report when anything happens,” I said. “Until then, you either leave me alone or I walk. That’s what we agreed.”

“You walk right back to the Pizza Hut, smart guy? I’ll bet you will.”

“Can we stop arguing?” interjected Hannah. “It’s getting us nowhere.”

Richard turned the car around, and began driving back to the house. But suddenly I spotted a bike shop, and said, “I want to get a bike.”

The store was surprisingly well stocked. I test-rode several bikes, and eventually chose a dual-suspension alloy mountain bike, which was overboard for trips to school, but I didn’t think that it would get stolen in my neighborhood. Anyway, the FBI was paying.

This new bike was so light that I could lift it with two fingers. It was so smooth, it almost rode itself. My first mountain bike had been steel, and heavy. But it had been good for thousands of kilometers. I rode that piece of junk over half of Washington State.

Back at the house, I put the bike in the garage. I noticed that there were two his and hers bikes already in there. At the table, Richard looked tired and annoyed. He was drinking beer straight from the bottle. He’d been out all day, I figured, probably really working hard. The fatigue he was showing was probably real—the tiredness of a thirty-something who has to travel an hour to work and another hour back. I heard him burp quietly, from the beer, and he noticed me looking at him. He seemed slightly drunk.

After we had finished eating, he said, “That was good,” to Hannah.

“You’re welcome,” Hannah said coolly.

I seconded it. “It was great.”

“Chicken and vegetables. Not exactly adventurous cooking,” Hannah said.

“Do you want to go anywhere tonight?” Richard asked her.

“What did you have in mind?”

“I don’t know. A look around town, maybe?”

“Not tonight. Let’s go tomorrow instead.”

“Okay.”

Suddenly Richard started talking about how the police caught some criminals raiding a local bank, and Hannah nodded, adding the occasional comment.

“This guy,” Richard said, shaking his head as he demonstrated with his hand, “came out of the bank and ran straight into the road, and got mowed down.”

I was surprised at how quickly Richard and Hannah had gotten over the argument. I sat, listening to the conversation, while I thought back over the argument. Unlike the arguments I had seen between my real parents, no threats had been made, and nothing was thrown. Nobody slammed any doors, and nobody left, never to be seen again. My new parents just sat there, talking about local events. It was a perverse parody of the nuclear family that left me with the feeling that I had to be alone.

I went to my room, and sat with the light off, looking out at the pristine suburb, dimly lit in the autumn darkness. Everything was quiet and peaceful. Here, everything seemed to be in its place. *Maybe I could just stay here for the rest of my life*, I thought. David Johnson, space cadet from Elmwood High, rides bikes, and excels in computers, math, and science. Thinking about how my life had turned out, it seemed crazy to me. How had I got here?

I closed my eyes, and thought back over my life. I had once lived in a house like this when my parents were married. I had little memory of it, but I recalled a large house in a quiet suburb in Washington State. I also remembered an argument, and waiting for my father to return. I waited, and waited, always trusting that he would come back. But he never did.

After that, I moved with my mother to an apartment. She got a job at a casino. When her new friends came around, they would party and play music and dance. She worked the late shift, and in the evenings I stayed with a neighbor, Mrs. Robinson, until I was ten, and no longer needed a babysitter.

I made my own breakfast and dinner, and watched television on my own. It was around that time that my unusual fascination started. I remember the first time. I had been sitting in a bank one day, waiting while my mother smiled through her teeth at a bank clerk.

She was taking care of some grown-up business that she had refused to discuss with me, and I was bored and absent-mindedly gazing at an oversized display check that was hung on the bank wall. In those days, people still used paper checks instead of credit cards, and that big cardboard check reminded me of a TV program on bank fraud that I had seen a few nights before.

In the TV special, a convicted fraudster described how he had made millions of dollars by altering bank checks. All paper checks came with a unique serial number printed on the bottom, written in magnetic ink that both computers and people could read.

This number indicated which branch the check got sent to for processing. By changing one of those numbers, the criminal had prevented the check from being properly routed. The computer would try to read the number, would flag it as unreadable and hence unroutable. A bank teller would have to manually examine it. He’d see that all the numbers were visible, with no tears or flaws in the check, and would put it back into the automatic processing pile, to circle through the computer once again.

The fraud was only discovered when the check was so worn out that it wouldn't go through the machine anymore. By that time, the forger had passed check after check, and had escaped to the Bahamas with the loot. I remember waiting in that bank, looking up at that huge check and being disappointed that I couldn't come up with my own scam. I was really beaten up about it, because I wasn't smart enough, even though I was still only eleven.

Months later, I saw a movie about a bank heist. The next day, while I was waiting in the bank once again, and looking at that oversized check in a bored haze once again, I suddenly got an idea for my own scam. I devised a totally new type of check fraud. What if I did it the other way around? What if I changed one of the computer-read magnetic numbers on the check, leaving the visible ink numbers intact?

The teller who manually examined the numbers would still be able to look up the branch code, and send the check to the right branch.

But again, the computer wouldn't be able to process it, and it might be rerouted or returned once again. That would require maybe two extra journeys, which meant that the bogus check might take longer to discover than the standard number scam. That might mean extra time for the con man to pass his bogus paper, and make his getaway.

I didn't know for sure whether my ruse would work, and obviously I would have had to get my hands on some magnetic ink. But if it did work, I would potentially have an even better check dodge than the standard routing scam.

I tried to think back to the TV program. Had they already discussed that method for bank robbery? I didn't know, and I never found out.

But, original or not, workable or not, I was immensely happy that I had persisted until I had come up with my own way of subverting the system.

I was young, and of course I never actually put the idea into action, but I always remembered that happy eureka moment. Best of all, I had, for a few weeks at least, found an outlet for my curiosity and my energies.

Every boy watches movies and thinks how glamorous it would be to be a master criminal. But it wasn't the profits of crime that I was interested in. I got fired up with the same curiosity and enthusiasm whenever I saw a documentary on the space shuttle or a big engineering project—something that was so difficult that it took years to complete. These engineering achievements required planning and ingenuity. I used to imagine myself standing on the site, looking over plans, arranging the work, organizing the workers, and making a blueprint into a reality. What difference did it make if it was a bank heist or a 200-story bank building organization that I was working on?

More and more, I began looking around for things that I could devote my enthusiasm to. But, of course, living in a crime-ridden neighborhood, there was literally nothing to do except crime.

One boring day, I noticed that baby strollers set off security alarms in stores, and almost without meaning to, I put together a method for shoplifting. I found a way of scamming the library into issuing me with two cards, though I hardly used the one I already had. I'd read stuff, remember it, and then stick the book back on the shelf. One time, I talked two cops into giving me a lift home from the city, because I wanted to see what it was like in a cop car, and what the cops were really like. Another time, I found out that the local video rental store had policies that could be exploited, such as the one where if they didn't have a title in, you'd get it free next time. There I was, an eleven-year-old kid, hated by all of the clerks, because I was making a game out of

it—trying to figure out when the most in-demand titles would be unavailable, which was the opposite of what everyone else was doing.

It was all kid's stuff. But looking back, it seems to me that these trivial misdemeanors were a foundation for a more important life—a life that I didn't yet know about but felt was waiting for me. My mother's attempts to involve me emotionally in her struggle for existence were obliterated by my constant struggle to find an outlet for my energies, by learning more and more about the world around me.

So when one day a classmate asked me to join a conference call that he was arranging over the public phone system, I took him up on the offer immediately. He assured me that the phone call would be free, since he had found a way to cheat the phone company out of paying for calls. I agreed, and that night I was introduced to the pastime of phone hacking, known as “phreaking.”

Here was a new world—a network of phones and exchanges, of blue boxes and black boxes, of phreaks (as my new friends called themselves) and hackers, and it was massively more complex than the other trivial systems I had been toying with. It was an endless connection of phone systems and subsystems. It went all around the world. It stretched from the White House to the Kremlin. Immediately, I wanted to know everything possible about it.

Some nights I went dumpster diving for trash at the local phone company offices, looking for documents that I thought might hold valuable information. Some nights I phoned faraway telephone exchanges, and pretended to be a phone company employee, extracting clues about the phone system.

Soon, I was making free phone calls to Iceland, Holland, and Australia.

“What's the weather like there?” I would ask a puzzled Iclander, who asked in broken English who I was, and why exactly I was calling him.

Then one night, about three months after I had started phreaking, I had a close call when a tough-looking phone company engineer, complete with utility belt, knocked on the door of the apartment, and started asking awkward questions.

But it didn't matter. By that time, my new friends had already introduced me to the world of computer hacking.

I met up with Knight and his crew of hackers at a computer convention. They were high school kids, but they seemed to know everything about computers. I didn't really know or care what their real names were. They all went by fake names, known as “handles,” which they had given themselves: Knight, Blizzard, Darkness, and several others. They thought that they were agents working against an unfair system. But I didn't mind that, because they showed me Unix and C. These were the tools that engineers used to create software systems. These operating systems, languages, and programs seemed utterly inaccessible at first. But what looked like rawness, I soon realized meant flexibility. It was like having a pick-up truck instead of a Mercedes.

Once I had learned how to hack systems, I learned how to hack into them—war dialing, pretexting, brute forcing. I spent days, weeks, and months learning how to use hacker tools to gain access to, and complete control of, remote computer systems. School didn't matter anymore. The whole of the year was taken up in hacking and cracking.

There was an unspoken competition to find out who among us could do the best hack. But after just a year, I saw no serious competition, except maybe Knight. I knew then that I was going to be the fastest draw in the new frontier.

Soon, I had outgrown my classmates. My hacking ‘kung-fu’ went beyond anything they possessed. I came to realize that they were nothing more than ‘script kiddies,’ downloading and altering other people's work.

They weren't like me. They didn't have my enthusiasm or skills. They had all the gear, but no original ideas. I was the opposite: I couldn't afford any hardware. I scavenged stuff from dumpsters, and spent hours in the public library learning how to put it all together. I also learned how to get free and *open source* software to run on it.

I had the names of the authors of those loaned books burned into my brain, because I found myself reaching for those books a hundred times a day, and renewing them as often as possible.

When I finally had a system that I could use, I began to look for things to do with it. It was then that I read about all the great hackers, and those people became my role models: I wanted to be just like them.

There was Kevin Mitnick, who beat the world's largest communications companies at their own game. There was Gary McKinnon, who hacked into the Pentagon. I read about Vladimir Levin, who robbed Citibank of \$10 million. I laughed over stories of Kevin Poulsen, who won a Porsche from a radio phone-in by commandeering the entire Los Angeles telephone network. I kept all these people in my mind. With every keystroke, I knew that I was coming closer to my goal. I knew that I wouldn't get caught; I was too careful for that.

I would get out of my miserable existence; I would get somewhere worth living in. I would have all the best equipment, and have lots of fun. I would travel abroad to whichever country was currently holding a hacker convention. I would stay in the best hotels. I wanted to teach people—to inspire the next generation. Kids in their bedrooms, wanting to escape their miserable lives, would look to me as their own role model: Karl Ripley, who had made a fortune selling banks their own security holes.

I began to hack websites, and leave my electronic calling card. I cracked email servers, and left the owners a little surprise. I found network print devices in remote offices, and left a fortune cookie for the next person at the printer. I began accruing user accounts all around the world. I started installing backdoors into every computer system I could find, from local businesses to national institutions. I got an account at NASA. I got root privileges at the world's second largest bank. I even got my foot in the door of the Pentagon . . .

But now I was back in high school, in some ways starting over.

Chapter 8

At 7:30 a.m., the next day, I followed the smell of breakfast down the stairs. Richard was quietly reading a newspaper, and Hannah was watching something on the stove.

“See you later,” I said, heading for the door.

“David, don’t you want breakfast?” Hannah asked.

“No, I’m okay.”

“You should eat something.”

You’ve got to be kidding me, I thought. I knew that my new parents had taken to their roles, but nutrition advice seemed a step too far. On the other hand, in jail I had got used to breakfast every morning.

“What have we got?”

“I can make you some scrambled eggs, if you want?”

“I’ll get some fruit.” I wasn’t very hungry, and didn’t want to wait. I took two red apples from the bowl on the table. Hannah put a plate in front of Richard. He put the paper down, and turned to his scrambled eggs. Hannah sat down, and poured some cereal into a bowl, and added low-fat milk. *Fed-O’s*, I thought, *the new cereal for undercover police. Full of fiber, so you don’t get constipated from sitting in a stake-out car. A single bowl has just half the calories of coffee and donuts.*

“I gotta go to school,” I said.

“Goodbye,” Hannah said.

I stopped at the door, and then looked back over my shoulder. Apart from their jaw muscles, both Hannah and Richard sat still, calmly eating breakfast, a tableau of the normal married couple in the morning. I freewheeled down the hill most of the way on my new bike. I seemed to be the only person cycling.

My first class was history, and I attended with the single goal of making myself look like an authentic student. I went in, and Zaqarwi was already sitting in the middle of the class, talking quietly with someone.

The history teacher was Mr. Conroy, and I was pleasantly surprised to find, given my habits of old, that I stayed awake during his class. After that was English class. English was another of those classes where I had somehow always been simultaneously behind and ahead. My teachers were as puzzled as me whenever I got zero percent one day and a hundred percent the next. But that morning, all I had to do was to listen to a lecture about dramatic irony. I pretended to take notes, all the time avoiding looking at Zaqarwi.

At lunch, I decided to go computer hacking. I locked up my bike in the on-campus bike shed, and took a taxi into town. I used my new bank card to withdraw a hundred dollars, and then asked some kid on a skateboard where the nearest cybercafé was. I went in and rented a terminal for half an hour.

I had a dozen email accounts I had not checked for over half a year, which I had used mainly for keeping in contact with other hackers. But I wasn’t interested in them. I pointed “Internet Exploiter” at eBay, typed Elmwood High’s ZIP code, and a list of notebook computers for sale appeared. I spent five minutes going through dozens of listings, but one ad stood out as being suitable, especially because it was only a mile from the school.

“NeoTek GZA-1990 notebook computer. Like new. Very fast. Carry case included.” It was on buy-it-now for \$299. It looked to me like the seller had copied the picture and the specs from the manufacturer’s website, and a quick surf to NeoTek.com showed I was right.

Some of the computer equipment that appears on the electronic auction sites is stolen, and you develop a sort of intuition about it. The way the picture had been lifted, the price (which was ridiculously low for the machine's specs), and the fact that it was 'like new' (why buy it just to sell it?), along with a couple of other minor details, all came together to give me the idea that the notebook was probably filched goods.

That was why it interested me. I knew that petty criminals can be trusted to deny ever having sold anybody anything, at any time. I messaged the buyer asking if I could pick it up this evening, not expecting them to be in during the day.

While I waited, I checked out the best price for the model of bike I had just got, and also looked for local mountain bike routes. Fifteen minutes later, I got a reply from the notebook seller's girlfriend, saying that he was out, but if I paid by eCheck or cash, I could pick it up after school.

Before my arrest, I had stuck \$1,000 in an eCheck account, hidden under a cryptic name and long password. Looking back, it was dumb of me to think that an emergency fund of one thousand dollars would be adequate. But it was enough to buy what I needed for the moment. I had to rummage around in my memory for the eCheck username and password. The money was still there. Somehow, the feds hadn't got to it.

I quickly set up two new accounts, transferred all the money from my old account to the first new one, closed the old one, transferred the money from the first new account to the second new account, and then closed the first new account. Paranoid? Maybe. But you never can tell.

I paid for the computer by eCheck, and messaged the seller once again, explaining that I would be around that evening to collect my new computer. I waited long enough to get the full address from the reply and print off a map of the seller's location. At last, I had got myself something to hack on.

I headed back to school, and for the next few hours, endured more classes until the final bell rang. After unlocking my bike, and checking that it had survived its first day in the shed without damage, I set off.

I made my way down some side roads, into the neighborhood indicated on the map. This was the flip side of my new neighborhood. It was rundown, and some houses even looked abandoned. I pedaled slowly down the road until I came to the address I had memorized. It was a shabby, once-white, single-story house.

I made my way up the modest driveway, and pushed the doorbell. When that didn't bring any reply, I knocked hard, and saw a shadow move behind the glass. A teenage girl opened the door, just enough to look out, and then stood, staring at me, without saying anything.

"I've come about the computer," I said.

The girl gave me a gloomy once-over with her dark eyes, and then opened the door. I leaned my bike on the wall, wondering whether it would be safe in that neighborhood, and then went in. Without waiting to shut the door behind me, the girl walked off down the hallway, and stuck her head in a doorway. I heard her say, "eBay."

Then she came back toward me, and I got a better look at her. She was dressed strangely, and was wearing heavy black eye makeup. She looked okay, but odd. Her hair looked like she was in the middle of dying it, and hadn't quite finished. I thought she was going to say something to me, but she turned suddenly, went into a room, and closed the door. I stood waiting in the hall.

For a minute, everything was quiet. Then a woman in her early forties came out into the hallway, and gave me the same gloomy once-over as the girl. She was dressed in what looked like overalls—the sort of thing I had seen the women from the paint factory in my old neighborhood wearing.

“Hi,” I said.

“He’ll be here in a minute,” said the woman bluntly, without smiling. I nodded, and the woman turned and went back into the room. For a minute, I stood there in the silence, looking around. Everything was old, but clean. The place looked like it had last been decorated at least two presidents ago, but steam-cleaned an hour ago. There wasn’t anything out of place—not a shoe or a paper clip.

I looked at the ornaments hanging on the wall. They had moons, stars, and astronomical patterns. I wondered again about my bike. I was just about to look out through the window in the door when a man walked into the hallway. He was tall, and had a long graying ponytail. He was dressed like a lot of truck drivers I had seen, and he was carrying a computer case.

“Hi,” I said.

“You’ve come for the notebook?” he asked. His voice sounded like gravel being trod on. I answered yes. He looked me over, and apparently came to the same conclusion as the girl and the woman, whatever that was. He handed me the case, still closed.

“Do you mind if I take a look?” I asked.

He seemed to mind, but I went ahead anyway. There wasn’t any place else I was free from prying eyes to switch the thing on, and no computer geek can resist a peek at a new gadget. I unzipped the bag, and slid the machine out. It was barely touched, not the sort that a guy from that neighborhood would have, but the sort that the boss on the top floor gets, just because the bigwigs always seem to want the best gadgets, and always seem to get them.

It was so hot that it nearly burned my fingers. The ad had said ‘like new,’ but looking at it, I guessed that it really was new, and seemed to be completely unused. A bit of the thin transparent plastic cover clung to the edge of the keyboard.

I can’t see the marks where it fell off the back of the truck, I thought, but didn’t say.

“I like NeoTeks,” I said out loud, just to be saying something. I hit the power button, and the machine booted surprisingly quickly into Windows. There was no logon screen. I pushed the pointer around the screen to see what was installed. Nothing. This was an untouched factory build, with no applications—not even freeware. No wonder it was so fast to boot up.

It always shocks me to think back to the equipment I used to hack on. When the feds busted me, they spent a lot of time trying to get me to tell them where the *real* hardware was hidden. They just couldn’t believe that some museum piece and a bit of free software were all I needed. They just couldn’t accept that I had done most of my best hacking on my little old Frankenstein, whose hardware was so old that it would not even run Windows properly.

“Great, I said, “just what I needed. Thanks for letting me pick it up.”

“No problem,” said the man, emotionlessly. I tried to stick the case into my backpack, but it wouldn’t go.

“Do you want to keep this?” I asked, putting the case on the floor. “I don’t need it.”

I turned and headed for the door.

“Goodbye,” I said as I left. The man didn’t reply.

I shut the door behind me. I got on my bike and pedaled down the road. A group of young men were standing on a street corner, apparently with nothing better to do than watch another young man with an expensive computer in his backpack riding an expensive new mountain bike through a crime-ridden and possibly violent part of town. I headed back to school, dumped my new computer in my rented locker, and then went back to the safety of my own suburb.

I got home, went to my room, and lay on my bed for a while, thinking things over. I had made a start on Zaqarwi, but it wasn't enough to report about. I had also made a start on Knight, or at least I had a computer of my own. Tomorrow I would have a phone. I already knew roughly where Knight's security business was, so that wasn't the problem. What I needed to do was to find out the location of one or more of his regular clients. They were my way in, because I would never get in through the front-line security.

Whenever an ex-cracker sets himself up as a security consultant, he has to expect that he's a hunted man. There's nothing in the world that other crackers would love to do more than to break his security. It's like conkers: If you win the game, you don't just win one point; you get all the other guy's points, too. He was at the top of the tree, and whoever toppled him got to be top of the tree. So there was no way Knight was going to let down his guard. But one of his clients might. That would be my way in—the one thing Knight couldn't control: his own employers.

