

Daemon

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a novel

Daniel Suarez



DUTTON

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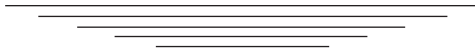
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*For Michelle,
No more bedtime stories . . .*

daemon (dē'mən) n.—A computer program that runs continuously in the background and performs specified operations at predefined times or in response to certain events.

Condensed from 'Disk And Execution MONitor.'

Part One



Chapter 1:// Execution

Reuters.com/business

Matthew A. Sobol, PhD, cofounder and Chief Technology Officer of **CyberStorm Entertainment (HSTM—Nasdaq)**, **died today at age 34** after a prolonged battle with **brain cancer**. A pioneer in the \$40 billion computer game industry, Sobol was the architect of CyberStorm's best-selling online games ***Over the Rhine*** and ***The Gate***. CyberStorm CEO Kenneth Kevault described Sobol as "a tireless innovator and a rare intellect."

“W*hat the hell just happened?* That was all Joseph Pavlos kept thinking as he clenched a gloved hand against his throat. It didn't stop the blood from pulsing between his fingers. Already a shockingly wide pool had formed in the dirt next to his face. He was on the ground somehow. Although he couldn't see the gash, the pain told him the wound was deep. He rolled onto his back and stared up at a stretch of spotless blue sky.

His usually methodical mind sped frantically through the possibilities—like someone groping for an exit in a smoke-filled building. He had to do something. Anything. But what? The phrase *What the hell just happened?* kept echoing in his head uselessly, while blood kept spurting between his fingers. Adrenaline surged through his system, his heart beating faster. He tried to call out. No good. Blood squirted several inches into the air and sprinkled his face. *Carotid artery . . .*

He was pressing on his neck so hard he was almost strangling himself. And he'd been feeling so good just moments before this. He remembered that much at least. His last debts repaid. At long last.

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He was getting calmer now. Which was strange. He kept trying to remember what he'd been doing. What brought him here to this place. It seemed so unimportant now. His hand began to relax its hold. He could see plainly that there was no emergency. Because there was no logical scenario in which he would emerge from this alive. And after all, it was his unequalled talent for logic that had brought Pavlos so far in life. Had brought him halfway around the world. This was it. He'd already done everything he would ever do. His peripheral vision began to constrict, and he felt like an observer. He was calm now.

And it was in that cold, detached state that he realized. Matthew Sobol had died. That's what the news said. And then it all made sense to him. Sobol's game finally made sense. It was beautiful really.

Clever man . . .

Chapter 2:// Rogue Process

Thousand Oaks, California, had an overzealous, sanitary charm. They didn't build homes here. They manufactured them—a hundred identical Mediterranean villas at a stroke. Gated subdivisions named in every combination of "Bridge," "Haven," "Glen," and "Lake" covered the hillsides.

Upscale retail chains had embassies in the city center, and the service people drove in each day from vassal communities. Where the medieval city of Lyon had its Lane of Tanners, Southern California had its Vale of the Baristas and its Canyon of Firefighters & Rescue Personnel.

For average working folks, America was becoming a puzzle. Who was buying all these two-hundred-dollar copper saucepans, anyway? And how was everyone paying for these BMWs? Were people shrewd or just stupefyingly irresponsible?

Pete Sebeck thought television held some clues. Channel surfing late at night, unable to sleep, Sebeck considered the commercials aimed at him. Was he their demographic? Had they correctly deduced him? And what did that say about him? The History Channel seemed to think he was either a Korean War veteran looking for a truly capable brush mower, or that he was desperately in need of a career change. He had a nasty suspicion they were right about one of them.

The 101 Freeway cut Thousand Oaks in two, but there really was no wrong side of the freeway. It had been named the safest small city in America, and as Detective Sergeant Peter Sebeck watched the tidy boulevards roll past his passenger window, he recalled why he and Laura moved here thirteen years ago—back when it was affordable; Ventura County was a great place to raise children. If you fucked up raising kids here, then God himself could not have helped you.

“Migraine, Pete?”

Sebeck turned to Nathan Mantz, who was looking at him with concern from the driver’s seat. Sebeck barely shook his head. Mantz knew better than to pursue it.

Sebeck thought about the radio call from Burkow. It would certainly rattle a few country club gates. Sebeck and Mantz cruised through town with the strobes flashing, but no siren. No need to alarm anyone. From his unmarked Crown Victoria, Sebeck watched the unsuspecting citizenry—the tax base on power walks. They’d have something to talk about tonight at Pilates class.

The Crown Vic descended into the undeveloped canyons just beyond the last subdivision wall. The scene wasn’t difficult to find. An ambulance, three patrol units, and a few unmarked cars on the sandy shoulder of Potrero Road marked the location. Two deputy sheriffs stood near a closed steel gate flanked by chain-link fence stretching out in either direction.

Mantz rolled the cruiser into the driveway before the gate. Sebeck stepped from the car and turned to the nearest officer. “Coroner?”

“En route, Sergeant.”

“Where’s Detective Burkow?”

The deputy thumbed in the direction of a hole cut in the side of the chain-link fence.

Sebeck waited for Mantz, who was radioing in. Sebeck looked back at the deputy. “Let’s get this gate open.”

“Can’t, Sergeant. It’s got one of those remote control locks built into it. There’s nothing to cut.”

Sebeck nodded as Mantz caught up to him.

“The property is owned by a local company—CyberStorm Entertainment. We got through to their people. They’re sending someone down.”

Sebeck moved through the hole in the fence, followed by Mantz. They marched along a dirt road winding among the chaparral on the canyon bottom. Soon they came to a crowd of EMTs and deputy sheriffs standing well back from a photographer. They were all shiny with sweat in the midday sun. The paramedics had a gurney, but no one was in a hurry. They turned as Sebeck and Mantz crunched across the dirt toward them. “Afternoon, gentlemen.” A glance. “Ladies.”

They mumbled greetings and parted to let Sebeck and Mantz pass.

Detective Martin Burkow, a corpulent man in his fifties with ill-fitting

pants, stood on a mound of sandy soil at the edge of the road. Next to him the police photographer leaned forward to get an overhead shot of a body lying in the road. A pool of brownish, dried blood stretched out beneath it and traced dark rivulets downhill.