I smelled food, and went downstairs. Hannah had cooked dinner again. I got the idea, as we sat and quietly ate our food, that her life married to Richard was not exactly a bag of fun, and she had decided to put her concentration into domestic chores.

Hannah asked if anything interesting had happened at school. I shrugged and replied that it was going okay, that school was boring, and that I didn't even know anybody there. We ate more or less in silence after that, and the rest of the night was a more sedate repeat of the first night, though Richard drank less beer.

After watching TV, I went upstairs and listened to the silence for a few hours. *Can I do it?* I thought, as I stared at the ceiling. *I now had a computer, but I also had a constant audience. Can I get Knight, with everybody watching me?* I kept thinking.

I knew the answer was probably no, but I had to give it a try anyway.

Chapter 9

The next day, I had computer studies again. In the previous class, I had set up two hacks. The first idea had been to get Logan's password, and the other had been to hack into the electronic whiteboard at the front of the class, and get my skills noticed by Zaqarwi.

Logan handed out another assignment, titled "Using PowerPoint to Communicate Your Ideas." With Zaqarwi sitting behind me, I did my best to look bored. It wasn't hard. I became aware of a voice with a mild accent talking, at very low volume. I turned my head slowly, and found myself looking at Zaqarwi, who was holding a quiet conversation with another boy. I couldn't hear what they were saying.

For the next few minutes, I stared at the whiteboard, but strained to listen to the voices behind me, without any success. Then Logan, noticing the conversation, said, "Excuse me," to the boy who was talking to Zaqarwi. Just before he went silent, Zaqarwi's companion said, "Gameworld on Saturday."

I made a mental note of that.

When Logan was busy lecturing again, I quietly placed my memory stick into the computer's port. Had they locked the port down to prevent it being used for transferring data to memory sticks? Maybe not. School system administrators are usually far too busy to follow all the security precautions that they would do in an ideal world.

I powered down the machine, and rebooted it from the memory stick, instead of Windows. Then I ran a program to dump the logon cache to the stick. That gave me a list of the last ten users to log on at that machine. That would include Logan's username and password from the previous session. Of course, they were in encrypted form. But I had plenty of time to crack that. With the list safely on the memory stick, I turned off the machine, rebooted to Windows, and logged on. I typed in the assignment within a minute. It took another five minutes for the rest of the class to finish.

"Well done, David," said Logan, as he passed by, checking on progress. During the previous class session, he had done that after each assignment. That gave me in the region of ten minutes to do my own work.

After Logan wandered off, I opened the Windows file manager, navigated to my hacker tools directory, and got to work, using a tool for finding network devices. Within a few minutes, I had discovered the sorry truth—that the school's network server was running an old (cheaper and less secure) version of Windows Server. In addition, the domain controller was called 'DC,' the mail server was called 'mail,' the web server was called 'web1,' and the dial-in server was called 'RAS.'

This was too easy. I actually prefer a challenge. There are hackers, and there are crackers. Computer hackers like to write programs to solve the most difficult technical problems they can find. Computer crackers like to write programs to break into the most secure systems they can find. Somehow, I managed to be both. It didn't matter to me what the challenge was, hacking or cracking. As long as the contest lasted, so did my interest. When it was like this, I got bored.

I checked the time. It was nearly the end of class. I opened a DOS box, and checked my machine's network address. The network administrator had opted to use static IP addressing, for some reason, and the last digits of the IP were the same as the asset tag on the machine. I wandered over to Logan, and asked him a made-up question. When he finished giving me the answer, I sneaked a look at the asset tag of the whiteboard.

Back at my computer, I pinged the whiteboard, and it replied. It didn't take much longer to hijack the remote control service. Now to make myself known to Zaqarwi. I put the whiteboard cursor in the middle of the board, and typed: "Logan's Lectures: A Cure for Insomnia?"

I heard a couple of giggles from students who had been looking up at the front of the room at the time. I quickly deleted the text before Logan looked up. He gave a girl at the back of the class a nasty stare, and she put her hand over her mouth. Very quickly, I discreetly looked over at Zaqarwi, who appeared to have noticed what happened.

Now that I had his attention, I again put the cursor in the middle of the board, and typed "Elmwood High School: Teaching Children How to Become Bureaucrats Since 1897," and then quickly deleted it.

There was widespread laughter. This time, Logan's cold stare could do nothing about it. A minute later, the bell sounded, and everybody got up to go. I stood up, turned, and nearly walked into someone.

"Excuse me," said Zaqarwi, with a heavy accent.

"Sorry," I said. I tried to make eye contact with him, without overdoing it. But he walked past, without any more comment. What was that? Had he just made contact? And what about his earlier conversation? Were they trying to drop me hints? I felt like an amateur all of a sudden.

I followed Zaqarwi and his friend out of the classroom, out of the building, and down the steps. They met up with two other boys, and as I passed them, I heard a dozen words, one of which was "party."

When I was out of earshot, I stopped, took my phone out, dialed directory enquiries, and found out that Gameworld was an amusement park on the other side of town—a good place for recruiting computer hackers, and getting recruited, too. I hadn't heard about any party, but I made a mental note, and headed down the corridor, past my rented locker without a glance, and continued on to the cafeteria to get some lunch.

The dish of the day was lamb and vegetables, but since I ate real meals at home these days, I decided to go for a burger and fries. I lined up behind two girls who were about my age, or rather, David Johnson's age. They were talking non-stop to a guy. I couldn't avoid their conversation, which washed over me.

"Are you going to the party tonight?" said one girl.

"Yeah," replied the guy. "Are you going?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"We're not invited," said the other girl.

"I am. Do you want to go with me?"

The girls looked at each other. Suddenly interested, I turned my head to look at the guy. He was wearing a striped sweater, with his T-shirt showing beneath, and black jeans, but, stiff as it looked, the girls didn't seem to mind. What he was saying was interesting to me. I had been mulling over the idea of getting a girlfriend. "Do you want to go with me?" the guy had asked, just like that.

"Both of us?" said the second girl, dubiously.

"Why not? Me and Mickleson. You and Cassy." The girls looked at each other.

"What do you think?" asked the guy. "Do you want to go?"

"Yeah," said the girls, almost simultaneously. They got served and moved away. I found a table as far away from them as possible, and then sat and ate.

I hadn't been there for long when a troop of girls sat across from me, and began talking about some program that had been on TV. I put the noise out of my mind, and thought about buying a phone and about when I would get the chance to use my new computer. That was the main problem. I had nowhere. No matter how hard I tried to think up something, I kept on hitting a wall.

My own room was out of the question, since I had no idea what level of surveillance the FBI had there. But it stood to reason that they would be intercepting any wireless communications. The public library had an Internet connection that I could quietly hijack, but it was too public for any clandestine work. Sooner or later, one of Philips's men or Malik's men would trail me there, and they'd easily be able to see what I was up to.

I considered several other options, such as using a motel room. But again, I knew that nothing would provide a safe place. Someone would always be waiting in the wings, ready to put their nose into my business the minute I started acting secretly or tried to sneak off. Then my Knight agenda would be discovered, and it would be over.

In the old days, I might have Svengali'd some wannabe hacker. There were always young kids hanging around the club, trying to be like the big hackers. They often had all the gear, and few skills. Had things been different, I'd have made friends with one. But I knew that I couldn't trust any hackers—wannabes or otherwise. Philips had no idea who was part of Malik's group, which meant that I had no idea, either. Any one of them might be a stooge for Zaqarwi. Besides, crackers, lamers, and d00dz are often all ego. They talk too much. Like Knight, they belly up as soon as a cop pets them. I couldn't trust them.

Did you ever see that film, *The Invisible Man*, about a scientist who wants to be left alone to complete his experiment, and the more he wants privacy, the less he is given? Eventually he goes nuts. That's how I was beginning to feel. The All-Too-Visible Man, starring Karl Ripley as the crackpot computer scientist.

I finished my food, and then headed out. Wandering down a corridor, I suddenly realized that I had no idea where I was going. I stopped, fished out my class schedule, and took a look at it. In the old days, my class schedule had been simple: I skipped everything, especially computer class, and went hacking. But now I had to put up at least a pretence of being a normal student.

My next class was algebra in room B-12. I turned around to head toward room B-12, and stopped as I realized that I had no idea, apart from being on the first floor, where B-12 was. I walked to the stairwell, and looked up. It didn't say A. It didn't say anything. I walked back to the other end of the corridor, and found that that stairwell wasn't marked either.

If Karl Ripley has X weeks to conduct a sting of Internet terrorists, and he spends Y days wandering around the corridor looking for a classroom, how long will it be before his life is flushed down the toilet?

I turned and headed down toward the offices, where they had a map of the whole building stuck on the wall, with a "you are here" for disoriented students, like myself.

I suddenly caught sight of a familiar girl's face in the crowd—cute but odd, with dark hair and eyes, and kooky clothes. My eyes followed her, and as she passed me, I knew for sure that it was the girl that I had seen the night before, who had opened the door at eBay-thief's house. She was a student at the school.

Immediately, an alarm bell went off in my head. Opportunity was walking quietly by. The idea was crazy. Philips wouldn't buy it for a minute. But when I lined it up next to the rest of my options, the idea looked much better. I was going to Gameworld this weekend. Why not go with a girl? The feds would have to buy it.

This girl's father was a small-time crook. She had petty larceny in her nature/nurture. A little bit of hacking going on at her house wouldn't bother her, like it might bother some regular girl, whose parents were legit. Okay, so she dressed strangely, and had so much eyeliner on that she looked like she had spent the last week down a coal mine. But I wasn't interested in an ornament; I wanted something useful.

A plan was forming in my imagination—not a very moral plan, but a plan all the same. I let it swirl around of its own accord for a while, and then came to the conclusion that pursuing the girlfriend angle was better than doing nothing.

The only bug in the code was that I had no idea of what to say to her. With older women, I was fine, because I was used to talking them into giving me their passwords. But with girls, it was different. They didn't have that instinct for pitying losers—in fact, quite the opposite.

The girl walked into the cafeteria. I followed her, got in the line behind her, and ordered a second lunch. I watched her pay for a can of soda, and then go and sit at a table. She sipped the soda, which seems to be such a popular replacement for food among teenage girls, and I stood there, looking at her, when suddenly she lifted her head, and noticed me looking. Well, she had seen me watching her, and hadn't bolted. I may as well give it a try. I walked over.

"Hi," I said.

"Hi," the girl said gloomily and cautiously.

"I don't know if you remember me, but I bought a computer off your dad last night."

"I remember you."

"It's a really good computer. I was wondering if your dad had a good phone for sale, too."

The girl frowned, puzzled. It was a lame excuse, and I cringed a little while saying it. I mean, if her dad had a phone, it would be on eBay, with the rest of the stuff, right? The look she was giving me said as much.

"You'd have to ask him," was the short reply.

"Okay," I said. I turned to go, and then turned back.

"You don't know where room B-12 is, do you? I just started here, and don't know where anything is."

"It's upstairs."

"I know. Where upstairs?"

"You go left out of here, go down the corridor, to the stairs, and then go up the stairs, and it's up there."

"Cool. Thanks."

"Don't mention it."

"So, are you going to the party tonight?" The girl's expression changed subtly. Her mouth got the slightest hint of a smile. I guess she had been half expecting some sort of a line from me.

"No."

"Why not?"

"Why am I not going to the party?"

"Yeah. Why not?"

“I’m not invited.” She said it kind of sarcastically. But at least she was still talking to me.

“I’m invited. Do you want to go?” The way I said it was like the guy I had just been listening to, real casual.

“I don’t even know you,” she replied, stressing the ‘know.’

I grinned a little. “There’ll be lots of people there. How much danger could you be in?” I was trying to keep it light.

She continued looking at me, but said nothing. At least she hadn’t run off. I’d give it one last go, and then concede defeat.

“What do you say? Do you want to go?”

“All right.”

“Cool. I’ll see you there tonight.” I turned to go, and then realized my mistake. I hadn’t introduced myself. I didn’t even know her name.

“I’m David.”

“Grace.”

I walked out of the cafeteria feeling like a weight had been lifted off me. I had got the girl to go out with me, and I hadn’t had to exploit her maternal instincts. But even this small conversation had been uncomfortable, and it was clear to me that I had exhausted my knowledge of girls and mating rituals. I thought back: The last girl I’d spoken to in the real world had been the one waiting in the queue behind me at Computer Store. She had made small-talk about computers, I remembered, and it was only now, looking back, that I realized that she probably hadn’t been interested in talking about computer memory; she had been interested in talking to me. I guess I hadn’t thought about it at the time, being too wrapped up with whatever I was buying, making me officially a geek.

What next? I headed to the library, and found the index. They didn’t appear to have a reference manual on girls, so I asked the librarian.

“Do you have any books on dating?”

Two girls who were standing next to me snorted, and one covered her mouth, as if her amusement was improper. The librarian gave me a strange look, as if I had just made an inappropriate joke. I returned her stare, to let her know I wasn’t joking.

“No, we don’t,” she said. I gathered that the subject of dating girls had some sort of social customs surrounding it. But I had done time in a federal pen, and now lived with two feds. Teenage social protocols lose their edge after that.

I didn’t try to figure it out. I headed over to a spare Internet terminal, and searched for ‘girls, first date, how to.’ I got a million-and-one hits on ‘advanced pick-up techniques,’ but I wanted something a little more basic. Eventually, I found a site called Olivia’s Dating Tips, which covered things like ‘Where to go on a date.’ In other words, all the basic stuff that I had missed being so busy with electronic relationships, where you just ping somebody to get their attention.

But there was too much advice. Writers want to sell books, not pamphlets. The thicker the book, the more they can charge. That’s great for their bank balance, but it means that the eager student has to plough through reams of junk before they get to the important stuff. One of the biggest strides I ever made in my computing education was to avoid thick books. I picked out several pages that made sense, and then uploaded Olivia’s wisdom into my head. After a short hour, I had a simple crib sheet on dating.

That left only one problem: I had no idea whose party it was, or where it was, and I wasn’t invited. Okay, three problems.

Chapter 10

By the time the last bell had rung, I had managed to find out where the party was. I biked home, stuck the bike in the garage, and then went into the kitchen, where Hannah appeared to be sanitizing the already spotless countertop.

“Hi,” Hannah said, smiling when she saw me. For a moment, I had that spooky feeling again that this was my real house—the one I had lived in as a little boy, and had never left. My parents had never split up, and we still lived in the suburbs. I got good grades, and had never met the police or the FBI. Sure.

“Hello,” I said, dumping my bag on the floor.

“How was your day?”

“Cool as dry ice.”

“Good. What did you do?”

“A whole lot of nothing.”

“You must have done something.”

I launched into a long, dry rendition of the tedious details of my dreary school day, explaining how I had been bored to death by a lecture on the superpower standoff of the past decades. I gave everything I could remember in excruciating detail. These rambling monologues were something I used to do with my own mother, and when it had finally dawned on her that I was being sarcastic, she would get very annoyed, and she’d start shouting at me.

But all Hannah did was smile.

“Sounds interesting,” she said dryly, and went back to cleaning. I went into the living room, picked up the remote, and flipped on the TV. The news was showing a celebrity who had changed her look for a new movie. I sat and listened to the monologue for ten seconds—which is my tolerance for celebrity culture—and then hungry for something to eat, I went into the kitchen.

“Are you making dinner?” I asked Hannah. She said something about sweet potatoes.

“I don’t like any sort of spread on foods,” I said. My mother, on the rare occasion she had cooked, had the habit of spreading something called margarine on food. Some magazine had said margarine was healthy, especially for growing kids, and my mother tried unsuccessfully to introduce it into my diet.

“Okay,” Hannah said.

“Can I get a snack?”

“Sure. Don’t eat too much, though.”

“What are these things?” I said, looking at a pack of crunchy something.

“They’re low-calorie snacks. Try them if you like.”

I grabbed a handful and went upstairs to check out my wardrobe. An hour later, we were all sitting at the table—the whole faux-family, eating sweet potatoes, and saying absolutely nothing. In the silence, I realized why Hannah had been making conversation before. It occurred to me that our domestic setup not only had to look authentic, but it had to sound real, too, like a real family.

Children talking to their mothers were quite normal in most families. I felt stupid for having launched into the somewhat sarcastic monologue earlier. I said that the dinner was very good, and asked Hannah if she had ever worked as a chef somewhere, before she met Dad. Richard chipped in, too, saying that the food was good, and Hannah tried to look unconcerned.

After dinner, I went upstairs to try on some clothes for the party, but couldn't decide what suited me. I used to buy grey clothes, or navy blue, or black, but that didn't seem appropriate now. According to Olivia's dating advice, I was supposed to look clean, neat, and contemporary when going on dates. I figured that since I'd already been dressing contempo-casual, I'd dress pretty much like the cafeteria guy—the one who had been so popular with the two girls. I went into the closet and routed through the clothes.

"Do you know how to do hair?" I asked Hannah. She looked up, and sort of frowned and smiled at the same time. It was an odd expression, and I wondered what had prompted it.

"What's wrong?" I said.

"Are you going out?"

"Yeah. Is there a problem?"

"No, you just look different."

I was worried that my style makeover might look contrived, and scare off the girl. She was a kook and the sweater might give her the wrong idea. Besides, I was aware of fashion faux-pas and their effect on girls.

"Different in a good way, or different in a bad way?"

"You scrub up pretty well," she said. She gave me a look that I had got before from other girls. I remember one boring school trip I was sat next to a couple of girls I knew, who were passing the time by rating the boys. I asked them my score, and I got "cute," and "definitely cute." Cute I can live with.

"Thanks. I think," I said to Hannah. She put gel in my hair, and then spent five minutes combing it one way, and then another, and, finally, making a trendy mess of it. I looked like I had just got out of bed, but in a good way.

"That suits you," she said.

"Thanks."

"Are you going somewhere tonight?" she said, asking the question I had recently dodged. She said it a bit too casually.

"A party."

"Oh, that's nice. Just don't be out too late."

"Okay."

I left it at that, and checked my new image in the mirror. Squarish, but not too much. I looked the part. Now I just had to play it. The cafeteria charmer had been confident and easy-going with the two girls, without saying anything amusing or brilliant. In fact, he had been distinctly dull. That meant that the chat-up lines and conversational charm could be dispensed with, which was just as well.

I tried not to think about the ticking clock that I was against, and I tried to ignore how much I wanted this girl to like me, so that I could recruit her. Girls smell desperation like grizzly bears smell fear. I sat back for a minute and emptied my mind of everything, until it was completely blank. Once my brain was purged of all cares and thoughts, I was ready to attend my first party.

I didn't have to spend long looking for the house. From down the street, I could see people standing at the foot of the driveway, and a bit further up, I could hear the pounding of a subwoofer. I made my way up the path, and looked through the frosted glass in the door, to see if anybody was minding the entrance. As expected, there was a guy standing guard. He looked like he had spent the last ten years sacking quarterbacks. I gave him some of the Federal Bank International's dollars, and asked

him to let my girlfriend (I described Grace) in when she turned up, and then went through the house, and into the kitchen.

There were only two people in the kitchen—a couple holding beer bottles and cigarettes, talking loudly and laughing. I walked outside, down the patio, and into the swimming pool area, which was deserted. I walked back into the kitchen, helped myself to a bottle from an unguarded bunch left on the countertop, opened it, took a swig, and went into the living room. Since my date wasn't there, I took the time to mingle. I made my way from one side of the house to the other. I never understood aimless socializing. People gather together in groups to discuss interests they have in common. But when the only thing some people have in common is that they have nothing in common, why bother? I walked up the stairs, and looked down the hallway.

“Hey, man,” I said in an urban drawl to a guy who was standing at the top of the stairs. “Like, where's the john?”

He pointed silently, and I followed his finger to the bathroom door. I knocked on the door. Hearing no reply, I went in and locked the door. I sat for a moment, contemplating life, the universe, and stick-on tile decorations. I thought about the party Knight must have held when he opened his business. There would have been lots to eat and drink, plus some dancing.

Knight: His parents were well off, and their lawyers had done his plea-bargaining for him.

Knight: He had been a big fish in a small pond. Now he had his own pond.

Knight: He didn't play fair.

There was a knock on the door. I opened it and walked out without looking at the two waiting girls. I walked downstairs, and danced my way through the partiers, to the turn-tables. I spent a minute shouting over the music to the DJ about playing some rock music, but it wasn't that type of party. The partying people filled all the lower rooms in the big house, but Zaqarwi and his friend were to be found. I didn't think that they would have shown anyway. Not his scene. I'd try Gameworld tomorrow. More chance there.

I turned around, and suddenly noticed a girl standing next to me, and for a split-second I didn't realize who it was. She wasn't wearing as much black eye makeup as usual; she wasn't wearing such strange clothes; and her hair wasn't plastered down, like last time. She looked good. It was my date. I mentally scanned the memorized text of Olivia's dating tips, and said, “Hi. You look different.” It was the only thing I could think to say.

“Thanks. I think.”

After that, the conversation ground to a halt, as I waited for my brain to kick in. Maybe you're not supposed to think.

“Do you want a drink?” I said finally.

“Sure.”

“Let's go to the kitchen.”

In the kitchen, I poached another of the bottles from the pack that had been left standing. I handed it to Grace.

“Thanks,” she said.

“It's a cool party.”

“Yeah. Do you know what this music is?”

“No, I don't know. I just asked the DJ, but I couldn't even hear him.”

The music changed suddenly, and I could see that the people in the living room started jumping up and down in time to the beat.

“What music do you like?” asked Grace.

“Me? I don’t know. Everything, I suppose. I just like music.”

“Everything?”

“I nodded.”

“Do you like rap?”

I shrugged. “Any music is better than no music.”

As conversations go, it wasn’t one for prosperity. But she seemed happy with it. I was just about to say something else when someone shouted “Graaace!” and two girls appeared. All three friends began girl-huddling. They talked for a minute, while I sipped my drink and stared at nothing in particular.

“This is David,” Grace said eventually.

“David, this is Emma and Jennifer.”

“Hi,” I said. I didn’t catch which girl was which.

“Hi,” chimed the girls. For some reason, they seemed pleased that I was there.

This was a new experience for me—girls pleased to see me.

“I hear you just moved to Elmwood,” said Emma or Jennifer, conversationally. I overcame my stunned haze, and said, “Yeah, just this week.”

“What you think about it?” she asked. Her tone implied that any answer that was either too sunny or too disrespectful would be suspect.

“My parents like it,” I said cryptically. They nodded, as if I had confirmed their own feelings.

“Did you see Barney anywhere?” the other girl asked Grace.

“He’s in the living room.”

“Nice to meet you, David,” said the girls.

“Likewise.”

The girls went to find Barney. I stood with Grace, racking my brains, which had gone blank again, for something to say.

“Do you want to dance?” Grace said.

“I don’t really dance . . .”

“Come on,” she said. “You got me down here, at least you can manage one dance.”

I followed her into the living room, where the crowd had ceased jumping up in the air, and was now waving their arms from one side to the other, and singing along with the lyrics that I didn’t know. Dancing at parties is pretty easy. Like consumerism in general (in as much as I had bothered to study advertisements), the object was to do the same thing as everybody else, while appearing to be an individualist.

“You’re a good dancer,” Grace said, leaning to shout in my ear.

I am? I thought. “Thanks. You’re pretty good yourself.” Looking around, I could see some of the other girls seemed to be taking it a bit too seriously. They kept raising their arms for some reason, like Oriental women do when dancing. Grace just seemed to be having fun, and thankfully our relationship hadn’t reached the arm-raising stage yet. Then the music changed, and a dance version of a familiar rock song started.

“Hey, I know this guitarist,” I said, listening to the familiar riff. Grace nodded.

“He’s good.” And that was how we spent the next two hours: dancing, talking, resting, going outside for fresh air, talking some more. I felt pretty awkward through it all. I was fluent in numerous computer languages, and used them with ease, but date-talk was not a language I understood.

What could I do? I just relaxed and smiled, and whenever Grace said something, I said something. Anyway, the music was too loud for talking. It was past

ten o'clock when I decided that being at a party wasn't getting me anywhere. So, I was finally in the company of a girl, but now I had to figure out some way to hint at my own agenda—namely computer hacking—just to see how she took it.

"I'm hungry," I said.

"So am I. Let's see if they have anything to eat."

"Why don't we go get some pizza?"

"Don't you want to stay?"

"I haven't eaten since lunch. Do you know anywhere we can go?"

"Yeah, but it's in town, too far to walk."

"I'll get a taxi."

We taxied down to a pizza restaurant, and sat in a booth. We ordered and sat waiting. Through the doorway to the kitchen, I could see some guy making pizzas. *That might have been me, I thought, had I not made the decision to work for the FBI, and get paid for dating quirky girls.*

As the night got later, my idea of getting to know this girl to the point where she would be willing to let me hang around her house began to seem increasingly idiotic. In the time frame I was supposed to be operating in, I couldn't think of any way to manage it. I couldn't even wedge the subject of computers into the conversation. I realized that I had goofed completely. Grace seemed to be completely straight. She probably wasn't involved in her father's business at all.

Where had I got the dumb idea from in the first place? I wondered. I gave up on it completely. Fifteen minutes and one half of a pizza later, I did another one-eighty-degree turn. Of course, there was no other option. This girl was the only possible avenue to hacking. I'd have to see it through to the conclusion.

We sat talking for another half hour, but there never seemed to be a good opportunity to bring up the topic of computers. It was going on twelve o'clock, when we got into a taxi, and had a silent journey back to Grace's house. I walked with her up to the door.

I combed my memory of Olivia's dating tips for post-dating rituals. Apparently, I had to thank my date.

"Thanks for showing me around Elmwood," I said. She hadn't shown me around, as such.

"I had a good time," Grace replied. A good time? Really?

"Me, too. I was thinking of going to Gameworld, tomorrow. Do you want to come?" Casual, Ripley, very casual. Grace's eyes lifted, as if she was checking a mental diary.

"Isn't that right over on the other side of town?"

She had answered a question with a question, something I had noticed the girls doing with the cafeteria guy.

"Yeah," I said, ignoring her apparent lack of interest. "Do you want to go?"

"Seems a long way to go." Another block, I thought, something else I had noticed the girls doing with the cafeteria guy. Strange.

"We could get a taxi."

Grace stared at me silently, as if wondering if I was worth the bother. She moved her head back a little bit, like one of the shoppers at the mall, eyeing up a special offer. Buy now, or caveat emptor? I prompted her.

"What do you say?"

"Okay."

"Cool. See you tomorrow? About seven p.m.?"

"See you," she said.

On the drive home, an echo of the party song was bouncing around in my head. Grace had said that she had had a good time. Strange. And she'd made me ask her twice to go out again. Odd.

The taxi driver, probably bored, began talking to me, and I gave him the official line. I was new in town. I had just met a girl. We had danced. The taxi pulled up outside the house, and I paid. I got out, and crept into the house. Both of my parents had gone to bed. But when I went upstairs, Hannah came out of her room, and smiled at me.

"Did you have a nice time at the party?"

"Yeah," I said with my usual abruptness. Then I turned back. Some twinge of feeling for Hannah—or whatever her real name was—hit me. She was stuck here, the same as I was. In a way, she had sided with me during the argument. Feeling somewhat guilty for my abruptness, I turned and looked at her with what was probably a softened look. "It was a good night. Thanks for doing my hair."

"That's okay."

"Goodnight."

"Goodnight."

I lay on my bed, looking up out of the window. The night sky was clear, and the stars were out. There was Orion.

I thought over the events of the evening. Nothing much had happened, and I had hardly made any progress toward my goals. But it had been better than sitting in my room. At least I had a feeling of moving forwards. I wondered idly how much Hannah had really known about Grace and the party. I figured that I might have been followed, observed, and assessed. There was probably somebody always watching me. Maybe there always would be. But I thought that Philips surely couldn't mind me having a girlfriend. It was cover. I was doing things my own way. Like the crew of the *USS Enterprise*, my partners in crime prevention had a no-interference clause in their contract.

That was a thought to go to sleep on: Philips and Garman and Richard and Hannah dressed in Star Trek uniforms, beaming down to the dark planet Malik. I was the anonymous security guard in red—the one who beams down just to get zapped, or driven insane, or torn apart by intergalactic terrorists.

Chapter 11

Saturday morning. Normally, not having to go to school meant that I could get on with my education. But I was working for the man. I played with my official notebook computer for an hour, and re-familiarized myself with a few hacker tools, getting them ready for the main event, assuming it ever happened. But I was far more interested in working on my own machine, the one that was still stuck in my rented locker at school. So far, I hadn't even touched it.

For another few hours, I sat around, supposedly watching TV, but with my brain going through my next moves. At about ten o'clock, I went into town and bought a poster for the back of the bedroom door, and some music. The rest of the afternoon was spent listening to music, and playing games on the machine that the FBI had got for the purpose of making their house look like a home. I had been playing for almost four hours when I heard the folks pull into the driveway. Richard came in, followed by Hannah, carrying half a dozen bags.

"Hi, David."

"Hi."

"Are you still playing video games?"

That was one of those rhetorical questions.

"Your dad and I are going out tonight to see a movie; will you be okay on your own?"

Hannah's tone was casual and conversational. If she was digging for information, you wouldn't have known from her voice.

"Yeah, I'll be fine," I said.

"Won't you get bored?"

"Not me."

"What are you going to be doing?"

"I found a place across town, Gameworld. I'll go there and play some video games. It beats staring at a screen all night."

"Gameworld?"

"Yeah."

"That's nice. We'll drop you off there when we go out."

"No, thanks. I'll get a taxi."

"We're going into town anyway."

"I gotta pick up someone on the way," I said, matching Hannah's casual tone.

"Oh. A friend?" She made it sound like an innocent question that any mother might ask.

"It's just someone from school."

"You have a new friend?"

"Yeah," I said, as if I was trying to play the video game, and she was disturbing me. Maybe she would leave it at that. We couldn't talk about anything in the house, so there was no need to press it.

"We could give him a lift, too."

"*She* lives on the other side of town."

"Are you seeing a girl?" Hannah said. Her surprise was evident.

"I'm not seeing a girl. I am just going with her to Gameworld."

"Well, I didn't mean to pry, but you may as well let us give you a lift. We can pick up your friend on the way."

"Will you just drop it, please?"

Everything went quiet for a minute. Then Richard, who had apparently been listening from the kitchen. “I’m hungry. How about some Chinese food?”

“It’ll save me cooking,” Hannah said.

“What about you, David?”

It wasn’t an offer I could decline. This time, Richard waited until we turned out of the subdivision and onto the main road before starting the inquisition.

“So, Romeo, why didn’t you tell us about this girl?”

I looked astonished. “What are you talking about?”

“This time Richard is right,” Hannah said, almost angry for the first time.

“We want to know who the girl is.”

“She’s nobody. She’s just cover.”

“Cover for what, exactly?” Richard said.

“What do you think?”

“How much do you know about this girl?” asked Hannah.

I sighed. “It’s just some girl. She listens to pop music and wears trendy clothes. She never blew anything up. I overheard Zaqarwi’s friend talking about a big party this weekend. I figured it might be a good chance to bump into him, only I’m not invited, but this girl was going, and I got her to invite me. I told you I was going to a party.”

“Did you meet Zaqarwi?” Richard said.

“Of course I didn’t,” I snapped. “I would have told you. I went to see if he was there. But I heard that he hangs out at Gameworld, so that’s where I am gonna be tonight. Hence I need a girl. I gotta have someone to hang out with. If I keep socializing by myself, it’s gonna look to Zaqarwi like I’m following him.”

My speech over, I turned my head to look out of the window. The car pulled up at a Chinese restaurant, and nobody moved.

“What’s her name?” Richard said. He was annoyed at being talked to like that.

“Grace.”

“Grace what?”

I hadn’t got Grace’s surname, but Mack had been the name on the email of the eBay account.

“I think it’s Mack,” I said. Richard took out his phone, and hit autodial. I didn’t see who he was ringing, but I suspected that it was Philips’s number or some other FBI number. A second later, he barked into the phone, “Run a check on a Grace Mack and her family.”

For a minute, we all sat in silence. Then he announced, “All right, she checks out.”

“Man,” I said. “You must think that there are terrorists on every corner.”

He glared at me in the car’s rearview mirror. “Your girlfriend’s stepfather is known to the local police as a fence. He’s got a sheet for selling stolen car radios, and assault.”

So, the guy with the ponytail was not Grace’s real father.

“I’m not going with him,” I said. Hannah looked at Richard, and Richard looked at Hannah.

“Look,” I said, “I’m playing the cards I’ve got. I’ll let you see them when I’m ready. I promise that I won’t keep anything from you. It’s just the way I work. I get things done, and then talk about them. The opposite from ninety-nine percent of everybody else on the planet. But it’s how I work.”

That seemed to end the conversation. We ate Chinese food, and then left. Nobody said anything all the way to Grace’s house. I introduced Grace to my so-

called parents, but there was too much tension in the air for any relaxed conversation during the drive. It was almost 7:30 p.m. when we arrived at Gameworld, which described itself as “The New Frontier in Gaming.”

After Richard and Hannah dropped us off, Grace and I walked into the establishment.

“Nerd world,” Grace said, with mild amusement. We got a few feet in and looked around. Near to the entrance were some of the older “classic” arcade games. At first I had no idea why they put them there, instead of the newer games. But then I realized that they probably had placed the good stuff in the middle of the park, so as to discourage people from loitering near the entrance, and to encourage them to enter into the new frontier, to boldly go and play the newer games. Some systems are counterintuitive until you consider them from a money-making perspective.

We walked past ads of immense virtual worlds, with kids standing half in and half out of them—like the phantom tollbooth—and into the classics section. The place was practically deserted, but there were a few nerdy guys enjoying the games. There were even a couple of girlfriends, too, waiting patiently, without a trace of boredom on their faces. As I understood it from my data on dating, girls like to do activities together. What those activities were apparently wasn’t as important as the sharing aspect. When I first read that, it sounded dumb, but the evidence seemed to support the idea.

Gameworld was more my scene than last night’s party. I moved around the people at Gameworld a lot easier than the party-goers. With these people, I didn’t feel any awkwardness.

“Where to first?” I asked Grace.

“I don’t mind.”

“I’ll race you around Monaco.”

We headed over to the classics section. Here were the golden oldies. Space Invaders, Galaga, Phoenix, the games that I had played in between cracking sessions, partly because my homebrew computer wouldn’t play anything else, and partly because I liked to spend time with my disassembler-monitor, de-engineering the game code, to see how it had been written, and changing it around to get infinite lives, or to make the characters go through walls—stuff like that. Whoever said I was a computer genius didn’t know me. Anything I did took hundreds of hours of sitting and learning instruction sets, and staring at printouts—certainly not genius.

I sat Grace in a surround-screen racing car game, which had been mind-blowingly advanced back in the day, stuck several coins into the slot, and then got in beside her.

“Select automatic transmission, so you don’t have to shift gears,” I said. We raced around the streets, hitting everything but the finishing line, Grace laughing whenever she drove off a Monaco cliff, or smashed into a shop window. Next up was a game of Phoenix, followed by Gorf. We went from machine to machine. I had to keep moving around, keeping my eye out for Zaqarwi. But Grace didn’t seem to mind. She seemed happy just to go with the flow.

While we were playing a doubles game of pong (in black and white), my eye caught a guy in the corner, with his arms around his girlfriend, as he showed her how to shoot the marauding aliens. He kept pointing out what to shoot. I made a mental note of it, for future reference. After half an hour in the retro section, I followed the big signs and moved into the virtual-reality section. We tried a game of something called “Otherworld.” Its objective was to shoot at other players, and after the first

minute, I heard a shout come over the headset, something that I might have once laughed at:

“Frag the noob!” That would be me.

After that, we lingered around the slot machine section for a minute, but there was nothing of interest—games or Zaqarwi—and we soon left. I looked at my watch. Of the three hours I was supposed to spend in the place, we had been there only ninety minutes.

I spotted a coffee shop, and figured that we could waste half an hour inside.

“Do you want something to drink?” I asked.

Grace nodded, and we went in.

“You’re the only person I know who drinks decaffeinated coffee,” Grace said.

“Well, everybody else was drinking the real stuff, so I thought I’d switch to decaffeinated, just to be different.”

“So, you’re a rebel?”

“A rebel without a clue.”

Grace smiled. I liked that she smiled at my feeble jokes.

“You know, I don’t even know your full name.”

“David Johnson.”

“Middle name?”

“None. What’s your full name?”

“Grace Mack.”

“So, how long have you lived in Elmwood, Miss Mack?”

“Pretty much all my life. How come you moved here?”

I shrugged.

“Where do you live?” I told her my address.

“It’s nice up there.”

“It’s pretty boring. Nothing ever happens. The highlight of the day is when Mrs. Brown’s Alsatian goes after Mrs. White’s poodle.” That got another smile.

We talked for the best part of an hour—just random stuff like that. I had no idea that girls like to talk about where you used to live, or where you had gone on holiday. Watching movies must have given me the idea that everything you said to girls had to be wisecracks and one-liners.

“Do you want to get a last game in?”

“Okay.”

We went back to the retro section. I stuck a coin in a Defender game, and got wasted almost immediately. I lost three lives in less than a minute. I was out of practice, but Defender was always a killer. Its sole purpose in life was to take your money, and throw you off. I hit the joystick, in mild annoyance.

“I must be out of touch,” I said. I turned to go, and almost collided with someone coming the other way.

“Sorry,” I said, before I even realized who it was. It was Zaqarwi, with another guy I had never seen. Zaqarwi smiled.

“That’s all right.” I waited for him to say something further. He was the recruiter, after all, not me.

“I think my high score is safe,” he said, pointing a finger at the screen. I grinned.

“I haven’t played Defender for years. It kicked me straight off.”

“You’re David, right?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m Abdul. This is Al.” He indicated his silent friend.

“Hi,” I said to Al, who quietly said hi in return.

“This is Grace.” Grace said hi.

“I saw your hack the other day,” continued Zaqarwi, referring to the whiteboard hack.

I grinned. “I just got bored, and started poking around.”

“How did you do it?”

“Simple,” I said, and gave Zaqarwi a hacker-to-hacker synopsis of how I had hijacked the whiteboard.

“I checked the address of my machine, noticed the last number was the same as the asset tag on the side of the computer case.” Zaqarwi nodded.

“Everybody was talking about it.”

“I normally like to keep a low profile, but I couldn’t resist such an easy target. I got bored.”

“Me, too. Maybe we should get a network game going sometime.”

“That would make class a bit more interesting. I noticed that they arranged the computers so that the teacher can always see what is going on.”

“We tried to talk Logan into letting us get a game together last Christmas, but he got too nervous. This year, we’ll set something up without him knowing. The Elmwood Christmas Frag.”

I laughed. I was surprised by Zaqarwi. He had this deadpan way of delivering lines. And it’s always nice to meet a fellow computer nerd. If it wasn’t for the knowledge that he was a terrorist, I might have enjoyed the conversation.

“Count me in,” I said. Then his face changed, becoming more serious.

“We have a club you might be interested in.”

“Sounds interesting. When do you meet?”

“Sometime next week. I’ll let you know.”

“Okay.”

“I gotta go. I’ll see you in class.”

“See you.”

“What was that about?” said my escort. I explained about my whiteboard hack in less technical terms, and she was amused, but genuinely puzzled.

“Why did you do it?”

“Just for, you know, the challenge.” She didn’t seem to understand. We taxied back to Grace’s house, and I had the taxi wait, while I went to the door.

“I had a good time tonight,” Grace said.

“I would have thought it would have bored you, all those computer games.”

“I wasn’t bored.” Grace ran her fingers through her hair, which my dating tips had told me was a good sign. Grooming behavior, Olivia had called it. I waited for the sprinkler system to come on, leaving us giggling and running for cover, like in the movies, but nothing happened. I waited for the clouds to pull back, setting free a romantic moon, but nothing happened. The Macks had no sprinklers, the moon was hardly showing that night, and the stuff Hollywood makes up can be quite misleading.

“Wait a minute,” Grace said suddenly. “I’ve got something for you.”

“You’ve got something for me?”

Grace disappeared into the house, and then came back a minute later, holding a cell phone.

“You said that you wanted a phone. You can have my old one, if you want. It’s nothing special, but it works.” She held it out to me.

“You don’t mind?”

“No, I was keeping it as a spare, but I don’t use it.”

“Thanks!”

“You’re welcome.”

“And thanks for showing me around again.”

“No problem.”

“See you in school.”

“See you.” Grace went inside.

I pocketed the phone, and went home.

“Hi, David,” Hannah said, as I went into the house. “Did you have a good time?”

“Yes. I played some of the old games that I used to play.”

“That’s nice.”

“And I made a new friend.”

I woke as usual at 6 a.m. the next day, Sunday. I didn’t go down for breakfast. I listened to music, and flicked through the radio stations. At ten o’clock, I was too hungry to stay upstairs any longer, and went down, hoping that Hannah and Richard would have gone out. But Hannah was in the kitchen, writing.

“Good morning, David,” she said, with indefatigable cheeriness. I said hello, got some cereal, and went back to my room. An hour later, I heard a knock on the door.

“Come in,” I said, and looked up to see Hannah sticking her head around the door.

“I’m going out. Richard’s gone to get something from the store. Will you be okay on your own?”

“Yes,” I said.