Sebeck gazed over the scene. A motocross motorcycle lay twenty yards down the road, on the side of a nearby hill. He could see where it had bounded into the left wall of the canyon and then rolled back across the dirt road.

Above the road, between him and the body, a taut steel cable stretched at neck level. The cable traversed the road at a forty-five-degree angle, closer on the left side, farther away on the right. Anything racing through here would grind down the cable like a saw blade. The cable was bloodstained for a good ten-foot length. The body lay ten yards beyond that. A motorcycle helmet five yards farther still.

Sebeck's eyes followed the thin steel cable rightward to a steel pole rising from the chaparral. Then leftward through the bushes. A freshly cut groove crossed the dirt roadway directly beneath the cable.

"Martin, what do we have?"

Detective Burkow coughed the consumptive cough of a lifelong smoker. "Hi, Pete. Thanks for coming down. Caucasian male, approximately thirty years old. A local walking his dog found the body about an hour ago. It was reported as a 10-54, but I thought I'd call you guys. This is looking more like a 187."

Sebeck and Mantz looked at each other and raised their eyebrows. Homicide. Rare in Thousand Oaks. The only killings down here were made in real estate.

The photographer nodded to Burkow and made his way back along the edge of the road. Burkow motioned for them to move forward. "Stick to the left, in the ruts. All the footprints are on the other side." He stepped down off the mound.

Sebeck and Mantz ducked under the cable and stood over the body. Sebeck was relieved to see the head still attached. The nearby helmet was empty. The dead man wore an expensive-looking motocross jumpsuit with logo patches. The yellow nylon was torn at chest level. It looked like he hit the cable with his torso, and it rode up to his throat. The man's larynx was slashed, and flies buzzed over the gaping wound. His skin was alabaster white, and his lusterless, dry eyes stared at Sebeck's shoes.

Sebeck pulled on rubber surgical gloves and leaned forward. He felt for a wallet or ID in the pockets. There didn't appear to be any. He looked ahead at the dirt bike, then back at the police photographer. "Carey, try to read the plates on the bike. Maybe we can ID this guy."

The photographer peered down the canyon, then affixed a 200mm lens to his camera and focused on the motorcycle.

Sebeck stood up, and his eyes once again traversed the cable behind them. He peered through the bushes where it disappeared. "Anybody know where this ends?"

The deputies and EMT's shook their heads.

"Nathan, let's follow this thing. Stay clear of it. And look for tracks." He turned back to Burkow. "Marty, what are all these footprints on the road?"

"The locals walk it all the time. I've already interviewed a few."

"Get me a cast of every unique print in this area." Sebeck waved his arms downward.

"That's gonna be a lot of prints."

"Tell forensics they don't have to cast the dog tracks."

Mantz grinned. "I don't know, I hear Pekinese are pretty smart."

Sebeck shot him a dark look and pointed at the bushes. The cable led through a gap in the hillside that opened up back onto Potrero Road. He and Mantz fanned out on either side and moved through the bushes while studying the sandy ground.

"Keep an eye out for rattlesnakes, Pete." Mantz jumped over a ditch of eroded soil.

The cable was easy to follow, and the groove in the soil beneath it shadowed it all the way. After sixty feet they were back at the chain-link fence on Potrero road, staring at the back of a No Trespassing sign. The cable ran through the fence and into the back of a steel box two feet square sitting atop a thick pipe driven into the ground. The groove in the soil ended six feet away from the fence on their side. They had found no new footprints.

"Let's head to the other side."

In a few minutes they were back on Potrero Road at the gate. They walked a hundred yards down the shoulder and reached the front of the steel box. It had a sturdy lock in its face and was fashioned of welded

steel. It had a few indentations where passing teens had taken potshots at it with rifles, but none had penetrated.

“Built to last.” Sebeck peered around to a square hole in back where the cable entered. “Winch housing?”

Mantz nodded. “At first I thought it might be kids playing an evil prank. But this is a serious piece of engineering. What use could this thing serve?”

They turned as a Range Rover and a pickup truck pulled to the shoulder of the road near the gate. A couple of guys in khakis got out of the Rover. They spoke briefly with the deputies there who pointed down to Sebeck and Mantz. The khakis climbed back into the Rover. Both vehicles rolled down the shoulder and stopped in front of the detectives, sending a choking cloud of dust over them.

The khakis got out again. The one on the passenger side came forward with his hand extended. He looked like money—business casual with creases. “Detectives. Gordon Pietro, senior legal counsel for CyberStorm Entertainment.” They shook hands. Pietro pushed business cards on both of them. “This is our VP of public relations, Ron Massey.”

Sebeck nodded. Massey had longer hair than Pietro and a pierced eyebrow with a gold ring. He was in his late twenties and looked like money, too. A pang of jealousy shot through Sebeck. The fact that he could effortlessly beat the shit out of this kid sprang unbidden into his mind. He pushed it back down. “This is Detective Mantz. I’m Detective Sergeant Sebeck, East Ventura County Major Crimes Unit.”

Pietro stopped short. “Major Crimes Unit? We were told there was an accidental death on the property.”

“The responding officers called us in. We’re investigating this as a potential homicide.” Sebeck leaned around Pietro and looked at the pickup truck parked behind the Rover. The pickup had a logo on the side door, illegible at this angle. “Who’s in the truck?”

“Oh—a worker from the management firm. They maintain the property. He has a remote for the front gate.”

“Let’s get him out here. I want to talk to him.”

Pietro walked back, motioning to the guy in the truck.

Sebeck turned to Massey. “What’s this property used for?”

“CyberStorm purchased the land as an investment. It’s also used by the company for campouts, team-building exercises, things like that.”

Sebeck took out a pad and pen. "So you're the PR guy? What's CyberStorm Entertainment do, Ron?"

"We're a leading computer game developer. Ever hear of *Over the Rhine*?"

"No."

Burkow shouted from down near the gate. "Pete. I got a name from the DMV. The bike's registered to a Joseph Pavlos. Lives up in those McMansions on the hilltop."

Massey put a hand to his chin. "Oh man."

"You know the victim?"

"Yeah. He's one of our senior developers. What happened?"

Sebeck gestured with his pen. "He hit this cable with his neck. Do you know if he rode down here regularly?"

"I don't, but his development team might."

Pietro returned with a Mexican man in his forties dressed in a green jumpsuit. The guy looked like he'd had a tough life—and that he expected it to get a lot tougher any second.