“Was there anything you wanted to do today?”

“No, I’ll just take it easy. I could do with a bit of a rest.”

She was about to back out of the room when she spotted the cereal bowl, sitting on the floor at the side of the bed.

“Don’t forget to take your bowl back to the kitchen.”

“Yes, Mom,” I agreed, with a wry grin, and she left. I got off the bed, picked up the bowl, and headed to the kitchen. Through the window, I could see she was now in front of the garage, putting on a helmet, ready to go cycling. I opened the door.

“Are you going bike riding?” —a dumb question if ever I heard one.

“Just a few miles,” she said. She didn’t sound too enthusiastic. I wondered what the FBI’s yearly fitness tests involved. “Do you want to come?”

“Okay.”

“I set a pretty hard pace,” she said, with a hint of a wicked smile. I smiled back.

“I used to ride my bike all over the city. I’ll manage.”

“Get changed and we’ll go.”

I changed and followed Hannah out of the driveway. We rode to a nearby park, where I tested my suspension out on a few natural jumps. Then we circled the dirt track twice, and after half an hour, Hannah was ready to ride back. We sprinted the last hundred yards, and I let Hannah win.

“You haven’t even broken a sweat,” she said, looking at me, her hands on her thighs, breathing deeply.

“I used to ride everywhere,” I said.

Inside, I headed for the fridge, and got some juice.

“Don’t eat too much,” Hannah said. “I’m going to be cooking.”

“It’s just juice.”

I went upstairs and lay on the bed once again. I didn't bother to shower or change. I just lazed on the bed, going over my plan for the next few days, as meticulously as an inspector checking for holes in a nuclear reactor. Apart from dinner, I stayed in my room, and it turned out that the bike ride was the highlight of the day.

Chapter 12

At 9 a.m. the next morning, I arrived bright and cheery at school. By 9:10 a.m., I was dull and bored. The only interesting thing that happened took place after my first class, as I was leaving the classroom. I was bumped into by some oversized guy wearing a sports shirt. Apparently, I was in his way. I stood aside to let him pass. It was like that in jail, too. Everybody is told what to do, and the only outlet for that grief is to tell other people what to do.

At lunch time, I found Grace, and we sat talking again. I tried several times to bring up a topic that was on my mind, but didn't know how to go about it. So far, everything had been going well. I had made good progress, considering the short time I had been working at it. But I hadn't yet found somewhere quiet where I could begin hacking in private. Somewhere like Grace's house. But I couldn't figure out how to approach the subject.

"Grace, do you mind if I use your room for some illegal computer hacking?"

"No, go right ahead. When the cops turn up, I'll tell them you were teaching me basic war-dialing, and MAC spoofing."

Somehow, I didn't think that it would go like that. I looked at Grace, sitting across the table from me. She had finished her liquid lunch, and was toying with the empty can, talking about something that annoyed her. Putting my problems aside, and tuning back into what she was saying, I realized that she was talking about downloading music from the Internet, without paying for it. Stealing. She had heard about other people doing it, but when she had tried to do it, she had got nowhere. At last, my cue.

"Why don't you just download from Monolith?"

"What's that?"

"It's where you can get music from."

"You mean like the latest stuff?"

"Some of it."

"How much does it cost?"

"It doesn't cost anything."

"Really? Why?"

"It's kind of sharing, you know. It's not actually legal, but people do it."

"Do I have to share some of mine?"

"Yes, that's the idea."

"Can you show me how?"

"Sure."

What had I been glooming about? This was almost too easy.

"How about tonight?" I asked.

"Okay."

When the last bell rang, I phoned Hannah and told her that I'd be going to my friend's house for dinner. I didn't say which friend.

I was surprised to find that Grace's room was entirely normal. I don't know why—maybe it was the dark eye makeup—but I had half-expected it would be painted black, or something like that. I looked at my watch. It was nearly four-thirty. I hoped that I'd have time to contact Knight Securities Inc., before they closed at five. I was thinking of hiring their services, and needed a couple of references from them.

Computer security companies and reformed hackers turned white hats are a popular challenge for hackers, and just one well-publicized crack could leave them out of business forever. So you can imagine how heavy Knight would have laid on the

security for his own network. That meant that I'd have to go in through a back door, and the easiest route was through one of Knight's clients. Knight would have to periodically remotely monitor them for break-ins. That meant that at least once a day, there would be a connection leading back into Knight Security Inc.—a connection that I might be able to tap into.

"This computer is really old," Grace said, powering up the machine under her desk. I took a look at it. It was a couple of years old, which was surprising, since her dad did such a nice line in stolen hardware.

"It's okay for playing music," I said. I moved to the keyboard, and quickly surfed over to Monolith's site, where I downloaded the software.

"I am putting this program on your machine, so you can exchange music files with other people."

After the installation had finished, I said, "Give me a band name."

"Trauma," Grace said. I typed 'trauma' into the search box, and a couple of files came up on the list.

"Now right-click and download them. You can preview them, to see what they sound like."

Grace clicked the preview button, and a blast of angst-pop music that sounded like it had been recorded in a grain silo blared out.

"Hey, it works," Grace said.

I looked at my watch. It was twenty to five. I left Grace downloading, and took out my own notebook, booted it, and got busy transferring my hacker programs from the memory stick to the computer. I started to unpack my toolkit, the collection of scripts and utilities that I kept with me whenever possible, in the way that a tradesman keeps his toolbox in his truck.

Getting set up is important to me. If I know where everything is, then I generally work a lot faster. I used to spend half an hour getting ready so that I could spend ten minutes hacking, rather than the other way around. I did a couple of familiar registry hacks, resized the page file, and turned off a couple of services that were sure to do nothing but take up resources and let in Trojans and hackers. I lifted my head, to find Grace staring at me.

"Is everything okay?" I asked.

"Yeah."

"I mean, you don't mind me using my computer?"

"I don't mind."

"You seem a bit spooked or something."

"It's nothing . . . It's just that I am a bit surprised because . . ." Her shoulders slumped, as if she was puzzled, but then she rolled her eyes, and was smiling again. "Nothing. So what are you doing?"

"I'm setting up my computer. Do you mind if I use your Internet connection?"

"I don't mind. I'm going to get something to drink. Do you want anything?"

"Unleaded?"

"Huh?"

"Decaf."

"Sugar?"

"No thanks. Do you mind if I make a phone call?" I said, taking out my phone.

"Go ahead." When Grace had gone, I connected up to the Yellow Pages site, and typed "Knight" into the search box, along with the ZIP code for Knight's area. It came up with a listing for Knight Securities Inc.

"Good afternoon. Knight Security Services," said a woman's voice.

“Hello,” I said, in my best no-nonsense businessman’s voice. “My name is David Johnson. I’m calling about your security services. I think our computers might have been broken into.”

“Yes, sir. I’ll put you through to someone who can help.” The line clicked, and for a worrying moment, I thought that I might be put through to Knight, who would probably recognize my voice.

But then a different voice said, “Hello, Mister Johnson, this is Charles Forbes. I understand that you think your computers might be targeted by criminals?”

“Well, I hope not,” I continued, “but I want to be sure. Maybe you can do something for me.”

“I’m sure we can. How we usually start is to send out a consultant, just to do a quick assessment of the situation. What sort of business are you in?”

“I run a jewelry business. I lend pieces to the fashion magazines. If your wife reads magazines, then there’s a good chance that the accessories some of the models are wearing come from us.”

“Oh, yes, my wife’s a big magazine reader. And can I ask you, are you based in Washington?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“Great. Well, if I can get the address from you, I could arrange for a consultant to call on you at a convenient . . .”

“Sure, but look, I’d like to get a couple of references from you, first. Is that possible?”

“Certainly, sir, no problem at all. We have many satisfied customers. Can I take your address?”

My address? I’d have to stall him.

“Yes, it’s . . . I just got a call on the other line. Sorry, but I’ve got to take this. Can I get back to you?”

“Please do,” said Forbes cheerfully. “I’ll have those references waiting.”

“I’ll call you back in ten minutes.” I checked my watch. It was nearly five. Grace walked in, and handed me the coffee. Then she went back to her computer, and there was silence in the room.

“You have a lot of trophies,” I said, just to be saying something. A shelf on the other side of the room was covered with sports medals.

“I’ve had those for years.”

“What are they for?”

“They’re for shooting.”

“Shooting? You mean guns?”

Grace grinned. “Nah, I’m kidding. They’re for running, but I don’t do that anymore.”

“I like cycling. I never won any trophies though. Come to think of it, I was too busy to enter any races. Do you like cycling?”

“No.”

That was the end of that conversation. I rang Forbes, and true to his word, he had the references ready. He gave me the names and addresses of two of Knight’s clients, Mr. J. McFey of Paktran Inc. and Donald Aston of J. B. Enterprises.

“Thanks very much,” I said. “You’ve been very helpful.”

“Not at all. You can call me any time you want to talk about anything.” I said I would, and rang off.

The two references I had in my hand were two possible backdoors into Knight’s lair. I slipped the details into my pocket and had a quick look over my new

phone. Since the advent of mobiles and digital telephone networks, phreaking had died out a bit. Thanks to the new technology—which in those days was almost as secure as a wet paper bag—phreaks were to some extent on the rise once more.

I had a quick look around the wireless routers in the neighborhood. My scan detected half a dozen good connections to routers that I could use. Two of them had no password on at all. Mr. Brown and Mrs. White had just taken them out of the package, and plugged them in, like it showed on the box. Another one had a NeoTeks home firewall, which had a default manufacturer's password still set. I knew NeoTeks used "router" and "router" as the default username and password. One of the other three had old WEP encryption, which I cracked within a few minutes. I connected to one of those, and had a look around the Internet.

When I looked up, Grace was sitting at her desk, transferring music to her player.

"Did you eat yet?" I said.

"Not yet."

"Wanna go out?"

"You want to order pizza?"

"Again? No, I wanna go out."

"Where to?"

"They have these things called coffee shops."

"Duh. I mean the only good places are in town."

"So?"

"So, it's a long walk."

"They have these things called taxis."

"They have these things called taxis," repeated Grace, acidly. I took my phone out, and dialed the local cab company.

"I'm going out," Grace shouted down the hall, as she put on her jacket.

Fifteen minutes later, we were in Java Hut, sipping drinks and discussing entropic aspects of the non-existent universe, while we were waiting for the pepperoni to arrive. But I was thinking about Knight once again. I had found a safe haven for my hacking exploits, and a willing accomplice. But I hadn't quite sealed the deal.

"Grace, can I ask you something?"

"Sure."

"How would feel about me coming over to study, after school, for a few nights?"

"To study?"

"Yeah."

"At my house?" There was something odd in Grace's voice.

"Yes." Now that I had said it, it sounded dumb. We had no classes together, and there was nothing to study.

"It's just for a few nights," I said, stumbling on when I should have shut my mouth, until I had figured out what I wanted to say.

"I could pay you."

"Pay me?" Grace frowned.

"Yes. A hundred dollars for the rest of the week."

"What are you talking about?"

I took a deep breath. Time to level.

"Look, you know I just moved to Elmwood, right?" No answer. Grace had stopped eating, and was looking over toward the nearest exit, ready to bolt when the weirdo made a grab for her.

“Well, part of the reason that my family moved here was because I got into trouble.”

The two girls at the next table suddenly stopped talking.

I lowered my voice. “I got caught computer hacking. It wasn’t anything major. I didn’t steal anything. But I was doing something that I wasn’t supposed to be doing, and I got into trouble.”

“How much trouble?” Grace said quietly.

“My dad went crazy. He’s in security, and he had to leave his job. We came out here, and now he makes sure that I don’t use any computers unsupervised.”

“You just bought a computer,” Grace said, the unattractive line in the middle of her forehead getting deeper.

“Yeah, and I keep it in my locker, where my parents can’t see it. If they knew about it, I’d be grounded every night for a year. I can do some programming at lunchtimes, but I have to get it set up, do some downloads, and things. If I could just come to your house for a few days, I’d be able to get it ready.” It still sounded suspect.

“Why didn’t you tell me the truth?” Grace said.

I shrugged.

“I didn’t want to tell you that I had got into trouble.”

“Did you get arrested?”

“No.”

“Then what’s the big deal?”

“Ask my dad. He went off the rails. He said we have to move. He even banned me from having a mobile phone.”

“Is that why you wanted a phone?”

“Yes. How about it? Would you let me use your place just for a few days?”

“A few days?”

“Yeah.”

“So, let me get this straight, you want to be a computer programmer, but your parents won’t let you, and you want to come to my house and program computers there.”

“Yes.”

“But how can your parents stop you from programming computers?”

“I guess you’ve never met my dad. I am banned. Totally and completely. He wants me to go to medical school, but I can’t stand that sort of thing. I just like computers. It’s the only thing I want to do.”

“Okay.”

I breathed a sigh of relief.

“Thanks. You won’t tell anyone, will you? About my getting caught hacking? It’s a shameful family secret, never to be uttered.”

“I won’t say anything. I guess that’s why you have that aura of mysteriousness about you.”

I didn’t reply. If there was a good answer to that one, I didn’t know it.

“Why don’t you want to go to med school?”

“It’s just not me.”

“I wish I could go.”

“Yeah? Doctor Mack?”

She shrugged. Then she picked up her coffee and drank some. That was a good sign.

I had to change the subject to something else.

“So, what do people do in Elmwood, when they are not eating pizza?”

“Oh, you know, movies, bowling . . . computer hacking.”

Funny. I let her have that one, and finished my pizza.

As we got out of the taxi back at her house, I asked, “Can I leave my stuff at your house?”

“Sure. No worries.”

Chapter 13

The next day, after school, I went to Grace's house. I unpacked my computer, and went through the motions of getting everything set up the way I wanted it, and then started dry running through possible scenarios. I was surprised at how easily I had got back into my old habits. It was as easy as getting back into bike riding.

I was also surprised at how quickly I had got used to being in Grace's small shabby house. The place was old, and it was occupied by at least one criminal. But there was something easy about being there, and it certainly beat being at home with Hannah and Richard. Not that they were difficult to live with. But knowing that I, a convicted felon and an almost convicted terrorist, was cooped up with two medal-winning feds was a bit much. It was nice to be somewhere I wasn't looking over my shoulder constantly.

"Want to go out later?" I asked Grace.

"Where to?"

"We could get some food." She frowned, in a distinctly we-did-that-last-night way, and I switched to plan B. That was one of the lessons I had got from Olivia's tips: always have a plan B.

"I could do with a look around the mall."

"Okay. What time?"

"Later."

"I'm going to turn on the TV, okay?"

"It doesn't bother me," I said.

Grace switched on her TV, and flipped through the channels. I put the noise out of my head, and got busy hacking. For the next hour, the world, the TV, and Grace all dissolved and vanished.

A hack goes like this: First you identify your target, which was simple in this case, since Knight now ran his own company. Then you do your research, start phoning the business and asking innocent-sounding questions, or dumpster diving. After that, you find a flaw in the network's security that allows you to run a program. That program can give you a user account. You start guessing passwords, with the intention of giving your account administrator privileges. After that, you install your own backdoor, wipe the security logs clean of any traces, and don't go there for a while. After you've laid low for a while, you go back and look around, and usually discover that while everybody else was looking in Area 51, Area 52 was where the government really stashed the alien spaceship. That essentially is how a hack goes.

In this case, I didn't have the time, resources, or even the space in which to work. I had to break all the rules about breaking the rules. All I had was a week or two at the most, a stolen computer, and a girl's bedroom complete with stuffed animals, perfume bottles, and Road-Runner-shaped slippers.

So, the first task was to have a quick look at Knight's operation. I assumed that there was no way in, but part of me had to confirm that at least I hadn't been complacent. Even if I failed, at least I had worked systematically, without overlooking the obvious.

Companies like Knight's connected their servers to the Internet by registering with the authorities. I executed a script that pulled registration information for Knight Securities Inc. from the registrar, and got an immediate hit for his DNS (domain name service, which converts numbered Internet addresses to regular names like spods.com). The DNS value would be something I could put into a scanner. Such scanners can be incredibly fast, testing thousands of Internet addresses in little time.

But in cases like these, the scanner I used was very slow. It had to be, because any storm of activity would be picked up by Knight. If you just scan slow and wide, fewer alarm bells go off. I also modified it to switch wireless connections at every failed attempt. That way, a different source address would show up on Knight's server. Again, that would cause fewer alarm bells to go off. But it meant waiting for several hours, while the results came in.

I left that running, and turned my attention to J. B. Enterprises. I tried the same series of steps, and got the same results. Nothing immediately obvious was showing as open.

I did a direct scan, not as worried about creating noise as I would be with Knight. After all, most companies can expect several such scans daily. It would just be lost with the others. But I got nothing from it anyway. I knew that Knight had a preference for Microsoft operating systems and the Cisco networking kit. I telnet-ed into the gateway, just to see if I could get a banner, but got nothing. I picked up my phone and rang J. B. Enterprises.

"Hello. J. B. Enterprises. How may I direct your call?"

I asked to be directed to the network manager.

"John Baxter. One moment, please."

"Hello," said Baxter in a slow drawl.

"Hi, there. I'm David Johnson. I'm calling from Network Solutions, Inc. We currently have a special offer on network switches." I heard Baxter sigh. He was a busy network administrator. He didn't need some cold-calling sales jerk to bend his ear.

"I don't want anything," he said bluntly.

I saw Grace looking at me. She must have heard me, and wondered what I was doing.

"That's okay, sorry to have bothered you."

"Yeah."

"Before I go, do you mind if I ask if you have considered using Network Solutions hardware . . ."

"We use Cisco exclusively. I couldn't buy what you are selling, even if I wanted to. Company policy."

Well, I thought, at least I know you're using a Cisco kit.

"Goodbye." The phone went dead. Grace was looking at me, as if to ask, "What was all that about?"

"You don't want to know."

I ignored her and went back to looking at my computer. I wasn't disappointed by these early failures. For a start, I knew that Knight was always going to be hard. Also, I knew that somewhere on one of his client's machines, someone will have left a port open, ready and waiting for me to talk to it. Some office genius would have invented his own backdoor, so that he didn't have to actually drive to the office to check his emails. Or some office slacker somewhere will have dismissed the notice every time it had popped up to tell him to update his machine. Finally, there were sixty-five-thousand ports on each machine, and I had several days to explore them.

Most computer delinquents I had met had more self-confidence than skills, and most of the hacks I had witnessed were not especially clever. They didn't replace kernels with almost identical twins, they didn't find clever ways to trip up Tripwire. They just had more patience than the system administrators had time.

But in this case, I had no time, and I would have to use some smarts. While I left the script running, I racked my brains for some inspiration. One idea was to see if

anyone had previously attempted an attack on Knight, and left a few details somewhere on the Internet.

I surfed around, and while there were a few mentions of Knight having gone into business and becoming a marked target, there was nothing useful.

I carried on looking, typing on my notebook's keyboard. Hack, hack, hack. That was the sound I liked. It was the sound of the golden age of computers, of the old teletypes and line-printers. Maybe that was where the word 'hack' had come from—those noisy machines.

It must have been something else to have lived in those difficult days. I read that artists appreciate their restrictions (presumably not including the restriction of not working), and such circumstances must have forced a programmer to be simultaneously creative and exacting—two opposite talents—while working on such ancient hardware, trying to find ways to knock a few bytes off of a program to save space.

“Do you want something to drink?” I came out of hack mode to see Grace walking back into the room, now wearing a T-shirt.

“Yes, thanks.” Grace went out, and came back a few minutes later, holding two cups of coffee. She put mine down on the desk, without saying anything.

“Where's the bathroom?”

“Last door on the left.” She turned to the TV. That was something else I liked about Grace. I couldn't really put a name to it. But my mother and her friends always seemed to be on guard when I was around. Everything would go quiet, but I could sense a certain tension. But Grace was relaxed. Normal. As if she wasn't even thinking about me. I didn't get it, I didn't understand the difference, but it was a very good sign. I went down the hall, and into the bathroom. When I came out, I nearly collided with Grace's stepdad.

“Hi,” I said.

“Hi,” he replied, walking past. We left it at that. I went back into Grace's room.

“I nearly crashed into your dad,” I said. Grace, who was leaning her head on one side to comb her hair, rolled her eyes. I picked up my cup of coffee, took a sip, and then went back to my computer.

Hack, hack, hack. Maybe the sound referred to the act of persistently chopping away at something. I checked the Knight scan, which had turned up nothing at all. He was firewalled and patched to the max. As a hacker, he knew all of the tricks in the book.

It was past nine o'clock when I came back down to planet Earth. I looked around. Grace was now lying on the bed, staring blankly at some serial drama on TV. I was just going to say something when I noticed two long white scars, one on either side of her spine, where her shirt wasn't covering her back. Each of the jagged lines was patterned with little white points, and it looked like her back had been cut open and sown back together again, Frankenstein fashion. *She probably had a childhood illness, and had surgery*, I thought.