"Ron? Pav was the one killed?"

Massey nodded and produced a cell phone. "Damn this canyon. Can't get a signal."

Pietro produced his phone for a bar-count contest. "What service do you use? I have two bars."

Sebeck butted in. "You are?"

Pietro turned back to him. "This is Haime."

"What's your full name, Haime?"

"Haime Alvarez Jimenez, señor."

"Can I see some identification, Mr. Jimenez?"

"What's going on?"

"There's been a fatality. Can I have that ID, please?"

Haime looked at Pietro and Massey, then dug into his pocket for his wallet. He found his driver's license and held it out to Sebeck. Its leading edge quivered noticeably.

A slight smile creased Sebeck's face. "Haime, did you kill this guy?"

"No, sir."

"Then relax." He took the ID and examined it.

Haime pointed at the steel box. "I close a ticket on this winch today. I just turn a key. Like it says on the work order."

"Where's the work order?"

"On the Pocket PC in my truck."

"Do you have the key to this winch housing?"

Haime nodded and produced a bar-code-labeled key chain with three keys.

"You activated this winch today? What time?"

"About nine, nine-thirty. I can tell you exactly from the work order."

Sebeck motioned for the keys, then used them to unlock the housing. He flipped it open with the tip of his pen. Inside, there was an electric winch with another keyhole in its face.

"What's the third key for?"

"Manual override for the front gate."

"So you turned the key. The winch activated and pulled the cable . . ." Sebeck leaned over. ". . . out of the ground."

"No, señor. No cable. Just the winch motor."

The others rolled their eyes in unison.

"Haime, if you were sent by your company to do this, then you don't have much to worry about. What's the purpose of this winch, anyway?"

Haime shrugged. "I not run it before."

"Can you get me that work order?"

"Yes, sir." Haime scurried toward his truck.

Pietro was looking down the length of the cable. "What exactly happened, Detective Sebeck?"

"Someone built this winch and the housing, then buried a steel cable in the soil. Running the winch stretched the cable across the dirt road at neck level."

The two CyberStorm representatives looked confused.

Pietro put a hand to his chin. "Are you sure that it's not a . . . like a chain across the road?"

"Why bury it? Why do it at all when you have a steel gate at the entrance?"

Pietro was at a loss.

Haime returned and pushed his Pocket PC into Sebeck's face. He shadowed the screen with his calloused hand and pointed to the work order displayed there. "See, it says 'Run the antenna lifting winch until it stop.'"

Sebeck took the handheld computer and with Mantz studied the data fields on-screen. "Nathan, we're going to need a search warrant for the property management firm. Put their office under surveillance until we get a team over there. Also, get me a case number, and get me Burkow's notes. I'm taking over the investigation. Everything goes through me from this point forward." He looked up at Haime. "Haime, we're going to want to chat with you at the sheriff's station."

"Señor, I didn't do anything."

"I know, Haime. That's why you want to cooperate while we arrange a search warrant for your employer."

Pietro interposed himself. "Detective Sebeck—"

"Counselor, this cable assembly was maintained by your property management firm—which would indicate they had prior knowledge of it. Would you prefer to make CyberStorm the responsible party, or does CyberStorm want to cooperate with my investigation?"

Pietro pursed his lips, then turned to Haime. "Haime, don't worry. Go with them. Do everything they say. Tell them everything you know."

"I don't know anything, Señor Pietro."

"I know that, Haime. But I think it best that you do what Detective Sebeck says."

"I am a U.S. citizen. Am I under arrest?"

Sebeck looked to Mantz. Mantz stepped in. "No, Haime. We're just gonna talk. You can leave the pickup truck here. We'll take care of that." Mantz motioned for Haime to move toward the patrol cars and started escorting him away.

Pietro nodded to Massey. "Detective Sebeck, we'll contact your office for a copy of the police report. You know where to reach me." Both men climbed back into the Range Rover and sped off, perhaps to find a better wireless signal.

Sebeck looked along the length of cable. Would someone really have built this just to kill a person? He could think of easier ways to kill someone.

He clamped back a smile. This wasn't a murder-suicide or a botched drug deal. It might actually be a premeditated killing. Was it wrong to hope so? Accident or murder, the victim was dead. Nothing would change that. So what was wrong with hoping it was murder?

Pondering this, Sebeck turned and walked back to the front gate.

Chapter 3:// Black Box

Sebeck, Mantz, and three county deputies crowded around a Post-it-note-slathered computer monitor in the cubicle of a nondescript company, in a generic office park in Thousand Oaks. Tractor trailers hissed by on the freeway just beyond the thin stucco walls, but the officers were intent, leaning over the shoulders of Deputy Aaron Larson, the County Sheriff's only computer fraud specialist.

Larson was in his late twenties with an air of military orderliness—buzz-cut hair, athletic build, and a square jaw. He had a boyish enthusiasm for ferreting out larceny. At such times he'd smile and shake his head in slow-motion disbelief over what people thought they could get away with.

Larson's computer screen scrolled rows of text. "This log lists IP addresses making connections to their server. Notice that we've got a number of connections at around the time our target work ticket was created."

He alt-tabbed over to a custom property management program. "I spoke with the secretary, and she said they're able to accept work tickets from clients through a secure Web page."

Sebeck nodded. "So the request didn't necessarily come from this office."

"Right." Larson flipped back to the custom application. "The *Requestor* field, here, claims the ticket was submitted by this Chopra Singh person at CyberStorm Entertainment. But wait—that's not where the connection actually originated."

Larson minimized all the windows, except the Web log. He highlighted a single line. "This was the connection that created the work order. When I do a Whois lookup on the IP address . . ." He switched screens. "*Voila.*"

A Whois lookup page displayed the domain as owned by Alcyone Insurance Corporation of Woodland Hills, California.

Sebeck read the small type. "Then the work order originated from this company in Woodland Hills."

"Maybe. Maybe not."

"You think the address was spoofed?"

"The only way to find out is to get a warrant for their Web logs."

Another deputy entered the cramped office. "Sergeant, there's a news van outside."

Sebeck waved him off and kept his gaze on Larson. "So no one in this management firm created the work order that killed Pavlos?"

"Seems unlikely."

Sebeck eyed the screen. "Is this sort of Internet work order system typical for a hole-in-the-wall company like this?"

Larson shook his head slowly and smiled. "No, it's not. This is pretty slick. The office manager said their parent company developed it for them. You'll never guess who the parent company is."

"CyberStorm Entertainment."

Larson touched his finger to his nose. "Very good, Sergeant."

Just then the radios crackled to life again. Sebeck turned to listen.

"Units in vicinity of Westlake. 10-54 at 3000 Westlake Boulevard reported. Be advised, 10-29h. 11-98 with building security."

Sebeck exchanged looks with the other officers. Another dead body had been found. "What the hell . . ."

The address tugged at Sebeck's memory. He pulled Gordon Pietro's business card out of his pocket. At least his memory hadn't failed him; the new body had been found at CyberStorm Entertainment.

As far as Sebeck could tell, entertainment companies came in two flavors: shady operations skirting tax, drug, and racketeering laws, or phenomenally successful corporate empires wielding immense influence worldwide. There was very little middle ground, and the transformation from one to the other seemed to happen in the wee hours. With signage rights on a ten-story office building, CyberStorm had evidently made that transformation.

The latest body had been found in a security vestibule—a tiny room controlling access to what the employees called a *server farm*. The small entry chamber reminded Sebeck of an air lock. The server farm was

filled with rack-mounted servers—their LEDs flickering away in the semidarkness of emergency lights. Through the glass Sebeck could make out several employees moving about. They were still monitoring the machines.

It was hard to see them clearly because the vestibule windows were fogged with a yellowish film—residue from burning human fat. The victim had been electrocuted in dramatic fashion.

Sebeck stood in the dim glow of emergency lights alongside the building's chief operating engineer, CyberStorm's network services director, county paramedics, a city power company foreman, and the president and CEO of CyberStorm, Ken Kevault.

Kevault was in his late thirties, tall and lean with spiky hair. His black, short-sleeve silk shirt revealed death skull tattoos on his forearms, and he had the sort of deep tan and wrinkles one gets after years of surfing. He looked more like an aging rock star than a corporate executive. He hadn't said a word since they arrived.

Sebeck turned to the power & light foreman. "The primary power's been cut?"

The building engineer responded instead. "Yes, sir."

Sebeck turned to him. "Then those computers are running on backup power?"

"Right."

"Let's get that room evacuated."

"There's another exit like this one, but it could be just as dangerous. I told the techs to stay put for now."

Sebeck nodded. "Who can tell me what happened?"

The engineer and network services director looked to each other. The engineer already had the floor. "About a half hour ago, one of the CyberStorm guys was electrocuted going through the inner security door. I don't know how it's possible, but the techs said he was standing there with smoke coming off his shoulders for about thirty seconds before he keeled over. And there he is."

Kevault let out a hiss of disgust and shook his head ruefully.

Sebeck ignored him. "The CyberStorm guys? So you're not a CyberStorm employee?"

The engineer shook his head. "No, I work for the building owner."

"And who owns the building?"

Eyes shifted from person to person for a moment or two until Kev-

ault spoke up. "It's part of a real estate investment trust, with a majority share held by CyberStorm."

Sebeck turned back to the engineer. "So you are a CyberStorm employee."

Kevault interposed again. "No, the trust is not the same legal entity as CyberStorm, and the trust outsources the engineering, security, and other building functions."

Sebeck could already imagine lawyers pointing fingers at each other for the next decade. "Forget that. Has anyone entered or left the scene since the incident?"

All the men shook their heads.

"Are there electrical blueprints for this entryway? Any recent unpermitted modifications I should know about?"

An edge crept into the lead engineer's voice. "We don't do unpermitted construction here. All this equipment was signed off on by the city and fire inspectors two years ago, and we have the occupancy permit to prove it."

The guy looked to be about fifty. A broad-shouldered Latino with a Marine Corps tattoo on his forearm. Sebeck figured this guy wasn't going to take any shit. He watched as the engineer moved to a flat-paneled workstation on a nearby desk and spun the panel to face them all. In a moment, the engineer brought up a 3-D map of their location. The map was a series of clean vector lines in primary colors.

The engineer tapped keys, highlighting a colored layer to emphasize each word. "Plumbing, HVAC, Fire/Safety, Electrical."

The image zoomed in. It was like a video game with transparent walls. They were now looking at a computer image of the vestibule, and Sebeck could see the yellow electrical lines running down through the doorframe to the combination magstripe/keypad in the door's strike plate.

No wonder the engineer had an attitude. He had every damned screw modeled in 3-D.

"There's no power source in that wall sufficient to electrocute a man like that, and even if there was, the breakers should have tripped. There's a short somewhere. Probably to a trunk line. Maybe it electrified the doorframe."

The power company guy leaned in. "What's going into the server farm? Three-phase 480?"

“Yeah, but it’s coming up through the floor. There’s a trunk line running through a vertical penetration. The decking was reinforced to hold the weight of the racks, and there’s a fiber backbone—”

“Gentlemen.” Sebeck stepped between them. “I need all nonemergency personnel evacuated from CyberStorm’s office space. Nathan, I want an outer perimeter established at all stairwell and elevator entrances. We set up command and control in this area just outside the vestibule. I want interviews from everyone evacuated.”

The network director turned to Sebeck. “We have five floors in this building. Is it really necessary to evacuate them all?”

“Two of your coworkers are dead today from unrelated ‘accidents.’ I find that an implausible coincidence.”

The network director’s face contorted. “Two?”

“That’s correct. I’ll let your illustrious leader fill you in.”

The CyberStorm folks turned to the company president. Kevault was gnawing on his fingernails in irritation or concentration—it was hard to tell which. He finally spoke without looking at anybody. “Lamont, switch over to the mirror site. Then evacuate the office.”

Sebeck leveled a gaze. “You’ll evacuate the building *now*. If you have any illusions about who’s in charge here, I can give you a time-out in the county lockup.”

Kevault was about to speak but thought better of it. He just marched off down the hall. His people followed.

Sebeck nodded to Mantz, who pursued Kevault like a Rottweiler going after a toddler.

Sebeck grabbed the network services director, who was also leaving. “Not you. You’re staying here.”