I've got scars everywhere—on my chest (it is actually a burn mark), my left knee (accident), my right eyebrow (had my head pushed into a wall), a little one on my left elbow (that one's a mystery)—all from when I was a too-curious kid, and also on my abdomen from surgery. I wondered if it would be okay to make a joke about it—you know, comparing scars—but it didn't seem appropriate. I couldn't tell how she would take it.

Just then, Grace suddenly turned her head to look at me. I quickly moved my eyes away from her scars, feeling flustered. Grace pulled down her shirt and sat up, looking at me, seriously freaked, and not saying anything.

“Can I have some water?” I said, just to be saying something. Grace got off the bed without a word, and went out. Great, I had blown my free hideaway. I hadn’t meant to stare. I sat for ten minutes, waiting for Grace to return, and watching the drama on TV.

Anna the maid was being accused of stealing by the rich and beautiful Rowena. Lee, Rowena’s husband came to Anna’s defense, but Rowena wasn’t buying it. The aliens were just about to land, and I was just about to fall into a coma, when Grace returned with a glass of water. She gave me the glass without speaking, and I was surprised that she didn’t look annoyed. I got the strange feeling that I had just passed some kind of test.

“Did you get your work done?” Grace asked.

“I made a start,” I said, sipping the water. “I really owe you.” I meant it. I hadn’t got far, but I’d have got nowhere at all if not for Grace.

“How about that trip to the mall?”

“Isn’t it a bit late?”

“I owe you a coffee.”

We took a taxi to the mall, and ambled around the stores. I looked at computer equipment and guitars, and Grace looked at books and swimsuits. Then we drank coffee and talked about random stuff, like which countries we wanted to visit, and what our favorite food was, and the times we had got into trouble as kids. Apparently, the year before, the cops had taken Grace home in a cop car, because she had been hanging around with some neighborhood kids who liked to steal things. I didn’t tell her that I routinely drove around in FBI cars.

We got back at just before eleven.

“See you tomorrow,” I said, hoping that I would be able to put in another four or five hours on Knight. Grace didn’t complain.

Chapter 14

On Wednesday, I went through the same motions as the day before, only I was concentrating on J. B. Enterprises. I get quite intense when I'm hacking away at something. I hit the keys hard, I thump the desk, and I tap my feet. But I didn't want to do that around Grace, because I didn't want her to call the authorities and report an escaped madman. On the other hand, I was seriously annoyed about getting nowhere.

As I remembered him, Knight just wasn't that good a hacker to have a flawless setup for his clients. Somewhere, I knew, there would be a large hole in his network defenses. But I guess he had been practicing for six months while I had been getting three hots and a cot.

Every so often, I became aware of Grace, moving in and out of the room. I looked up, and saw her frowning. I asked her what was wrong.

"I can't download any songs by Cadence," she said.

I set up a username and password on one of the legal download sites, so that she could use it. Grace didn't want to spend my (the FBI's) money, but I told her it was worth it, for letting me use her room. I went back to hacking.

An hour later, I heard her talking, and noticed her sitting on the bed, speaking to a sleepy-looking cat that she was holding by the belly.

Later still, when it had got dark outside, I saw her leaning on her hand, looking at her computer screen, and saying, "How should I know?" at some homework. I supposed that she was hitting a wall, too. Hacking J. B. Enterprise was as difficult as hacking Knight. At ten o'clock, I switched my computer off.

"Do you want to go out tomorrow?"

"Where to?"

"Just to get something to eat."

"Okay." I suddenly noticed that Grace was wearing a black dress that had polka dots on it. When she had changed, I had no idea.

"I'm trying it on, because I'm going to a wedding on Saturday," she explained. It reminded me that tomorrow, I would have to get a suit and tie, ready for the possibility of having to make a journey. If J. B. Enterprises wouldn't come to me, I might have to go to them. My phone rang, and I answered it.

"David, it's Abdul."

"Hi."

"I hope you don't mind me calling you at home."

"No problem."

"It's on for Thursday night, at the Java Hut. Are you up for it?" He was referring to the hacker crew initiation test that I was to undergo. Thursday was tomorrow. My whole evening was wrecked. I told him that I was more than ready.

"See you tomorrow," I said.

"Okay." The line went dead.

Wait a minute. Tomorrow? I turned around, to look at Grace. Tomorrow I had to go to the coffee shop. And Friday I was at J. B. Enterprises.

"Sorry, but can I cancel tomorrow? I've got to go somewhere. I can't get out of it."

"Okay," Grace said, indifferently. "Friday?"

I was going to invent some lie, and then I realized that Grace might come in handy. I'd have to make my visit incognito, and Grace would be good camouflage.

"Friday?" I asked.

"Yeah, you know, comes after Thursday, rhymes with shy-day."

I took out a pencil and a piece of paper, and wrote:
“Shh! Don’t say anything out loud.”

Grace gave me a puzzled look, with a half smile.

Me: I am going to Silverdale on Friday. Wanna go?

Grace: Y r we writing in whispers?

Me: Top secret. Tell u later.

Grace: U r being mysterious again!

Me: I’ll pay for yr train ticket + brkfast + beverg of yr choice.

Grace: Why Silverdale?

Me: ?

Grace: OK

Me: Do u have a suit?

Grace: U joking?

Me: No. Need disguise.

Grace drew a little picture of a false moustache, beard, and glasses, which I thought was amusing.

Me: Office camo.

Grace: ?

If we were going to wander around J. B. Enterprises' office, we would both have to blend into a crowd of anonymous office clerks. I switched the PC back on, and quickly surfed over to a women’s fashion site, and pointed out a picture of a blonde office drone in a snappy grey business suit. Grace looked at me with a quizzical expression.

Me: Y/N?

Grace thought about it for a few more seconds, then put a line through the N, leaving the Y. Yes, she would go.

Me: Don’t bring yr phone.

Grace frowned.

Me: I’ll send a taxi here at 7:00 am. Will bring u to train station. Train 2 Silverdale at 7:45. C U there. PS. Don’t forget to wear office suit. PPS. Don’t forget - no phone. PPPS. Don’t tell anyone. Top secret.

Grace: !?@*!

I let her have the last word, or rather punctuation mark, and then left.

The next day, I ditched school at lunch time. Some hall monitor thought that she would stop me, and I showed her the pass that Stony had handed me days ago, and moved quickly on.

I got out of the taxi at the mall, and wandered around aimlessly for a few minutes, to check if anyone was following me. The only thing I can ever remember Knight saying that struck me as intelligent was “If you think you’re under surveillance, you are.” He probably stole that line from a movie, but I had come to appreciate its paranoid logic. I ducked in and out of a few shops, and tried to catch out anyone was still following me. But nobody was.

From a store, I bought a pair of dark sunglasses, a baseball cap, a plaid overshirt, and a travel case. There was a small tie shop nearby, and I picked out a cheerful red silk neck tie, and put it in the bag. I made my way to the tailors that I had spotted on my first visit, went in, and asked to rent a business suit for the weekend. They gave me a black suit that looked smart and professional when I tried it on, despite being off-the-rack.

I left the shop, went into a restroom, and carefully folded the suit, and put it into the case. Wearing my new plaid shirt, dark glasses, and baseball cap, I took a taxi to the bus station. I got out of the taxi and ran into the bus station, as fast as I could, nearly colliding with a pair of ancient travelers with about a hundred cases stacked on top of a cart. I got a locker, stuck my bag in it, along with the dark glasses. I was pretty sure that nobody could have watched what I was doing without giving themselves away.

I was back to my taxi in a few minutes. I returned to school, and breezed through the rest of the school day. It's amazing how quickly school goes when you don't take it seriously.

After dinner, Hannah drove me to Java Hut, to meet Zaqarwi. Before I got out of the car, I made a big deal out of checking over the FBI notebook. I knew that I would probably be using it for hacking soon, and it made me happy to think that the feds would be checking the key log later. As far as I was concerned, they could see exactly what I had done. That would give them plenty of evidence that I was doing the job properly. The more they thought that, the more they would leave me to do things my way, without interfering.

I got out of the car, and walked past the video rental store at the entrance, and into the coffee shop.

"David," said a voice. I looked around, and saw Zaqarwi and three other guys at the side of the room. Zaqarwi was still dressed in his school clothes, but it wasn't unheard of for hackers to go days without changing their clothes.

"Nice to see you," he added. "What's your poison?"

I looked at the board where there was a list that had pretty much every coffee ever thought up by marketing executives.

"Unleaded, thanks."

"Sure. I'll introduce you to everybody first. This is Bennell." I said hello to a guy who was two years younger than me, but taller, and with a trace of acne on his jaw. "He's our wireless expert." Bennell nodded.

"This is Bates. He knows a lot about hardware, routers, firewalls, and stuff. His dad works for MicroWorld, but we don't hold it against him." That was an in-joke, judging by the grin that went around the group.

"Wright knows everything about VMS," said Zaqarwi, indicating a big guy with long hair and a shy smile.

"We're beginning to suspect that he likes it." That got a smile, too. VMS was an operating system used on minicomputers. It was known for being verbose, and you had to like typing to use it. I said hello to Wright.

It was all easy-going and pleasant, and I wouldn't have suspected any one of the group of being mixed up with terrorists.

While Zaqarwi went to the counter for supplies, I took my notebook out and got a wireless signal to the Internet. I opened a browser, surfed to my favorite search engine, and had a casual look at what was new in the world of hacker software. Bennell, Bates, and Wright went back to their computers, and began typing rapidly. After a minute, Zaqarwi came back to the table, holding an oversized cup, and handed it to me.

"Thanks," I said. I took a sip. The coffee was strong and tasted very good. "It's decaf?"

"Yeah, man."

"It's strong."

"It's good coffee here."

“So what are you guys up to tonight?”

Zaqarwi smiled.

“We’ve got a bit of a challenge. We thought that you might be able to help us.”

“Uh-huh?”

“We’d really like to get into the school’s system.”

“Elmwood High?”

Zaqarwi nodded.

“I already had a look around,” I said. “Logan’s assignment took me about two minutes to complete, so I had plenty of time.”

“So, you think you might be able to help us?”

“Maybe. What do you need a school account for?”

“You never know,” said Zaqarwi, shrugging.

I smiled. “Do you have any leads?”

“Here’s something you might find interesting.” Zaqarwi indicated a list on his notebook’s screen. The one he was pointing to was the dial-in number and Internet address of the server that I had previously discovered was called “RAS” (Remote Access Service/Server).

“That’s a start,” said Zaqarwi.

“I’ll give it a shot,” I said. Of course, I had the list of encrypted user accounts I had previously taken off Logan’s machine, and his account might have domain administrator access. If it did, I would have full access to the entire school network. All I had to do was to decrypt it. That would only take a minute. But I didn’t say anything. If Zaqarwi and his friends knew that I had already got most of the way, I wouldn’t have scored many hacking points with them. I knew that I’d have to sit there, and appear to go through the motions.

“I’ll start running a scan on my machine,” I said to Zaqarwi, “but I’ll need to borrow another machine, if possible. Can I use yours for an hour?”

“Be my guest.”

I left my notebook quietly cracking the password file, and then turned to Zaqarwi’s machine. For the next hour or so, I gave a good show of the standard hacker MO: I began scanning and brute-forcing my way past the school’s security. Every so often, I switched from using Zaqarwi’s notebook, to using the FBI’s. I was leaving two good audit trails, for my watchers to view at their leisure. I knew that, like the feds, Zaqarwi would have a key logger installed, to store every key press that I made. That was fine by me, too. The object of tonight’s episode was to provide evidence to Malik, the FBI, and anyone else who wanted to know it that I was a hacker for hire.

The way I usually work is that I will open a few consoles, and start running utilities. While that’s going, I open a browser, to surf the Net. Contrary to logic, I find that this way of working allows my concentration to stay sharp, maybe because it gets to rest every so often. Sometimes, I even have music on in the background, but not tonight. The coffee shop had decided to go for soft rock, and it wasn’t too offensive.

I passed an hour like that, flipping back and forth between machines, muddying the water whenever I could, to make sure that Zaqarwi and the FBI had no end of logs to browse, but no fun trying to back trace the path I had taken. I checked the password crack, and found that it had finished. Logan’s password was ‘strangeness1979.’

I had a vague recollection of there being an old-time rock group from Logan’s era named that. For some reason, I remember the stupidest stuff. I have a brain full of

pop culture, when it should have been full of useful stuff. One of the benefits of a TV education, I suppose. I quickly connected up to the school network using Logan's account, and found that it did have domain administrator rights.

I connected to the domain controller, and created an account called 'netsvc,' which sounded like it might be an authentic account for the netsvc utility, whatever that was. Starting as it did with the letter 'n,' it was buried nicely in the middle of the alphabetical list of user accounts, where it might better avoid detection. I gave it domain administrator access.

But before I logged off, I took just enough time to have a look at Grace's grades. *How can anybody get a D in Home Ec?* I wondered. Another interesting thing cropped up, too. On running a program I had written called 'wlsof,' I found that there was already a backdoor in place. It was one of mine that I had written when I was plain Karl Ripley, unkempt loner and script kiddy.

In other words, despite what he had said, Zaqarwi already had a way into Elmwood High, and not only that, but he had downloaded one of my old programs to do it. The irony would have been tasty, if I had had anyone appreciative to share it with.

I logged off and sat back with a visible grin on my face. I had done what Zaqarwi had asked. I had done it in an hour. Not bad work. I had surely passed their little test. Malik would find out. I was through to the next stage, I was pretty sure.

"You did it?" asked Zaqarwi, noticing my expression. He sounded surprised, and the other three hackers looked up.

"Sorry I took so long. I've been a bit rusty lately." A bit of overconfidence never hurts in the presence of hackers. Arrogance and egotism are tolerated, because they're often necessary. It's only when you can't walk the walk that they mind you talking the talk. The group gathered to have a look.

"Here's your account: 'netsvc,' password 'netsvc.'"

I saw some impressed looks pass around the group. Apparently, they had no idea that I had, in a way, hacked them more than I had hacked the school network. I shut down my machine, before anybody had a chance to look it over. I gave Zaqarwi his machine back, and thanked him.

"I've got to go to the john," I said. A pit stop would give Zaqarwi some time to discuss my membership in his crew with his friends. When I got back, Zaqarwi was still playing with his new account, apparently very impressed.

"Domain administrative rights. Nice work."

I nodded.

"Good hack, dude," said Bennell.

"Awesome," added Parker.

Wright gave a wave of acknowledgement, one hacker to another.

"Can I talk to you for a minute?" said Zaqarwi. He pulled me to one side.

"I'm amazed. To come into a group of people, and do what you did. That's pretty good. We could use someone like you."

"Cool," I said. I did feel pretty good, even though it had been a fake hack. Hacking is pretty addictive. Maybe it's because you spend ages banging your head against difficult problems, that when you finally win, you feel great.

"We've got a few projects on that you might find interesting. A little bit more challenging than tonight."

"Cool," I said again. With my single-word answers, you'd never have guessed that the last time anybody gave me a language skills assessment I had got a perfect score.

“What’s next?”

“There’s someone I’d like you to meet. He’s a good guy, and he’s got deep pockets.”

I frowned, on cue.

“He works as a security consultant. His clients pay him to try to break their security, and he pays us do his work for him. He gets the glory, and we get some of the money.”

“Sort of like subcontracting?”

Zaqarwi laughed. “That’s right. Subcontracting.”

“How much does he pay?” I said, cutting to the money. The more he thought I was motivated by money, the better prospect I would be.

“Let’s put it this way, Bennell is earning more than both his parents . . . put together.”

I laughed. “You got to be kidding me.”

“No, man. I’m not kidding. We could really use someone like you.”

“I’d better get an offshore account opened, then.”

Zaqarwi laughed loudly. “You do that.”

We went back, to join the others.

“David’s in,” he said. The others smiled.

“Nice one,” said Bennell. “Dude, the next time we get together, you got to show me how you did that so quickly.”

“Sure.”

“I’m hungry,” said Zaqarwi. “Anybody want to get pizza?”

There was a round of positive replies.

“How about you, David?”

With the Malik hack on simmer, I needed to turn my attention back to Knight, and quickly.

“I’d love to,” I said, “but I’m meeting my girlfriend.”

I left Zaqarwi and his merry crew of robbing hoods, and made my way across the parking lot to the movie theater.

Chapter 15

I should have been happy, because I had scored at last. But when I considered it, it was a home goal. I had hooked Zaqarwi, and next time—maybe as soon as this weekend—I would be meeting Malik. Not long after that, the FBI would have him ‘in the bag.’ That only meant that my chances of bagging Knight were about to become nonexistent. After three days at Grace’s house, hacking away at Knight’s client, I had got nowhere, and I was running out of time.

If you ask me, some people are simply born with the idea hardwired into their brain that they can always do what they want to do. I knew a few hackers who didn’t know the word ‘can’t’—or at least where mechanical things were concerned. You just enjoy things so much that the more difficult they are, the more fun it is when you stand back to admire the end result.

But on this occasion, the time constraint had beaten me. There was no hacknological way to do what I wanted to do, and I conceded that I’d have to do it the old-fashioned way: a field trip. If I needed a way into J. B. Enterprises, then I’d just have to visit their offices and politely ask them for it.

After I resigned myself to it, I felt better. At least I was moving forward again.

But even that wasn’t without its problems. J. B. Enterprises’ head offices weren’t in Elmwood; they were near Knight’s hometown of Westridge, a place called Silverdale. That was fifteen minutes away from where I was by train, according to the schedules I had consulted. A taxi might take 45 minutes if it got stuck in the rush-hour traffic, and I didn’t want to chance getting followed, either by Malik’s men, or Philips’s men. Nor could I rent a car, either; you had to be 21. I couldn’t do anything.

I made my way to the movie theater, the kick of the hack already gone. I phoned Grace, and despite it being late, I managed to get her to meet me. She turned up half an hour later, and we went into the theater.

“Thought you were busy,” Grace said.

“I’m free. Wanna choose a movie?”

Grace chose the movie, while I chose the popcorn. At just after ten, we went bowling, and I let her trash me. But I beat her hollow at pinball afterwards. After that we sat in a coffee shop, talking. I didn’t complain when she stuck vanilla in my decaf coffee, and she didn’t complain when I spent half an hour playing a video game called *Manic Miner*.

The journey home was quiet, but it wasn’t an awkward silence. I had gotten used to being with Grace even though I had known her only a few days. I quietly watched the nighttime town go by. They must have designed Elmwood at night, because it looked a whole lot better. Coming through the middle of town, I saw the black asphalt shining red and green, from the traffic lights. For some reason, I thought about the TV program *The Twilight Zone*.

Even Grace’s shabby neighborhood looked good in the moonlight. We turned left at a junction, and I happened to turn my head, and noticed a silver car behind us. There is nothing unusual about having a silver car behind you, and I don’t why I noticed it; I just did. At Grace’s house, we got out of the taxi, and I asked the driver to wait. I looked back down the street, and out of the corner of my eye, I watched the silver car pull in down the street and stop. Its lights went off.

It was a street where people parked on the road, so there was nothing wrong with that. But I could see the dim form of the driver inside. Someone was waiting. Or watching. I walked with Grace up to the front door.

“Thanks for beating me at skittles,” I said to Grace. She laughed.

“That’s okay. I think it’s called bowling, though.”

There was a silence, and this time it was awkward. Grace seemed to be waiting for me to say something, but I didn’t know what. Girl’s magazines, I knew, were full of articles on dating conventions, but I was never a guy to follow formulas. I thought that I might be doing something wrong. I gazed up at the stars.

“Look, you can see the whole of Orion.”

“The stars?” Grace said, looking upwards. It was an almost cloudless night, and despite the road lights, the stars were distinct.

“Yeah.”

“Which is Orion?”

“Just up there. The three together are the hunter’s belt.” Grace did her trademarked frown.

“Follow the line of my arm,” I said. Moving close to her, I put my head next to hers, and pointed upwards. From where the tail in the car was, it would look like some sort of romantic clinch. Grace tilted her head, to look beyond my pointing finger, to the heavens. I could feel her warm hair on my cheek.

“It doesn’t look much like a hunter.”

“I always thought it looked more like a spaceship.”

Grace looked at me in that way she had, like she pitied an idiot.

“And look over there. There’s Gracium.”

“Gracium?”

“Yeah, it’s over there,” I said, pointing. “Gracium is the fabled rescuer of stray animals.”

“Uh-huh.”

“And over there,” I said, moving her around another ninety degrees. But I slipped, and grabbed Grace around the arm.

“Oops! You guys should get this path fixed. You could get a lawsuit from somebody. And over there is Davidos.”