Sebeck had seen his share of fatal accidents in fourteen years with the department, and he knew that workplace fatalities drew paperwork like blowflies to a corpse. OSHA inspectors, insurance investigators, reporters, lawyers, and building management—all were waiting in the wings. But for now, Sebeck posted deputies to keep nongovernmental and nonessential personnel out of his crime scene.

The main power was off, and they established radio communications to monitor a lockout on the DWP power vault.

After running a few tests with a voltmeter, the engineer and power company foreman determined that the doorframes were not electrified.

They instructed the data center employees to open the second exit and let the police and firemen in. They then evacuated the techs. The crime scene was now free of civilians.

Sebeck was surprised at how warm and stuffy the room had become. The AC hadn't been off all that long. He glanced around at the dozens of rack-mounted computers clicking away. That was a lot of BTUs. That's probably why they had an entry vestibule—to keep the cold air in. He turned to the engineer. "What are these machines for, anyway?"

"People playing games with each other over the Internet. My grandson plays."

Sebeck had heard of this sort of thing. He had no idea it involved so much hardware. It looked expensive.

They moved to the inner security door. The victim lay just beyond the glass, and they got their first good look at him. As a patrolman, Sebeck had seen the carnage of a hundred car wrecks, but the network director lost it, and excused himself. As Sebeck suspected, the engineer wasn't much affected.

"That poor son of a bitch."

A Vietnam vet, Sebeck thought.

It was hard to reconcile the human resources photo with the remains that lay before them. The victim's face was distorted in agony—or at least the involuntary muscle spasms of electrocution. His eyeballs hung out over the cheeks. His hair had mostly burned off his head. His whole face was blistered, but Sebeck already knew who it was: a lead programmer named Chopra Singh—the name on the spoofed Potrero Canyon work order.

There was no longer any doubt that these were murders. He just had to find the evidence.

Sebeck had the power company foreman test the door with a voltmeter again just to be sure and then moved aside for nearby firemen, who pushed into the vestibule. The stench of burnt flesh and hair hit them, sending groans and gasps through the team. "Carey, get some video."

The photographer moved in, and bright light filled the space. Afterward, the paramedics confirmed the obvious—the victim was deceased. The vestibule was too small for both the body and the investigators, so they scanned the scene from the narrow doorway. Unlike most murder

scenes, Sebeck thought, the victim's body wouldn't contain much evidence, so he didn't start there. Instead, he had it covered with a plastic tarp and brought back the power company foreman. "I need to find out what electrified this door, and I need to find out fast."

"There's no danger, Sergeant. The power's off in the whole building."

"I'm not worried about just this building."

The foreman paused for a moment to digest that and then nodded gravely.

Soon, Sebeck and the foreman crowded into the open doorway just above the now covered body. It was far from ideal, but Sebeck felt time was of the essence. The doorjamb looked normal, but after unscrewing the strike plate, the foreman got a crowbar into the aluminum frame and pried off the cover with a resounding crack. What it concealed looked strange even to Sebeck.

A small wire ran up the inside of the doorframe from the floor and into the back of the keypad and magstripe reader. But another, much thicker wire ran down from the ceiling and was bolted with copper leads to the frame itself.

Sebeck looked to the power company foreman. "I don't remember that on the engineer's blueprint."

The foreman moved in alongside. "That's 480 cable. You could power an industrial grinder with that."

Sebeck pointed up at the ceiling.

Fiberglass ladders were brought in along with head-mounted lights. Soon, they pushed up through the drop ceiling and into the plenum. Their lights revealed fire coating sprayed over the steel beams and metal decking of the floor above. HVAC ducts and bundles of cables traversed the space.

It was here that they found the black box. At least that's what it looked like—a black metal housing into which the 480-volt line fed before running back out the far side. A thin, gray cable also led into the black box.

Sebeck focused his light beam, tracing the various lines from their vanishing points in the darkness. "All right, that's as far as we go."

It took the bomb squad two hours to clear the scene. When they finally gave the all-clear, more ladders were brought in and more ceil-

ing tiles removed until Sebeck, Mantz, Deputy Aaron Larson, and the county's lead bomb technician, Deputy Bill Greer, were able to convene a precarious meeting with their heads poking through the drop ceiling around the now opened black box.

Greer was a serene forty-year-old who might as well have been teaching a cooking class as he flipped up his blast helmet visor and pointed to the metal cover in his hand. "Fairly standard project enclosure." He gestured to the open base, still bolted to the HVAC duct. The 480-volt wire led through a cluster of circuit boards and smaller wires. "This is basically a switch, Sergeant. Whoever set this up could electrify the doorframe through this box."

Larson pointed to a network port in the side of the black box, then traced his finger to a smaller circuit board attached to it. "Check this out: it's a Web server on a chip. It's got a tiny TCP/IP stack. They're used for controlling devices like doors and lights from an IP network. I checked. They've got them all over the building." Larson slid his hand along a CAT5 cable extending from the board into the darkness. "This box is linked to their network, and their network is connected to the Internet. It's conceivable that someone with the right passwords could have activated this switch from anywhere in the world."

"Could the switch be set to activate when a certain person swiped their access card at the security door?"

"Probably. I just don't know enough about these cards yet."

"How long has the switch been here?"

Greer looked at the back of the enclosure. "It was covered in dust when we got to it."

"So that vestibule door has probably been used thousands of times without incident—then suddenly today it kills someone. We need to find out if Singh has ever been in this data center."

Larson jotted serial numbers down from the circuit board. "We can review their access logs. And there are security cameras."

Sebeck was shaking his head. It was too complex. They were all just guessing now. He stared at the switch for a moment more. "Gentlemen, I think it's time to call in the FBI. No offense, Aaron, but we just don't have the capabilities to deal with this."

By early evening, Sebeck stood near the building entrance flanked by Mantz and a uniformed deputy. A frenetic pack of reporters sur-

rounded them, microphones pushed forward into a multicolored mass of foam rubber. Camera lenses glinted in the rear while reporters shouted questions.

Sebeck motioned for silence until all he heard was the nearby generators on the satellite trucks. "This is what we know right now. At approximately eleven thirty this morning, the body of Joseph Pavlos, an employee of CyberStorm Entertainment, was discovered in a canyon off Potrero Road in Thousand Oaks. At approximately two P.M., a second CyberStorm employee was electrocuted in what we now know to be a deliberate act. We are withholding the identity of the second victim pending notification of next of kin. We also believe Mr. Pavlos's death was a homicide and have requested assistance from the FBI."