“Really? And what fabled constellation is Davidos?”

“It’s top secret.”

“That I can believe.” For a moment, I stood, looking at Grace, and she looking at me. She didn’t mind my talking nonsense, and I didn’t mind that her eyes were like black diamonds.

“Well,” I said, stepping back. “I’ve got to get back home. It’s getting late, and my mother will be calling the Coast Guard. See you tomorrow morning.”

“Okay,” she replied, somewhat wistfully. I should have kissed her. I had wanted to, but knew that I couldn’t get too close. Business first.

I turned and walked down the driveway, and got into the taxi. As it turned and headed back down the road, I checked out the silver car. It was empty. Wherever the driver was, he wasn’t inside. I wondered if paranoia was setting in. Being watched all of the time is something that no one can endure for a long time. It wrecks your brain.

I arranged with the driver to have a taxi pick Grace up in the morning, and another taxi meet me at the end of the street tomorrow at seven. I gave him a twenty and told him to instruct the driver to wait for ten minutes, if I wasn’t there.

Back home, I stuck my key in the front door, and went in. Hannah was there.

“Hi, David. You’re late.”

“Yeah, sorry.”

“I wish you had called.”

“Sorry, I forgot.”

“Did you have a nice night?”

“It was cool. Everything went great. I’m going back this weekend.” I tried to convey wordlessly, with just my positive expression, that I had hacked Zaqrwi, and was in the group.

She seemed to get it. “That’s great. Did you see a movie?”

“No, we just sat around and drank coffee and talked.”

“What about?”

“We talked about computer games and girls.”

“Well, it’s nice that you’re fitting in. I am glad to hear it.”

“Thanks. Me, too.”

I went to my room. Without turning the light on, I got undressed and got into bed. But, despite being tired, I couldn’t sleep. I lay awake, looking out of the window into the cloudless night.

Why do I lie so easily, so convincingly? I wondered. What sort of talent is that to put on your CV? Had North been right? Was I really a natural-born criminal?

Up above, Orion was watching, just like he had been outside my nighttime window throughout my teenage years, spent hunched over my computer until two or three a.m., dreaming of the things I would do, the money I would make, and a better life away from these crime-ridden, run-down neighborhoods.

A jet blinked its way into the night, and as I watched it disappear, I wondered about its occupants, and where they were going. And I thought about going somewhere myself. Grace had said that she wanted to go to Europe, to look around. Me, too.

Chapter 16

I sneaked out early the next morning, before my proxy-parents were up. I hid my bike in some bushes at the end of Grace's street, and got into the waiting taxi.

At the local bus station, I retrieved my bag, and went into the restroom, where I changed into my suit and tie, stuck my clothes into the case, and put my name, address, and cell phone number on a label attached to the case.

I stuck the case on the floor in front of the restroom attendant's door, and then knocked loudly. A door opened, and an elderly man looked out.

"Excuse me, sir, but I found this case over there. There are some kid's clothes in it."

It would be simpler to be able to retrieve my belongings from the lost and found later, after I had returned to Elmwood from Silverdale.

I left David Johnson's clothes with the attendant, and walked out of the restroom as Jim Jensen, successful young businessman, with an quirky habit of wearing dark glasses in autumn. I got into a taxi, and told the driver to take me to the train station.

I arrived shortly after 7:30 a.m., paid the driver, and bought two tickets to Silverdale. I made my way to the platform where my train was due at 7:45 a.m. I was confident that nobody had followed me. I had gone to a lot of trouble to evade my watchers, but it was necessary. This Friday was the last working day of the week, and probably my last chance at Knight for two long years. I wasn't about to mess it up by being careless.

I went to the platform, and looked around. In the weak sunshine, I couldn't see properly, so I dipped the glasses. But I couldn't see Grace anywhere.

There was a woman in a train guard's uniform, and at the end of the platform, a guy was standing, taking down the train numbers in a small notebook—a train nerd. But no sign of Grace. I checked my watch, and then checked it again thirty seconds later.

It took me a minute to pace up the platform and back down again. With just one minute before departure, I boarded the train and went into the first-class car, and found a seat. I stared through the window at the station, as it moved past with a steadily building rhythmic clank.

I should have been pleased to be underway, but I was disappointed that Grace hadn't shown. I was just getting used to relying on her, so I hadn't expected her to let me down. She had been part of my plan, and I knew my day's work would be more difficult to do without her. Had she been prevented from coming somehow? Disappointed, I mentally began to rearrange my scheme.

"Excuse me," said a voice. I looked up, and saw an attractive blonde-haired woman standing in front of me, dressed in a business suit, and wearing sunglasses.

"Is this seat taken?"

I stared at the woman for a moment, and then I realized who it was.

"Grace?" I said. "I . . . I thought you didn't make it . . ."

"I couldn't find you."

"I've been waiting."

"I didn't think you'd be in first class."

I had decided to make the trip as enjoyable as possible for Grace, seeing how she had been my accomplice for the last few days, while I had been nothing more than a burden—a geek in her home and bedroom. For some reason, my head was blank, and I was finding it hard to form sentences.

“So, what do you think?” Grace said, holding her hands out to demonstrate the suit she was wearing.

“I think you look great.”

“Thank you.”

That was it? I had complimented a girl on her looks, and she hadn't phoned the police or run away screaming. I was getting to like Grace a lot.

“Not too shabby yourself.”

“I had to rent a suit.”

“I like your penguins.” She was referring to the pattern on my new neck tie.

“So you think the blonde suits me?” she asked, running her fingers through her new hair. It was pony-tailed, held back by a small black band, exactly like the woman I had pointed to on the Internet.

“Sure. Where did you get the suit from?”

“A friend helped out. The jewelry is mine. And so are the shoes. So, where are we going, that needed us to get all dolled up?”

“We are going to Silverdale.”

“I know that. What's in Silverdale?”

“I'm going to visit an old business colleague.”

“David, you're being mysterious again.”

“Believe me, the less you know, the better. Besides, I'm Jim.”

“Huh?”

“My name today is Jim Jensen. And you are Alison Croft, my assistant.”

“Alison?”

“Yeah.”

She frowned. Now that she had bothered to comb her hair, and was so well dressed, her characteristic frown wasn't so bad.

“Why do I get the feeling that you are going to get me into trouble?”

“Your stepfather sells stolen electronic goods. How worried could you be?”

That sounded awkward. I hadn't meant to be so blunt. I quickly covered over it. “All we're doing is visiting someone I used to know.”

“So why do you need me?”

“I don't need you per se. I wanted to say thanks for letting me geek-out at your place. I thought I'd buy you some breakfast in first class. Beats the school cafeteria, right?”

“Breakfast?”

“Sure. Do you want to get something to eat?”

She opened her mouth, as if to say something sassy, then changed her mind.

“Okay.”

We made our way to the dining car, and sat down. The waiter gave us menus.

“Oh, my God,” Grace said, looking at the prices on the menu.

“I'm going for the continental breakfast.”

“What's continental about it?”

“They eat it on the continent.”

“Which continent?”

“Europe.”

We both had the same breakfast, which consisted of croissants, butter, fruit spread, coffee, juice, and some unidentified thing that I didn't ask about and didn't eat.

Grace put a napkin on her lap, and then spread butter on her croissant, and looked at it without actually eating it.

“So, what are you going to do after school?” I asked.

“I was thinking of becoming a mainframe programmer,” Grace said.

I laughed.

“Do you know what a mainframe is?”

“A big computer?” she asked.

“And you are going to program these mainframes in what language?”

She shrugged. “Computerese?”

I smiled. “Good luck.”

“Well, I don’t actually know what I want to do. I’ve got a time to figure out the details.”

“You must have something that interests you.”

“I like the idea of working for myself. You know?”

I nodded. I did know. “Being your own boss is good. But you have to have capital to set up a business.”

“Yeah,” Grace said, glumly. “I guess I’ll have to work in the factory with mother dearest, for about a hundred years.”

“You’re not going to college?”

“I’m not exactly academically minded. Besides, I can’t afford it. What about you?”

“I’m going to college next year.”

“Next year? I thought you were sixteen, like me.”

I realized that I had let the real world cross over into the fake one, and had referred to my federal-financed education. It was my first gaff. I tried to get out of it.

“I’m a star pupil in science, and my dad has already talked his old school into admitting me.”

“Didn’t you say that you weren’t allowed to study computers?”

Another good point. “They want me to go to med school. I’ve got other plans. I’ll be quietly working on my computer career. After I graduate, Dad won’t be able to tell me what to do. I want to work in Silicon Valley. That’s when the fun begins.”

Grace looked at me quietly, and I realized then how boastful and idiotic that last sentence must have sounded. It works with geeks, but not really with girls. Grace finally bit some of her croissant. I had finished mine and was looking around for more.

“I like that about you,” she said, tilting her head a little, like someone in a gallery trying to figure out a painting. “You know what you want.”

What do you say to that?

We talked, and the train traveled on through some pretty impressive scenery. I had one of those feelings, you know what I mean, when you kind of realize that this is one of those memories that you would look back on.

“Can I ask you a question?” she asked.

“Sure.”

“The first time you talked to me, you weren’t really interested in a phone, were you?”

“I needed a phone, and I wanted to ask you to the party.”

Grace did a familiar thing with her face—sort of looking at me as if I was so pitiful it was funny.

It was my turn to ask the questions. “Can I ask you a question?”

“Okay.”

“How come you like me?”

“What?”

“Girls usually think I am weird. Cute, maybe, but weird. Why not you?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Tell me what you mean.”

“Never mind.”

“David . . .”

That was another thing I never understood about girls. They always wanted to talk things out, as if words changed anything. This was something that I felt strongly about. Talking only changed your perspective on something—sort of dealing with something without dealing with it.

I heard the train begin to slow, looked out of the window, and saw that we were approaching the station at Silverdale.

“We’re here. We’ll make it in time.”

“In time for what?”

“People starting work.”

We quickly got off the train, and got into a cab. I gave the driver the address, and he took us through the replica Elmwood suburbs of Silverdale.

In a short time, I spotted the offices of J. B. Enterprises from the sign at the entrance to an industrial compound. It was a medium-sized, dark brown, brick building, and its windows were so dark they were almost black.

I got the driver to let us out away from the entrance. I checked my watch again. Almost 8:00 a.m.—right on time. We stood for a minute while I looked at the building, and thought over the situation. I could have turned around, gone back, and worked out some other way to get the details that I badly wanted. No time. I had no other quick option. I had to get in there.

One good thing about it was that the building was open-fronted. There was no barrier to go through, and no metal detectors. I had been lucky.

There was a security guard posted inside the big glass doors, but he wasn’t checking every person who came and went. I watched as a gaggle of office clerks did the Friday-morning amble from the parking lot into the entrance, moving in sleepy ones and chatty twos.

“Okay,” I said to Grace, “all you have to do is be my assistant. Just go along with whatever I say.”

Grace raised an eyebrow.

“Are you serious about going in there?” she said.

“Yeah. You don’t have to do it.”

“No, I want to help you. I just feel a bit nervous.”

I waited until I spotted four women, who were chatting loudly and joking.

“Are you ready?”

“No,” Grace said.

“Just act natural.”

“What if we get stopped by a guard?”

“Just smile that beautiful smile, and watch him melt.”

“I’m not that attractive.”

“Don’t you have mirrors in your house?”

Grace looked flustered for the first time since I had known her. I grabbed her arm and ushered her along until we were walking at the back of the chatty group, as if we were part of them.

“David!” Grace said. I must have been hurting her arm.

“It’s Jim, Alison,” I whispered.

As we passed through the entrance, I spotted the guard and started speaking to Grace in a loud voice.

“Remind me later about Donald Aston’s report.”

Grace said nothing. I watched her eyebrow rise a little.

“It’s very important, all right?”

Grace said nothing, again. She looked a little spooked. I continued talking to myself, hoping that the guard, who was at the side of us now, would allow my inside knowledge to override his common sense. I hoped that it was too early in the morning for him to be paying attention to security passes.

The group passed through the inner doors, and I put my hand on the small of Grace’s back, and ushered her through the door.

We split from the group, and walked into an elevator. I hit the button for the eighteenth floor. We had a quiet ride up.

We got out of the elevator, and stood in front of the locked doors that led out into the work area. I was looking at the security swipe on the doors. I had no card to let us in. I stood at the door for a minute, making a good act of looking for my card. Where did I put it? I rummaged in pockets, and came up with nothing. Someone else got out of the other elevator, and walked straight past me, and swiped the door open.

I waited until the last minute to grab at the door, and got it just before it closed. Grace followed me into the corridor. I stopped to look around, but there were no clues as to the location of Donald Aston’s office.

I spotted two management types coming toward us, and started talking again.

“Don’t forget that report for Donald.”

“Yeah,” Grace said, and I was grateful that she had at last found her voice.

We wandered around, until we came to a door whose name plate read “Donald Aston.” Glancing to the right and left, I confirmed that no one was paying any attention to us. Fortunately, the crack under the door revealed that there were no lights on inside the office. Like most overworked network administrators, Donald Aston probably arrived late most mornings, having worked the night before.

I tried the door handle, and breathed a huge sigh of relief to discover that the door was unlocked. Easing it open as quietly as possible, I pulled Grace into the office behind me, and quickly shut the door. Only then did I turn the light on.

She shot me a suspicious look. “Is this your friend’s office?”

“I’ll explain later. No time now.”

I immediately walked around his desk, plopped down into the overpriced ergonomic chair, and turned on his computer monitor. I of course harbored the unrealistic hope that he had forgotten to log out of the network before going home last night. But the login prompt that came up confirmed that, like any security-conscious techie, he was good about logging out whenever finished with his computer. Now I faced the task of trying to get into his computer before he made it into the building.

Like the fabled Coke machine that had “Pepsi” as its password, if you have the same warped mindset as the typical network administrator, you can often guess the passwords on servers fairly easily.

Lucky for me, Donald’s mind was as warped as mine. Within a short time, I had logged in and installed a Trojan horse program on Knight’s server. Come Monday morning, Knight would be in jail.

I had done it. I had won.

“Let’s go,” I said, opening the door, and moving us quickly into the corridor.

Several paces in front of us, a very thin and nervous-looking guy was walking toward us at a fast pace, with his ID badge attached to a pocket protector full of pens

and bouncing on his wrinkled shirt. He was looking at the two of us, and the vibes I was picking up were not positive.

Glancing toward Grace, I was horrified to see her staring at him like a deer caught in car headlights. My hand was against the small of her back, and I tapped it lightly to try to pull her out of her trance.

I realized that my mouth was dry, and I would've loved to slip into a nearby break room to get some water. But there was no time to worry about that. We had to get out of there as soon as possible. At any moment, we could run right into—

“Donald!”

A plump lady in a nearby cubicle spotted the guy walking toward us, and called out to him.

He stopped, looked at her, glanced back at us, and then returned his attention to her.

She continued. “I can't log into the system. Can you help?”

By this time, we were passing right by him, and he gave us a suspicious look.

The plump lady interrupted his thoughts. “Donald, I need to get this report out ASAP!”

Peripherally, I saw him reluctantly walk toward her cubicle.

Grace looked even more pale than before.

“Grace, you are doing great. We're going out now.”

Grace said nothing. She was too spooked. I knew I had made a mistake in bringing her along.

“Look, I'm sorry; I didn't mean to drag you into this. It's just that, other hackers I hang around with think this is good fun. I guess I didn't think.”

Grace remained silent.

“Do you want some water?”

“No, I don't want any water. I want to know what happens if we get caught on the way out.”

I had neglected to mention that, for a good reason. I knew one hacker from a rival crew (it was a friendly rivalry), who called himself Joker, because he was always playing jokes. But one day Joker had got caught engineering his way into an office network. He just walked into some office, and charmed them out of their server details. After they had arrested him, we had jokingly sent him five dollars toward his ten-thousand-dollar bail. We weren't joking when we saw him next. They had put him into a juvenile detention center. A whole year off school might sound like fun to most students who hate school, but he was a changed person when he got out. As far as I knew, he never touched a computer again. We heard from a guy at his school that he said nothing at school, and just kept to himself. He was a changed man.

Come to think of it, so was I, after my spell in the prison system. It is the most insane life you can imagine. Everybody hates everybody else—especially some kid who thinks he knows it all. I, too, had planned to give up hacking forever. At least, I would quit once I had finished what I had started.

“We won't get caught,” I said. “We're leaving. Let's go.”

I speeded up the pace, even though Grace was doing little steps beside me, in her impractical but nice-looking shoes. When it comes down to it, things are either useful or good-looking.

“Come on,” I urged her. “We've got to get back to the train station.”

Suddenly, I noticed a large security guard standing down the corridor from me, close to the locked doors that we needed to use to get to the elevator. He seemed to be glaring at me.

I slowed us down, and came alongside a fire exit door, which had on it the picture of a stick figure walking down some emergency stairs.

I could have got away. All I would have to do would be to push open the fire door, and run out of the building. The guy was heavier than me and Grace. We'd have out-nimbed him any day. But the alarm over the doorway would have sounded, the police would have been called, and the game would be up. They'd find out what I had been doing in the building, and then they would go to the trouble of changing all of the server details and passwords, so that the information I had obtained would be worthless.

I couldn't do that, after all of the hard work I had put in. Also, they might have stationed another guard along the stairs somewhere.

I'd bluff it out. I stopped and knocked on the nearest door. It was marked "Human Resources." I pushed Grace inside.

"Hi," I said, to the woman who was sitting nearest the door. She had a photo of two children in a frame on her desk.

"Hello."

"I'm looking for Belinda. Is she here today?"

The woman gave me a blank look.

"Or am I in the wrong room? Belinda Shepley?"

"I'm sorry," she answered. "There's no Belinda Shepley in here, not that I know of."

She asked all of the other women in the office if anybody knew the imaginary Belinda Shepley. Nobody did. I stalled a bit by describing the imaginary person, hoping to buy some time for the security guard to wander off.

But then I realized that if Donald noticed anything wrong (had I turned everything off?), every moment's delay could be a mistake.

So I quickly conceded defeat with a humble, "Sorry."

"I could try to look her up in the company phone book," she offered.

"No, thanks. I'll phone her myself," I said, getting out my cell phone, and simultaneously opening the door, smiling my way through it, and taking Grace with me.

Thankfully, the guard was gone. Orion was smiling on me.

"Come on, Alison, you're doing great, we are nearly there."

We walked down the corridor, through the doors, and into an elevator whose doors were just closing.

After a very tense ride down to the ground floor, we got out and made our way through the exit, all along talking about some imaginary report that we needed to hand deliver to the nearest copy center.

The guard in the foyer never looked at us.

We walked out the front doors and through the parking lot, as dignified as we could muster.

We headed toward the main road, which seemed much further away from us this time, no matter how fast we walked.

Chapter 17

We got to a quiet little diner on the main road, and I put Grace into a booth and then phoned a taxi.

When I got back, Grace was glaring at me.

“Do you want a coffee?” I asked.

She didn’t say anything.

“Grace? Are you okay?”

“I can’t believe you did that!” she exploded.

“What?” I looked around nervously, and added, “Please keep your voice down.”

“We could have got arrested!” she hissed angrily. “We could have been put in jail.”

“No, we couldn’t.”

She didn’t seem convinced. I knew that I had done a dumb thing. I had wrecked my relationship with Grace.

“You didn’t tell me what we were doing. I trusted you, and you used me.”

“I told you . . .” My voice trailed off with what was probably a guilty look on my face.

“I want to go home.”

I slumped down in the booth, and tried to think it out. Of course, it had been a stupid thing to do. Some of the happiest days of my life had been with my old crew, pulling stupid tricks on people who ought to know better. But it was kid’s stuff. It wasn’t fun to everybody. Grace was straight. She wasn’t involved in her stepfather’s tricks, and she wouldn’t—or shouldn’t—be involved in mine. I had to tell her something to try to calm her down.

“Look, I know this sounds unbelievable, but I’ve got a get-out-of-jail-free card, that I can play when—I mean, if I get into trouble. The . . . authorities . . . owe me.”

Grace, still glaring out the window, said nothing.

“I can’t explain it, but even if we had got caught, I could have gotten out of it. . . .”

“*You?* What about me?!”

“I mean, both of us. I’m sorry. I’m just not thinking right now.”

“That’s for sure. You can’t explain anything, like what you were doing in there anyway. I should have known. You’re the only guy I know who wants to get into a girl’s bedroom so you can use her computer. I thought you were different. But guess what—you’re a criminal.”

“Would you just trust me? I wouldn’t have got you into trouble.”

It wasn’t actually lying to her. When I said I could have got out of it, I was thinking about Philips. If we had got caught back there, I could have explained it away to him, told him that I was working on Malik. Anyway, he wouldn’t have wanted to jeopardize his operation by having his star performer in jail. He’d have got me out of it. Otherwise, I would never have taken Grace along.

“Why don’t you tell me what you are really doing?”

“Because I have trouble trusting people, OK? People let me down. Whenever I trust someone, they hurt me. My parents. My friends.”

“But I’m not them. I’m not your parents. I’m not one of your hacker friends.”

“I got put in jail for hacking. The guy who put me in jail is going to get what he deserves. That’s what I was doing. I am trusting you because I need your help. I am sorry I lied to you.”

“Is that what this is about—you wanted to use my house, my computer, me?”

“No. I mean, at first I did. But not now.”

How could I explain it to her?

“You were in jail?” she said.

“Yes. I don’t ever want to go back.”

“My dad’s in jail. My real dad.”

I didn’t know what I could say to that.

“But he didn’t do it. He was framed. They sold him out. The police made things up, because they weren’t good enough to get the right person. And now my dad is in jail.”

“Do you want a coffee?” I said. I didn’t know what else to say.

After a minute, Grace said, “If I drink coffee now, I’m going to have a heart attack.”

“Two decafs to go, please,” I said to the waitress.

I sat looking at Grace, waiting for her to return to normal.

“Seriously, I wouldn’t have done it if I thought it would get you in real trouble.”

Grace let out a breath. Somehow, her anger seemed to have subsided.

“I was scared.”

“Yeah, me, too. I’d have been stuck if you hadn’t been there.”

I heard a horn blaring outside, and looked out of the window to see a taxi waiting.

“That’s our ride,” I said.

We got in, but not before I had picked up the coffees.

We were soon back at the train station, sitting on a bench in the autumn sunshine, waiting for the next train, sipping coffee, and reminiscing about the good old days.

I caught myself: *What* good old days? So much had happened recently that it seemed a long time ago I first met Grace.

Glancing at Grace, who was sitting next to me, I decided that she wasn’t exactly lighthearted about our morning’s work; but now that we were out of danger, she had relaxed a bit, and was starting to talk normally again.

The commuters had all gone now, leaving only a few stragglers, including a homeless man. He was drinking from a bottle in a brown paper sack, even though it was not far past breakfast. I wondered, *where did he go wrong?*

For some reason, I don’t remember what Grace and I talked about, but I looked up at one point in our conversation and caught one of the station attendants, a woman in her fifties, looking at us. She was smiling, as if we weren’t two truant larcenists, but just a nice well-dressed young couple enjoying coffee and being together. Maybe we were. It doesn’t take much. Some girl likes a guy, some guy likes a girl. All you have to do is leave them alone and then one day you have a nice young couple.

I should have been happy. But now I had made it past one of the biggest hurdles, it wasn’t enough. For seven months, I had longed to see Knight get justice. Knight had ruined my entire career: from now until retirement, I would never be able

to get a secure job, and never be able to work in the government, or the military, or any areas of interest.

Even worse, Knight wasn't even a decent hacker. He was about one step above a script kiddy.

Similarly, the town where he had located his business, Oaksburge, was just one rail stop further along the line.

I knew I had to tell Grace the truth.

“Look, Grace, if you want, I'll go home with you now. But there is one last thing I have to do before we go back home. It's only ten minutes away. I promise, it's nothing that could get us in trouble. I promise you.”

She agreed, but without much enthusiasm. I bought two tickets. When we got off the train in Oaksburge, I bought a packet of cigarettes. Then we got into a cab, and I gave the driver the address.

Chapter 18

Although Knight's office was fairly modest in size, it was so new that it looked like it had been built the week before. The parking lot at the front of the building was full of expensive cars.

I stood at the front of the building, directly across the road, with a lighted cigarette in my hands. In those days, the smokers used to congregate at the entrances of buildings, and I wanted to look like one of them, so that Knight wouldn't see me. Being spotted near to his office was the last thing I wanted. Next to me was Grace, but she wasn't saying anything.

For five minutes, we stared at the building, and it dawned on me that I had done a dumb thing. We couldn't stand there all day. It was nearly noon on Friday, and I had somehow thought that Knight would leave his building for lunch. I wanted to see him—the man I had been thinking about for seven months—but my desire must have got the best of my good sense.

I didn't know if he was even in the building. Dumb, dumb, dumb.

I spotted an empty bench in the middle of a grassy area, where in summer the office clerks would have congregated. Now it was cold, and there were only a few people coming out of their offices. I set off toward the bench, and then realized that I had left Grace.

"Grace?"

"What are we doing here?"

"I told you already. Let's go to the bench."

I didn't talk to Grace. I waited and watched, watched and waited. I heard Grace draw in a deep breath and let it out slowly. I was just about to say something like, "Let's get out of here," when a man came out of the opposite building holding a bag. He was a tall man with a strut that had earned him a nickname. It was Knight.

He was dressed in a stylish suit and had grown his spiky blond hair a bit longer. The resale value of the car he unlocked would have beaten an FBI agent's yearly salary. In just six months, he had gone from being a spoiled teenager to a CEO.

Grace's voice broke my reverie. "That's him?"

"Yeah."

"He looks older than you."

"He's almost twenty."

Knight popped open the trunk of his car, and put the bag into it. Then he went back into the office. He looked calm and cheerful, like he was getting ready to go on vacation.

"He doesn't look like . . ." Grace said, stopping mid-sentence. "So, what happens now?"

"Nothing. I just wanted to see him is all. I wanted to see him before he went to jail."

"What are you doing here?"

"I told you."

"Tell me again."

"When I was fourteen, I joined a group of computer hackers. Then one of them turned me in. His name is Knight. Now it's his turn to go to jail."

"So you're going to turn him in?"

"No. He's legit. He operates a company that gets paid to hack into computers. Can you believe that?"

Grace frowned. "So if he hasn't done anything wrong, how are you going to send him to jail?"

"Back in the office, I installed a program that will make Knight's computer connect to a bank and transfer a few million dollars to an offshore account that can't be traced back to Knight. Only it can be traced. I made sure of it over a year ago, before Knight had thought of selling me out. And that is how I get to send him to jail. It's not a bank at all. It's an FBI server—what they call a 'honey pot.'"

"What will the FBI do to him?"

"What do you think?"

"I don't know. Will he go to jail?"

"Yeah. For a long time."

"But you're no better than him."

"I never said I was. Knight is a nark. This is him getting narked. You don't want to know what they do to narks in jail."

"I want to go home."

I turned to look at Grace.

"Would you just wait for a few more minutes?"

"No. If I had known this was just a vendetta, I wouldn't have come. You said you had put your past behind you. You said that you wanted to become a computer programmer."

"Thanks to Knight, I won't ever get to be a programmer. Not a serious one, anyway. My record will always be there. No one serious will ever hire me. No government or military, no banks. The only hope I have got is to start a new life."

"And do you think this will make that better? Will it change anything?"

It seemed logical to me. I was merely making another move in Knight's game. Only this was checkmate, and I win the game. I didn't get what was so hard to understand, but Grace looked away.

My cell phone rang.

"Yeah?"

"Hello, David," said the voice on the other end of the phone. It was Zaqarwi. "My friend, the one I told you about. He wants to meet you tonight. Are you still interested?"

"What time?"

"Seven. At the coffee shop."

"Sure. I'll be there."

"Good."

I put the phone away.

"I have to go back in a few days. That's the reason that I had to do this now. I just wanted to see Knight for one last time before he gets busted. Then it's all over, for him. And for me. I finally get to start a normal life. We can be together."

Just then, Knight reemerged, and this time he was followed by a woman. She was very good looking, and had on an elegant black-and-white checked dress. As she walked, she smiled and talked to the baby she was holding in her arms.

The woman passed the baby to Knight, who strapped the baby into a child restraint seat in the back of the car. I watched as Knight made funny faces at the baby. Then the woman began to talk to the baby. Peripherally, I saw Grace turn her head to me, but I didn't look at her.

"David," Grace said with a puzzled look on her face. "Are you sure?"

"What?" I said blankly.

I watched as Knight and his girlfriend paused to kiss. They looked happy, blissfully happy. Then they got in the car, and drove off. From where I was sitting, I could see them smiling and talking.

I didn't have anything to say. The plan that I had been working on for seven months was nearly done. And my victory was as bitter as a mouth full of ashes.

I turned to look at my own girlfriend, but she wasn't there. Grace had walked away.

"Grace?"

"Get away from me. You're a criminal—no better than . . ."

"I'm not a criminal. Would you wait?"

Grace kept walking.

"Grace?"

Grace stopped and turned.

"I don't get it. You have everything, and all you want is to settle some score that's in the past!"

I didn't get it, either.

"I have everything?" I repeated blankly. "I have nothing. He took everything. Him and my mother."

"Your mother? What are you talking about? You are just—get away from me."

"Tell me what you mean. How do I have everything? Grace, please tell me."

"You're smart, hard-working, funny, and cute. But it's a lie. Why can't you just be that anyway? Under it all, you're a decent guy. Do you know how many guys have tried to get into my bedroom? And all you wanted to do was to play on the Internet. I thought you were different. God, I hate you."

She started walking away again. I had to say something.

"Grace, please, can I ask you something?"

No answer. Surely, she wanted to get away from her horrible life.

"Look, if I . . . if I got some money, and somewhere to live. Would you come with me?"

Grace stopped. She turned her head to look at me, and stared blankly, not understanding.

"What?"

"I have some money stashed away. If I leave here, if I go away to another country, get a house, start working a normal job, would you come with me?"

"That's crazy. I can't do that. *You* can't do that."

"You could have a normal life. We would have all the money we could want. Really. You could go to college, or start a business. So could I. We could be happy."

Grace said nothing. But there was something she wanted to say.

"Your dad. Your real dad. He could come to stay with us."

Grace sat silently. Her pretty dark eyes looked at me, and never wavered.

"Maybe you should give it more time—"

"No, Grace, it's now or never. I have to leave. We could go live wherever you want to go. Anywhere. But we have to go within the next few days."

Grace said nothing. But there was hesitation in her looks. Did I trust Grace? I hardly knew her, but my feelings for her were clear. I wanted to be away from the FBI and their schemes. I wanted to be away from my past. I wanted my own fresh start. But most of all, I wanted to be with Grace.

We grabbed a taxi, and rode to the station in silence.

We sat waiting for the train back to Elmwood. Neither of us said anything. There was nothing to say.

Across from us was a guy begging for money. I remembered the bum I had seen that morning, the alcoholic guy.

Was that me? Only instead of spending my days inside a bottle, I had crawled into a virtual bottle, and spent my days, weeks, and years there. Was I on a similar path of self-destructive behavior? Was North right? Was I an addict, my programming faulty, stuck in an infinite loop? Would I end up being arrested, charged, and back inside for a ten-year stretch. Twenty years?

I looked at Grace. Grace with her scars, and her criminal parents. Inside the nearby cafeteria, I could see a guy and his girlfriend, waiting for a train, eating lunch and talking. They seemed happy and normal. They weren't trying to outsmart anyone. They weren't trying to change the past.

"Don't do it, David," Grace said. "Even if you do win, you'll still lose. You're not like them. That's why I like you. You can't fool the police. My dad thought that he could do it. But they got him all the same."

"It's already done," I said.

"Where are the FBI, then?"

"It's . . . I just want to have a normal life. With you. We could watch movies, eat pizza, and go to computer conventions. I just want to be normal. But what Knight did to me—"

"Don't do it, David. Don't live in the past. It always catches up with you."

Even though I had now defeated Knight, it somehow meant nothing to me. But what Grace was saying did.

I used the station's wireless service—I actually paid, for a change—to remove the Trojan. "It's done," I said.

We continued sitting on the platform in the cold morning air, waiting for the train back to Elmwood.

"Could you spare some money, sir?" asked a voice. 'Sir'—people call you 'sir' when you're wearing a suit.

"No, sorry," I said.

I looked up. It wasn't the drunk I had seen before. It was another guy holding a sign that read "I want to work."

"Is that true?" I said, nodding at the tatty cardboard he was holding.

"Yes. I want to work."

"Then why don't you get a job?" It was delivered as blunt as it sounds.

"They took my house," he said sadly. "They took everything. I just want to get back on my feet. I haven't touched a drink in a whole month. I lost my wife, my children, everything. I want a fresh start."

The train was clanking into the station. "Here," I said as I stood up. I handed him the NeoTek notebook. "Hold this by the bottom."

I quickly popped it open, and started running a program to scrub away all of my hacking scripts as well as any other traces of my activities on the notebook.

While he was still holding the computer, looking somewhat baffled, I grabbed Grace by the hand and started walking toward the train.

The guy called out, "Hey, mister, your computer!"

"It's yours now," I called back to him. "You should get four hundred for that. Don't take less than three."

"But it's yours!" he protested, not quite believing.

“I don’t need it anymore.”

Grace and I got on the train.

Back in Elmwood, we grabbed a taxi at the train station.

The taxi stopped at the end of Grace’s street.

“Can I see you tomorrow?” I asked.

“Yes. I’d like that,” she said, moving closer to me.

“I’ll work something out.”

We kissed, for the first time. I then turned and started off back to the bus station, where my old clothes and my old life were waiting for me.

But in a way, I felt like a new life was also waiting for me.

Chapter 19

I called Hannah.

“Mom, I won’t be in for dinner. I’ve got to meet a friend.”

“Okay, David, but you should eat something.”

“Yeah, I will. I’ll talk to you later.”

I hoped that veiled promise would postpone her curiosity until I got home.

“Well, enjoy yourself.”

“I will.”

“Call me when you want to come home.”

“I’ll only be a few hours.”

I got out of the cab and walked over to the coffee shop. I looked at my watch. It was 6:45. I still had fifteen minutes before meeting Zaqarwi and Malik, and I wanted to be alone to think.

Instead of going into the coffee shop, I went into the video store at the entrance, and sat down, my mind whirling with thoughts of Grace, and of the future. I needed to think, but had no time. As soon as Malik made the offer, I would be going home. There would be no chance to do anything.

Was I right to be thinking about going away with Grace? All of a sudden, obstacles and questions started to present themselves.

How serious was Grace? I hadn’t expected her to elope with some man she hardly knew. But I knew that I wanted to be with her. I could work as a programmer; but what would Grace do? And would she be happy doing it?

The biggest question was: would it last? I knew from watching my mother that relationships built rapidly rarely stayed the course. They burned out. Was I making the mistake I had always sought to avoid? But how would that be different if I had money, places to go, things to do, a happy, exciting life? I had my stash, a list of backdoors, user accounts, and systems that I could use to get enough money to live with Grace. I had a way into a bank, but how much money would I steal? And did I want to make a real criminal of myself? I never thought of myself as a criminal; I had never taken any money from anyone. But now I had an impossible situation.

As I sat in the video store, trying to clear my mind, and staring off into the distance, something caught my eye. A car pulled up in front of the entrance, and a guy got out. I recognized Bennell, one of Zaqarwi’s crew. For a moment, he stood looking at the building. Then he looked at his watch. Instead of walking into the coffee shop, he made his way around the side of the building and disappeared out of sight.

I went back out of the bookstore, looking over at the coffee shop as I did, to make sure that Zaqarwi hadn’t seen me. I could afford to be a few minutes late. I quickly made my way to the side of the building, and then suddenly stopped.

The shop had a rear parking lot, and there, leaning into the window of a large black Ford, was Bennell. He was talking to someone. In the dimming light, I couldn’t fully see the driver of the car. He moved behind a row of bushes that lined the sidewalk. I edged slowly closer to the car. The shadows of the twilight were darkening the glass, and though I had edged further, I could still not make out the driver’s face—only the outline of a man.

I moved closer, up to the edge of the bushes. I tried to focus my eyes. Suddenly, Bennell leaned back, and I saw who he had been talking to. It was Philips.

I pulled back behind the bushes quickly, and tried to stop my heart from banging. What is going on? Was Bennell working for Philips, too? Or was Philips using Bennell to watch me? What was Philips doing here? Whatever it was, it meant

trouble for me. It meant that in some way Philips was not on the level. Across the road, three young men in sports clothes were getting into a truck, laughing and talking loudly. Their shirts had football emblems on them. I ran over to the truck.

“I’ll give you fifty dollars for a ride.”

“What?” said one of the men.

“I need a lift. Right now.” I held out the fifty-dollar bill.

One of the men laughed, and said, “Get dead, freak.”

“Wait,” said the driver. “Fifty? Where to?”

I was dropped off at the end of Grace’s block, and I quickly made my way to her house. Grace’s stepfather’s car was in the driveway. I reached for my mobile phone, but suddenly realized that I didn’t even have Grace’s phone number. I felt stupid. How could I have made such a mistake? That’s the first thing that a regular guy does when he meets a girl. But I wasn’t a regular guy. I was anything but regular. I was Ripley-Halsey-Johnson. I was strange. I was a computer criminal. I had done time.

I stood on the sidewalk in front of her house, trying to figure out how to contact her without anybody else knowing.

Then I heard a voice shouting. I could tell that it was raised in anger. I strained to hear. It was coming from the kitchen. I moved around to that side of the house, so I could see through the window.

“It’s seven-thirty,” the voice said. I recognized it as the voice of Grace’s stepfather. “Where is he?”

“I don’t know.” That was Grace’s voice. There was fear in it.

Chapter 20

I slowly edged forwards until I could see through the kitchen window. Grace was sitting at the table. Her shoulders were hunched up, and one side of her face was red. The makeup on her cheeks was smudged from tears.

I could also see Grace's mother standing in the doorway with her arms folded, glaring at Grace. I couldn't see the stepfather, and I wondered where he was. Then he moved into view. His hands were on his hips, and he was dressed in his familiar trucker clothes. Only now, I could see at the back of his belt was a gun holster, with a small black gun in it.

"You were supposed to get him back before seven o'clock. Where the hell is he?"

"How many times do you want me to say it? I don't know. I don't know! He left me, and I didn't see him after that."

Grace's stepfather moved close to Grace, his face contorted with anger.

"Just what did you say to him on your little trip?"

"I didn't say anything."

"You were told to watch him."

"I did what you said."

I knew what I was seeing; it was a set-up. Grace was a honey pot. She was a trap for me, a computer nerd, who didn't know the first thing about women. I had been played. Hannah, Richard, Philips, and Garman—they were nothing more than criminals. My "FBI home" was nothing but a set-up. The target wasn't Malik. There was no Malik. *I* was the target—*me*, a guy with a way into the Pentagon, the heart of the American military. It was me they were after—Karl Ripley, nominated by the free press as the greatest computer hacker of all time.

I had been hacked.

"Maybe you tipped him off?"

Grace shook her head. "Why would I do that?"

"I don't know. Maybe you forgot what happens to your daddy if he doesn't come back."

"He'll come back."

"He's probably somewhere by himself," said Grace's mother. "He's a loner. That's what he does. He goes off . . ."

"Keep out of it!" said Grace's stepfather, or whoever he was. He turned back to Grace.

"I swear to God, if you told him anything . . ."

"I didn't say anything."

". . . your daddy's going to be disappointed. Dead disappointed."

"It's not his fault!" Grace said, with horrible desperation.

Grace wiped tears from her cheeks. I had to go. I crept back from window, and then ran down the street. My heart was pounding, and I could feel cold perspiration on my skin. I knew I couldn't stay on the street. I made my way to the fields that surrounded the houses.

"Dead disappointed," Grace's fake stepfather had said. These people were killers. I knew that now. I ran on, through the total blackness, stumbling and falling because of the uneven ground.

I stopped and looked back at the neighborhood. In the distance, the lights looked peaceful; but in one of those houses were some people who wanted what I had,

and would probably kill to get it. They had set up houses, created fake IDs, registered me at a school; and would go to any lengths to get it.

I stumbled on. I searched for money in my pocket, and pulled out my mobile phone. It was the one I had gotten from Grace. She had given it to me, because cell phones can be tracked. I took the battery out, and then threw it and the phone as far as I could.

I took out my money, and strained to count out enough for a train ticket. But to where? Where was I going? Anywhere but here. I looked around. I needed to find a phone to call a taxi. I'd have to go to the next town. That was my only hope.

After I had gotten my breath back, I started jogging again. Eventually, I came out to a major street. On the corner was a seedy-looking convenience store, and a public pay phone. I prayed that it was functioning.

Fortunately, it was. The phone book was missing, but I had already called for so many taxis during the past week that I had the company's number memorized.

Ten minutes that seemed like an hour later, the cab arrived, and stopped in front of the house I had asked him to wait at. He honked the horn, and looked at the house. When nobody appeared, he started to radio it in, probably asking if they had got the location correct. I looked around. The place was deserted. I moved out of the cover of the bushes, ran over to the taxi, and startled the driver.

"It's Halsey. I rang you. What's the next town called?"

"Englewood."

"Take me to the train station in Englewood."