Shouted questions erupted again. Sebeck motioned for silence. "It appears these employees were specifically targeted, and we have no reason to believe that the general public is in any danger. I caution CyberStorm employees to be particularly vigilant and to report suspicious objects or packages to the police. I'll take questions now."

The parking lot erupted in shouting.

Sebeck pointed to an Asian woman. He'd have to admit that he chose her first because she was drop-dead gorgeous.

"Sergeant, you said you're bringing in the FBI. That means there's more to the case than the two murders?"

"The FBI has the resources and jurisdiction required to properly investigate this case."

Another reporter spoke up. "Can you describe precisely how the victims were killed?"

"We can't divulge precise methods at this time."

"Can you give us a rough idea?"

Sebeck hesitated. "At least one of the victims appears to have been murdered through the Internet."

A buzz went through the press corps. That was their sound bite.

"That's all we're prepared to say right now."

Chapter 4:// God of Mischief

From his vantage point at a coffeehouse, Brian Gragg gazed across the street at the darkened windows of a French provincial mansion. The lush River Oaks section of Houston's Inner Loop had more than a few of these aging beauties, restored and pressed into service as quaint professional buildings. They sheltered doctors' offices, architectural firms, law firms—and branch offices of East Coast stockbrokers. It was this last species of suburban tenant that attracted Gragg. They were the weakest link in a valuable chain.

One of the brokers there had installed a wireless access point in his office but failed to change the default password and SSID. Better yet, the broker couldn't be bothered to shut his machine off at night.

Gragg glanced down at his own laptop and adjusted a small Wi-Fi antenna to point more directly at the office windows. The broker's computer screen was displayed as a window on Gragg's laptop. Gragg had compromised the workstation days ago, first obtaining a network IP address from the router, and then gaining access to the broker's machine through the most basic of NetBIOS assaults. The ports on the workstation were wide open, and over the course of several evening visits to the café, Gragg had escalated his privileges. He now owned their local network. Clearing the router's log would erase any evidence that he had been there.

But all that was child's play compared to how he would use this exploit. In the past year, Gragg had evolved beyond simple credit card scams. He no longer prowled bars passing out portable magstripe readers to waiters and busboys and paying a bounty for each credit card number. Gragg now stole identities. His buddy, Heider, had schooled him on the intricacies of spear-phishing. It opened up a whole new world.

Gragg was using the broker's workstation to conduct an e-mail campaign to the firm's clientele. He had cribbed the phony marketing blather and graphics from the brokerage's own Web site, but what the e-mail said was irrelevant. Gragg's goal was that the phish merely view the message. That was all it took.

Gragg's e-mail contained a poisoned JPEG of the brokerage logo. JPEGs were compressed image files. When the user viewed the e-mail, the operating system ran a decompression algorithm to render the graphic on-screen; it was this decompression algorithm that executed Gragg's malicious script and let him slip inside the user's system—granting him full access. There was a patch available for the decompression flaw, but older, rich folks typically had no clue about security patches.

Gragg's script also installed a keylogger, which gave him account and password information to virtually everything the user did from then on, sending it to yet another compromised workstation offshore where Gragg could pick it up at leisure.

What sort of idiot hung the keys to his business out on the street—and more than that, broadcast a declaration from his router telling the world where the keys were? These people shouldn't be left home alone, much less put in charge of peoples' investments.

Gragg cleaned up the router's connection log. More than likely the scam wouldn't be detected for months, and even then, the company probably wouldn't tell their clients. They'd just close the barn door long after the Trojan horses were gone.

So far, Gragg had a cache of nearly two thousand high-net-worth identities to sell on the global market, and the Brazilians and Filipinos were snapping up everything he offered.

Gragg knew he had a survival advantage in this new world. College was no longer the gateway to success. Apparently, people thought nothing of hanging their personal fortunes on technology they didn't understand. This would be their undoing.

Gragg finished his mocha latte and glanced around the coffeehouse. Teens and kids in their early twenties. They had no idea he was raking in more than their corporate executive fathers. He looked like any other punk with long sideburns, a goatee, a winter cap, and a laptop. He was the kid you didn't notice because you were sick of looking at him.

Gragg shut down his laptop and pulled a bootable flash drive from

one USB port. He took a pair of needle-nose pliers and crushed the tiny drive like a walnut, tossing the pieces into a nearby trash can. The evidence was now destroyed. His laptop hard drive contained nothing but evangelical tracts. In the event of trouble, he would look like Jesus's number one fan.

Just then his cell phone played the *Twilight Zone* theme song. Gragg tapped the wireless headphone in his ear. "Jason. Where you at, man?"

"Corporate restaurant #121. I'm just about done. What's your ETA?"

Gragg glanced at his watch. A Tag Heuer. "About thirty minutes."

"Don't be late. Hey, I logged sixteen more open APs uptown at lunch."

"Put 'em on the map."

"Already done."

"I'm on my way. Meet me out back."

Gragg glanced around at people getting into their leased cars to drive back to bank-owned homes. They were cattle. He viewed these oblivious drones with contempt.

Gragg headed "uptown" to Houston's West Loop—a cluster of skyscrapers just west of the city center that served as a sort of second skyline for people who felt the first one was too far away. Gragg's partner, Jason Heider, worked as a bartender in a corporate chain restaurant in the Galleria—close by the indoor ice rink.

Heider was thirtyish but looked older. Back during the tech boom, he'd been some sort of vice president at a dot com. Gragg met Heider in an IRC chat room dedicated to advanced cracking topics—authoring buffer overruns, algorithms for brute force password cracking, software vulnerability detection, that sort of thing. Heider knew what he was talking about, and before long they were dividing the work required to eavesdrop on Wi-Fi in airports and coffeehouses, stealing corporate logons where possible. They both shared a keen interest in technology and information—the tools of personal power. Heider had taught Gragg a lot in the last year. But nothing lately.

Also there was Heider's recklessness. Heider recently lost his license from a DUI and almost sunk them both by having his laptop in the car at the time. Gragg was starting to watch him more carefully and disliked leaving him alone on a Saturday night for fear his indiscretions

would get them both arrested. Fortunately, Gragg had never confided his real name to Heider.

Gragg reached the mall parking lot and circled around the bland tiers of stucco. He parked near the west entrance and waited. Heider eventually straggled out to the parking lot with a cigarette hanging out of his mouth. It was a cold autumn night, and Heider's breath smoked whether he was exhaling smoke or not. He wore a surplus M-65 jacket that had seen better days. The guy looked particularly pathetic as he trudged toward Gragg's car. Gragg thought it would be a mercy to run him down. Heider was a shadow of himself—as he often admitted. He took a last puff of his cigarette, tossed it, and got into the car.

"Hey, Chico. Where's the rave?"

Gragg gave him a once-over. "You carrying?"

"No, man. Well, just some crank."

"Jase, dump that shit out now, or you can walk the fuck home for all I care. I've got a gig tonight, and I don't need a canine unit giving the cops probable cause."

"Christ, would you relax?"

"I don't relax. I stay focused. Friends don't let friends do drugs—especially when those friends can turn state's evidence."

"All right, man. Enough. I get the fucking idea." Heider turned the dome light switch off, then opened the car door and tossed a small zip-lock bag onto the asphalt.

Gragg started the car and pulled away. "Your brain is your only valuable tool, Jase. If you keep trashing it, you'll be worthless to me."

"Oh, fuck off. If I had a stroke and sniffed glue, I'd wind up with your IQ. I mean, you spend all day watching hentai and playing video games. How smart can you be?"

Video games was an oversimplification; Gragg played massively multi-player online games, or MMOGs, and as he stared coolly at his partner, it occurred to him that the games' complex societies contained far more social stimulation than anything that existed in Heider's world. All the more reason for what was to come.

Gragg turned up the stereo to an Oakenfold mix and drowned out Heider's voice.

He drove out to the Katy Freeway and headed west, exiting onto State Highway 6 North about ten miles out of Houston. Highway 6 was a bleak four-lane stretch of concrete running through marshy ground

and wide prairie fields bordered by walls of trees—remnants of an agrarian past. Now the only growth was in strip malls, subdivisions, and office parks, sprouting like bunches of grapes off the vine of highway and separated by long stretches of nothing useful.

Gragg glowered at the road. He hadn't said a word in ten minutes.

Heider just watched him. "What's with you tonight?"

"The fucking Filipinos. They posted a message telling me to meet them."

"What for?"

"To pick up a new encryption key."

"In person?"

"They're trying to keep the Feds off their tail."

"Fuck that. Sell the data to the Brazilians, man."

"The Filipinos owe me for five hundred identities already. If I don't pick up the code, I don't get paid."

"What a pain in the ass. Last time we do business with them."

Gragg flipped open his cell phone and started keying a text message while driving. He spoke to Heider without looking at him. "We've got less than forty minutes to showtime. The Filipinos can wait."

In a deserted cul-de-sac of an under-construction subdivision, half a dozen cars sat in the darkness. Knots of teenagers drank and smoked on their car hoods, laughing, arguing, or staring at the distant glow of the freeway. The pounding bass beat of rap music thudded into the cold night air from several car stereos all tuned to the same satellite radio channel. It reverberated in their chests as they threw rocks, shattering the newly installed windows of half-built homes. One kid zipped from car to car on a motorized scooter.

They were a racially mixed group, mostly white, but with Asian, black, and Hispanic kids here and there. Their cars displayed their social class; a Mustang GT convertible with 18-inch chrome rims; late model SUVs with vanity plates; Mom's BMW. Economic class, not race, was the glue that bound them.

A cell phone somewhere began a faint MIDI of *Eine Kleine Nacht Musik*, and every girl in the group groped for her phone. The alpha girl—a thin, sexy blonde with low-cut denims and a midriff top despite the cold—clucked her tongue at the others. "Y'all stole my ring." She read the text message. "Austin! Guys, turn down the music!"

Stereos were quickly muted.

Alpha girl used her best cheerleader voice to project the coordinates: "29.98075, and -95.687274. Everybody got that?" She repeated the coordinates while several others keyed them into GPS receivers.

An athletically built African American kid and his buddies stared at the console of his Lexus SUV. He keyed in the coordinates, and a graphical map appeared on the GPS LCD. "Tennet Field. It's closed down. My dad used to have his plane there. Let's roll!"

A dozen kids paused to text-message the coordinates to still other friends. The smart mob was forming and would be en route in minutes.

Gragg strode the tarmac in the pale moonlight, heading toward the dark silhouette of Hangar Two.

The radio crackled in his head. He wore a bone-conduction headset. It was capable of projecting sound directly into his skull, regardless of the noise in his surrounding environment. It was a useful tool for managing a for-profit rave. The radio crackled again. "Unit 19 to Unit 3, do you copy?"

Gragg touched his receiver. "Unit Three. Talk to me."

"The Other White Meat headed south on Farmington. Range two-point-three miles."

Unit 3 was a lookout placed on the east perimeter with night vision goggles. Gragg saw headlights turning into the main airport entrance. "Unit Twenty, Zone One is a blackout area."

"10-4, Unit 3."

The headlights soon went out.

Signature control was a never-ending battle for a prairie rave. Lines of car headlights were the enemy.

Gragg followed the thick generator cables running from the machine shop, past the parking lot, and up to the main hangar doors, where a subsonic bass beat rumbled, threatening to detach his retinas. A long roll of black Duvateen hung down at the entrance, blocking the light and some of the noise within.

A line of a hundred or so teens hooted and hollered at the entrance, while a dozen heavysset thugs in SECURITY windbreakers flanked the opening. The bouncers collected twenty dollars from everybody at the door and then slipped an RFID-equipped neck badge around

each teen's neck. Once tagged like cows, the patrons then proceeded through the metal detectors and into the main hangar. Each guard was equipped with a Taser and pepper spray to quickly subdue and remove those inclined to disrupt the party. Dozens more patrolled the party inside.

Gragg ran a tight operation, and for this reason he was always in demand by rave promoters. Tonight's promoter, a young Albanian drug dealer named Cheko, stalked the tarmac nervously. But then again, he did everything nervously.

Gragg sniffed the night air, then walked past the bouncers into the head-pounding madness that was the rave. He pushed through the crowd of youths. Although he was several years older than most of them, Gragg was of slimmer build and shorter stature. His lip piercing and arm tats gave him a menacing blue-collar appearance—but if anyone looked closely, the tattoos depicted entwined CAT-5 cable.