The driver looked at me as if I had come from another planet. I must have looked a sight. That's when I realized that my hiding in the bushes, sneaking around Grace's house, and running across the dark and muddy field, had left my clothes really dirty.

I held up a twenty-dollar bill, to show him I had money.

"You can keep the change," I said.

Eventually, the dubious driver told me to get in, pocketed the note, and moved off. I ducked down, and put my head on the seat.

"How long to get to the station?" I asked the driver.

"Ten minutes."

"I'm going to close my eyes until we're there."

The driver drove on, uninterested in the oddball in the back of his cab. With my head on the seat, I listened to the hum of the engine, and watched the streetlights flicker past with hypnotic regularity. I tried to blank my brain, and to think of the future.

The tiny train station was quiet, and dimly lighted. I looked around. There was nobody on the platform, and nobody in the waiting room. The only person there was the ticket seller behind his window.

"How long until the next train?"

"To where?"

"Anywhere."

The man gave me a sour look, but checked his schedule and said, "Twenty minutes."

I bought a ticket, and then moved into the shadows near the end of the platform. Many times during my life, I had come to the conclusion that the road to hell was paved with other people. Now, I had a longing to see some friendly face. But I didn't have any friends. I could open my mouth and charm the passwords out of people, but there was nothing in me that knew how to make real friends. Like Grace?

I watched the minutes pass silently and slowly on the big station clock. At the nominated time, I heard a sound and turned my head. I saw a faint light in the distance, which grew nearer, as a train pulled into the station with a rhythmic clang.

From my hiding place, I looked around. The platform was still deserted. Looking through the train's windows I could see nobody on board. I approached the door and extended my arm.

“Going somewhere?” said a voice behind me. I turned my head to see who it was. But I didn’t make it. A bolt of lightning suddenly lit up the sky, illuminating the station with bright light, and a spike of pain traveled from my head down my spine.

Then the light went away, and everything faded to black.

Chapter 21

I slowly became aware of the humming sound of a car's engine, and the flicker of passing streetlights overhead. I let out a breath of relief. I was still alive, still in the taxi, still going to the station. Exhausted, I had nodded out. My misery was nothing more than a strange hypnagogic mishap. So why did my head hurt so badly? I tried to move my hand to my head, but couldn't.

"The boy's awake," said a sarcastic voice. I opened my eyes fully and sat up. I was in a strange car. In the front were two men I had never seen before. I was wearing handcuffs, which were so tight that they hurt, though nothing like my head. I looked around. From the corner of my vision, I could see the legs of someone sitting next to me. I went to turn my head, and instantly regretted it. Slowly, carefully, I managed to look to my right, and saw Grace sitting quietly beside me. She was wearing handcuffs, too. She didn't look at me. She was looking out the window.

"My head," I croaked. My voice seemed detached from me.

The first man, who was driving the car, said "Sorry about that headshot, Karl, but you have a habit of squirming out of situations, and we couldn't take the chance. I'm sure you understand."

From my place behind the driver, I couldn't see his face, but I heard a quiet snort and realized that the men were amused. I saw his head, with its shaved hair—like an old fashioned crew-cut—move up and down as he quietly chuckled. He seemed happy with his night's work.

"You don't mind if we ask you a few questions before you go back to prison for a long time, do you?" said the second man. He smiled, widening his moustache, which was as blond as his hair.

I didn't answer because my brain was too fogged to grok anything. We rode on in silence.

"Who are you?" I said eventually.

"We are what you might call the *real* FBI," said Crew-cut.

"As opposed to little Miss Hot Pants here," added Moustache, "and her criminal friends."

"No," I said. "I'm working for the FBI. Take me home. They'll explain. Call Agent Philips. Garman, too. Call them. Talk to them."

Moustache opened the glove box. The light went on, and I saw a pistol strapped to the roof of the compartment. He pulled out several photographs.

"Do you mean this Philips?" He showed me a mug shot. In it, a disheveled Philips was holding an arrest card in front of his chest. I shook my head.

"I don't think he gets it," said Moustache to Crew-cut.

"How about this one?"

He held up another photograph. This one was Philips joking with Garman and Malik in a bar. They looked drunk.

"But they came to me in jail."

"Anybody can get into jail," said Crew-cut. "It's getting out that's the difficult part."

I looked at Moustache. He seemed to be pleased with himself, like the cat that got the cream. How long had he been sitting cramped in this car, watching me, thinking of the day when he would be able to haul me in, and even the score for the FBI. "Not so smart, are you?" said his gaze.

"Where are we going?" I said eventually.

"You know where," said Crew-cut grimly.

Within a minute, the car pulled up in front of a police station.

Suddenly, Moustache leaned into the back of the car, and grabbed me by the shirt. He pulled me to him, almost choking me. My head felt like it was going to explode.

His eyes were inches from mine.

“Make one crack when we get inside, and I will kick the living daylights out of you,” he said quietly and calmly.

Both agents got out of the car and opened the doors.

“Let’s go.”

Moustache took my arm and led me up the steps into the police station.

Grace and Crew-cut followed behind. Inside, Crew-cut flashed a blue and white FBI badge at the desk sergeant.

“I need an interview room,” he said.

“I need some water,” I said lamely.

Moustache poked me in the chest. It hurt like a bullet. The sergeant held his hand out, and Crew-cut handed him the badge. He squinted at the badge, and then looked at over at me, his eyes moving up and down.

“Who have you got there, Al Capone?” he asked, without any trace of humor.

“It’s been a long night,” said Crew-cut shortly, refusing the police banter.

The sergeant typed Crew-cut’s details into the computer on the desk. From where I was I couldn’t see the screen, which was turned toward the sergeant, but I watched the keyboard, as he typed, one finger at a time, “E-d-w-a-r-d-s.”

Then he gestured at Moustache, who let go of my arm and with a grim expression of bored annoyance, took out his badge and gave it to the sergeant, who typed in his details into the computer,

“M-o-o-t-delete-r-e.” Then he handed Moore’s badge back, and gave Edwards a key.

“Room three,” he said. “Sign the book.” He sounded as if he had already said it a thousand times that day.

Edwards signed the book that was on the desk, and we went down the corridor. Edwards opened the door, and I was back in a police interview room again.

Moore sat me in a chair, as if I was a child who had been naughty. Then the two FBI agents, talkative a minute ago, sat quietly, content to stare at me. I looked at Grace, who sat on the other side of the table. She didn’t look at me. She stared quietly at nothing. Her eyelashes were wet from tears. I thought of our trip to Knight’s house. Had she been serious about coming with me? I would never know.

Another five silent minutes passed. Apparently, Edwards and Moore were not going to question me. We were all waiting for someone. I could guess who: Agent North of the Cyber Crime and Broken Parole Division. I had to try something.

“I didn’t do anything,” I said.

“Huh,” said Moore. “How come the smartest guy in the world of silicon chips is the dumbest goon in the annals of crime? Thanks to you, the birds flew away, leaving just these little canaries, both trying to flap their wings and fly away. That means that you and her take the rap alone. They left her behind. ‘Thick as thieves,’ huh?”

“Let her go, and I’ll cooperate. I’ll tell you what you want to know. She wasn’t part of it.”

Edwards and Moore laughed.

“Priceless,” said Edwards.

I opened my mouth to talk, but Moore interrupted.

“Shut your mouth. There is nothing you can say to us that could possibly interest us.”

“We’re not here to make any deals,” said Edwards. “That’s out of the question now, even if we wanted to. We’re just babysitting you until the cavalry arrives. You remember Agent North?”

“Why let him take all the credit? Do you owe him something? Is he your boss?”

I knew the answer to these questions was no.

“I’ve got what you really want.”

“What you’ve got is nothing,” said Edwards, losing his temper at last. “You were top of the hacker charts. You made a joke out of a lot of people. But that’s old news. You’ve got no bargaining chips left. Tomorrow’s headline will be ‘Pentagon Hacker Gets Ten Years.’”

“All your asses are belong to us, dude,” added Moore, in a parody of a hacker saying. “You managed to plea bargain your way out of the last one. No bargaining this time.”

“We’ve got all the evidence we need,” said Edwards.

“They tricked me.”

“Tell that to the judge,” said Edwards. “The way we see it, you got out of jail, and voluntarily went straight back to hacking. Not only that, but you were working for terrorists. Hell, they’re going to throw away the key.”

I heard Grace breathe deeply, like a sob.

“I know, you’ve got me, but let the girl go.” I said “the girl” to try to distance myself from Grace. I knew that the FBI wanted me so badly that they might even consider anyone associated with me.

“She set you up,” said Moore, his face a puzzled frown. “What are you, whipped and stunned from one peck on the lips? Her daddy is a drug dealer. The way I heard it, when they caught him, he had so many class-A substances in his car, they had to build an extension onto the evidence room.”

“She had to do it for her father. She’ll just get off with probation. Why waste your time on something you can’t make a case out of? Let her go, and I’ll talk.”

Edwards looked at Moore, and both men cracked up laughing.

“You’ve got two hopes: Bob Hope and No Hope,” said Moore, grinning. “Now quiet down.”

“You’re the guys who caught the Pentagon hacker. I’ll give you the details of security holes in the Pentagon network. You’ll be seen as heroes.”

“Dumb, dumb, dumb,” said Edwards, quietly, after a moment’s thought.

“Smart enough to bargain my way out again.”

“You think so?” said Edwards.

“You know it. I got mixed up in something only because I was duped. The press will have a field day with the whole story. Hell, I might as well get myself a PR agent, and book a few talk shows, to promote my book.”

Edwards’s hard smile did not change. I continued.

“You know that you don’t have any Knight to inform on me this time. No one to set me up.”

“We don’t need anyone,” said Moore. “We’ve got so much video, we could make a movie out of it.”

“We could call it ‘How To Get Back Into Jail.’”

“We knew you’d be back in front of a keyboard,” said Edwards, continuing Moore’s theme. “Everybody in the Bureau did. You’re an addict.”

“They tricked me into doing it.”

“You can’t tell us,” said Edwards, with his calm smile, “that you were duped by organized criminals into going after Knight. That was revenge hacking all of your own making.”

That was true. Though I could claim that I had acted under duress, and had been duped by criminals, I could never convince anyone that going after Knight was anybody’s idea but my own.

“All we had to do was watch Knight and wait for you to pop up. The rest of the stuff was fascinating enough. But basically, we don’t need it, because we already have you.”

I shrugged, unconcerned.

“It wasn’t my fault. If I hadn’t have been dragged back into the world of computers, I’d have gone on the straight and narrow.”

“Says you,” said Moore.

“I know a good lawyer who can make something out of that. He looks like me.”

Edwards snorted scornfully.

“You knew I was being held by killers,” I said it like a prosecution lawyer would, “. . . and you chose to do nothing. Hell, I might be able to sue you not only for entrapment, but also for leaving me . . . how do lawyers put it . . . ‘in harm’s way?’”

I saw Moore glance at Edwards, and I knew that I had hit on something they hadn’t considered. These men weren’t lawyers; they were standard field agents of the knock-them-down-and-cuff-them variety. They had fun banging heads and shooting guns. They probably hated paperwork. They wouldn’t know that a real lawyer could have shot holes in my lie in a minute. Probably.

“Tell it to North when he gets here,” said Edwards with practiced unconcern, and just a hint of irritability.

“North messed it up last time,” I said. “He’ll mess it up again. Then you’ll have nothing. I’ll walk, and you’ll both look as stupid as he did last time—beaten by a smart-mouth kid. How will that look on your record? Every time you go into court for the rest of your lives, the real criminals are going to be laughing to themselves, and for what? For some hotshot you never met who dropped the ball, and wants to drag you into his mess.”

Edwards’s composure remained, but I could tell that I was getting to Moore.

“North wasn’t expecting you last time,” he said, jabbing his finger.

“And this time,” I retorted, “I have even more information about the Pentagon to trade.”

“You don’t have anything. We’ve been watching you, remember?”

“I have it stashed away. The Pentagon. A multi-national bank. NASA. You can have them all.”

“I think he’s trying to hack us,” said Moore to Edwards, attempting to keep his sarcasm afloat.

“Even if you weren’t trying to hack us,” said Edwards, “you’re talking to the wrong people. We don’t get anything out of that. We’re just the hired hands.”

“Patriotism?” suggested Moore.

“If it’s money you want, I can give you a bank. I have a backdoor into a bank. I phoned up one of the clerks, a woman, and literally sweet-talked her into giving me the internal security codes. The bank would be really grateful to know you found the hole in their security.”

“We’re federal agents.” Edwards shrugged. “We can’t accept even a cent in rewards.”

“Not legally,” I said. “But do you know how many banks have bought hackers off? They don’t want their clients to get nervous. They hush it all up. Do you know how grateful banks can be when you keep it quiet that they had a big hole in their security? Maybe they’ll take on your mortgages, get them transferred from your current bank. I’d see to it that you got them quietly paid off.”

I saw something happen to Moore’s expression. I didn’t know anything about the divorce rate among FBI agents, but it made sense to think that all those unsociable hours and dangerous assignments might lead to marital instability. He wasn’t wearing a wedding ring, I had noticed, so maybe he was divorced. Maybe he had a mortgage he was still paying, on a house he couldn’t even live in. I hoped so.

“Free of your mortgages for the rest of your lives,” I added.

“I’m not going to sit here for two hours and listen to this,” Moore said angrily. Two hours. North was two hours away.

“You want some coffee, or what?” said Edwards to Moore.

“Yeah,” said Moore. He got up, that expression still on his face. He hadn’t bought into my plan yet, but his brain was still working.

“Don’t forget the FBI’s phone system,” I cheerfully called after Edwards, as he made his way to the door. “I have some beautiful voicemails you just wouldn’t believe. The headlines would be memorable. And you are the two brave agents who tracked me down and brought me to justice. It’ll get you promoted to the next pay grade. The grand tour of Cape Canaveral. Handshake with the president—”

“Shut your mouth!” said Edwards, so loudly that it must have been heard by half of the police station. I closed my mouth, and watched as Moore got Edwards by the arm, and directed him to the side of the room.

Moore whispered something to Edwards, and the men began a hushed conversation. I watched them from the corner of my eye. Though the room was small, I couldn’t clearly make out what was being said, but I could see it in their body language. Edwards was against my offer. But Moore wanted it. As soon as I had used the word ‘mortgage,’ I had hooked him.

“Screw him,” said Moore loudly, with exasperation, before Edwards quieted him. I knew though that he wasn’t talking about me. He was talking about North.

I looked at Grace. Her matted eyelashes blinked slowly.

“Were you telling the truth when you said I was a good dancer?” I asked.

“I’m sorry,” she said quietly. “They made me do it. My dad—”

“Hey,” said Edwards, turning around. “One more word . . .” He jabbed his finger at Grace.

Two minutes later, they returned, and Edwards spoke to me.

“All right, Ripley, here’s the deal. I don’t give a rat’s ass about whatever deals you make later, with North or the judge, or whoever. What we want is the bank. That’s the deal.”

“You got it,” I said, nodding. “And the girl goes, and North never has cause to pick her up.”

“When we’ve concluded the deal, the girl can take a hike. But if you stiff us, Ripley, she goes inside with you. We’ll see to it.”

I watched Grace, her eyes started to open, and she tilted her head up. She watched Moore nod his head. He grabbed me.

Grace and I sat looking at each other again. I smiled at her. Even with the smudged mascara, she was easy to smile at. Moore grabbed hold of me and hauled me up.

“Get on your feet,” said Edwards to Grace. “We’re going for a ride.”

On the way out, I saw the desk sergeant glance at me, and realized that he must have heard Moore’s shouting. Moore pushed me through the door, and once again I was out in the darkness.

“It’s at my old house. Take the freeway—”

“We know where you used to live,” interrupted Moore. “The question is: where in your old house?”

“I’ll show you.”

Edwards looked like he was going to argue, but Moore seemed to want to just get going.

The journey took less than an hour, and during it, nobody said anything. I couldn’t even hear Grace breathing. I looked at her once, but she wouldn’t even look at me.

“Here it is,” said Moore, as we pulled up in front of the large white house that had been my home about a million and one years ago.

“Get to it, Ripley. We don’t have all night.”

I worked loose a familiar brick in the garage wall—the one that I had discovered as a kid, and it came away. Behind it was a memory stick, with all sorts of server details, and user accounts on it, encased in a waterproof plastic holder.

I opened the pack, and took it out.

“Here,” I said to Moore. “Now it’s your turn. Let the girl go.”

Moore snatched it from me, looked at it, and then put it in his pocket. Then he turned to Edwards, and nodded. Edwards lifted a gun. It had a silencer on it. He pointed it at me.

“Ripley,” he said.

I looked at him, but then Moore must have hit me from behind, because for the second time that night, everything went black.

I saw a business card next to me on the floor, and then I knew for sure what Grace had meant when she said that the past always catches up with you, and why she had wanted me to forget about Knight. I grabbed the card and stood up. I felt my head. The next time somebody cracked me there, it was going to split open. I focused my eyes on the card. It was a business card belonging to Knight. On one corner was a graphic of a white chess Knight. White takes black in two moves. Sure.

I looked around, and there was no one there. But they are always watching. I groaned and tried to rub the pain from my skull, and then made my way to a payphone. I had to bribe the taxi driver with all of the cash I had on me before he agreed to take me all the way back to my Elmwood home.

Of course, there was nobody there, and there never had been. I slumped against the door, with my head in my hands. I knew that they were watching. They were always watching, even though they now they had what they wanted. They were watching to see what I did.

They were somewhere in the night. Edwards and Moore, they weren’t FBI, any more than Hannah or Richard, Philips or Garman. They had my stash of user accounts and bank details. They had their leader, Knight, who had organized the con from the start. They were probably already transferring money to their own bank accounts.

It was a huge double con, and I was the mark. I sat there, holding my head, knowing what I had lost. I got back into the taxi, and asked the driver to stop at Grace's house. I looked through the windows, but there was no one there, either.

I gave the driver Knight's address, and he dropped me off at Knight's office. But was no Knight Securities, Inc.—not even any furniture in the office.

I looked up into the night sky, and screamed “No!”—even though I knew they were watching. Actually, because they were watching. Orion looked down. Orion. He didn't care. He had been watching for countless millions of years, and he would carry on watching for millions more.

I sat on the curb in the empty parking lot, looking at Orion.

Chapter 22

It must have been a convincing act, because Knight bought it. And once he was convinced that he had hacked me, he got to work. With the user account details he had gotten from my stash, he was able to log on to a well-known bank's server, and transfer a large amount of money. Altogether, he and another gang siphoned off over a hundred million dollars. The details of the Pentagon's network he sold to a buyer, and got another small fortune. Only he didn't.

The FBI arrested them as they were heading to a remote country, where the bank accounts come with numbers but no names. There was a big trail, at the end of which Knight and his friends—Philips, Garman, Hannah, Richard, Malik, Zaqarwi, and the rest—all got heavy sentences. I heard that Knight is now in solitary confinement, like I had been.

But I can't take any credit for Knight's downfall, since it was all the idea of Agent Bartels, of the Cyber Crime Squad of the FBI. The real FBI. He had come to me a week after I landed in jail, and said that Knight would be looking to run a hack on me. He said that Knight was a criminal, and that he would probably be looking to steal my stash, which he knew was worth millions.

Bartels had guessed that Knight would be sending people to me, pretending to be the police or the FBI. And it was Bartels who hid that stash of fake user accounts and server details at my old house. The truth is I never kept a stash. Any details I had were kept in my head. Like I said, whenever I hacked a site, I took only memories.

I went to college not long after Knight's arrest, and with my hacking days behind me, I now live the quiet life. The real world is just as boring as I always imagined. Studying, assignments, and project work. Sometimes it's hard not to wish for the good old days.

But life has its compensations. Sometimes on the weekend, I like to take a break from school to travel around. Just last month, I found myself on the train, sitting across from an attractive blonde, dressed in a business suit and wearing dark glasses. I got talking to her, and bought her lunch. With her dark eyes and her habit of frowning, she reminded me of Grace, but of course there never was any Grace. And when we went to the beach last week, and I noticed two scars running up her back, I knew that it still wasn't Grace.

This woman's name is Jennifer, and we get on very well. She has this annoying habit of asking too many questions, and getting me to talk about things I don't really want to talk about. But it could be worse. It could be the feds asking the questions.

I never went back to my life of criminal hacking, and I'm pretty sure that I never will. Except one time, when I was at the FBI's local headquarters, talking to Agent Bartels, filling in the details of our own sting, I managed to sneak a look at their personnel database. Imagine my surprise when I came across Agent North's username and password.

I'd let you have them, hacker to hacker, but I need to keep hold of them for a while. You never know what you might need one rainy day.

Besides, you don't think I'd do anything criminal, do you?

The End

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