Gragg looked up at the DJ tower, flickering in the strobing laser light. Mix Master Jamal was laying in a groove trance. The topless go-go dancers on ten-foot pedestals danced rhythmically. Gragg smirked. The strippers weren't so much for the teen guys as the teen girls. Suburban girls acted scandalized, but they'd tell friends who'd have to see it for themselves. Where else would girls from good families see nude dancers? In the seedy strip club on the state highway? Hardly.

Gragg came inside specifically to find one of these girls from a good family. He moved through the crowd, to the back of the hangar where the real money was made—at the “pharmacy,” where Cheko's people sold ecstasy, meth, DMT, ketamine, and a dozen other recreation-grade pharmaceuticals, in addition to soft drinks and bottled water.

Gragg could usually spot his quarry easily—the sexy girl with a guy she didn't look particularly intimate with. A first date, or perhaps just dancing together. He avoided girls with a group of female friends, and girls who weren't having fun.

He soon found his target; the girl was gorgeous, perhaps seventeen, thin-waisted, but with a good rack shadowing her exposed midsection. Strands of glo-stick circled her belly and neck. It reminded Gragg of Mardi Gras, and that was a good sign. He motioned to a couple of security guards, and moved toward her.

He timed it so he and the guards converged on the dancing couple. Gragg tapped the guy on the shoulder—which sent him twirling

around defensively. Gragg held up two neck badges clearly marked ALL AREA ACCESS. Smiling, he looped one around the guy's neck.

Few symbols have more power over the Western teenage mind than the All Area Access badge. The guy glanced at the uniformed security guards, and evidently felt reassured.

Gragg, meanwhile, draped the badge over the laughing girl's neck. Her cleavage glistened with sweat. Gragg leaned over and yelled into the guy's ear. "Your girl is fabulous, man! She should be dancing on the top floor—not down here!" With that, Gragg slid a couple of pills into the guy's hand, and nodded his head toward the girl. He motioned for them both to follow and led them through the crowd as the burly security guards made a path.

They soon reached the base of a steel staircase leading up to the DJ tower. It was roped off and flanked by a couple of bouncers. Gragg leaned in close to one of the bouncers. "Tell me when she's taken the hit!"

The bouncer knew the drill. He watched poker-faced as the young guy popped what he probably thought was ecstasy into the girl's mouth. She washed it down with a swig of bottled water, laughed, then writhed with the pounding music. The bouncer nodded to Gragg. Gragg nodded back and the rope was withdrawn to let them pass.

As the boy passed by Gragg, Gragg leaned into his ear. "Play your cards right, man, and I'm gonna get you laid within the hour." The guy smiled back and gave Gragg what the kid probably assumed was the universal "playas'" handshake.

Gragg watched them go. They were now in the holding pen—a controlled area where he could further reduce her inhibitions. The prostitutes there and Cheko's men would make it all seem completely acceptable to "go wild." Gragg had successfully separated her from her support system. The rest should be easy. He was already erect in anticipation, but a little patience was required.

Gragg walked the perimeter for a good fifteen minutes before heading back to the holding pen. He found the girl dancing on the mid-deck with a crowd of perhaps twenty. Most of the women there were attractive and scantily clad—but these were Cheko's whores and were of no interest to Gragg. The seventeen-year-old target was laughing as her date danced between women in g-strings. The girl was evidently flying high. On meth the laser lights, the trance music, and the writhing mo-

tion were said to be hypnotic. Accompanied by a surge of sexual arousal and perceived invulnerability. Or so Gragg had heard. He didn't take drugs himself.

Gragg radioed the security guard in the DJ tower. He couldn't even hear himself talk, but he knew the guard would hear. The guard looked out and saw Gragg wave his arm slowly then point at the girl dancing nearby. The guard leaned over to Mix Master Jamal, and the DJ looked out at Gragg. He nodded and then snapped his fingers at the light board operator. Gragg leaned over to her date. "What's your girl's name?"

"Jennifer!"

"You wanna see her tits?"

The guy stared for a second in dumb amazement. Then burst out laughing. "Hell yeah!"

Gragg spoke her name into the radio and moved forward. A spotlight shone down onto Jennifer, and the DJ's voice came out like the booming voice of God, "Check out Jennifer! Is she hot or what?" A roar of lust arose from a thousand voices.

Jennifer laughed and looked back to see her date and those around her shouting encouragement.

The DJ's voice. "Let's see you move, baby!" The pounding bass moved back in, and she moved seductively to it. The other dancers moved away, and the laser lights enshrined her on the platform. The crowd surged in anticipation. Her eyes became wild with her potent sexuality. Each rhythmic gyration of her hips made a thousand guys howl. She was anonymous and powerful.

But Gragg was her new master. He looked back at Jennifer's date, smiled, and nodded to the DJ.

The DJ's voice boomed down again. "Lose the top!"

A thousand voices roared and took up the chant. The chant quickly fell in line with the music. "Lose-the-top! Lose-the-top!" Even the girls in the audience were cheering. Jennifer danced, soaking up the adoration. All eyes were on her body, screaming with lust. She was high enough that she didn't mind, and it seemed such a small thing to please them all.

She first teased them by flashing her breasts, but that only drove the crowd wild for more. They knew they had her now; it was only a matter of wills. They took up the chant with renewed vigor. "Lose-the-top! Lose-the-top!"

When she pulled her top off and danced, breasts jiggling free, the roar of joy rattled the walls. They motioned for her to toss her top down, and she dangled it above the outstretched hands of the lustful mob. Someone managed to grab it from her, and it was soon torn to pieces. Jennifer laughed and tugged at the All Area Access badge around her neck. Girls around the room started flashing their breasts, sitting atop the shoulders of guys in the crowd.

The DJ cranked up the music again, and the party moved on. But Gragg moved in with one of Cheko's men holding a digital video camera. Jennifer smiled as they filmed her dancing topless in front of a thousand people. Her young, toned body glistened with sweat.

Within a half hour, Jennifer was sitting on a sofa in the holding pen, sucking Gragg off while her date looked on in shock. But her date didn't stop them. Gragg moaned while one of Cheko's men videotaped her. He looked to Jennifer's date. "You're after me."

When he ejaculated into her mouth, Gragg felt a rush of power and sexual release. This was his drug. Gragg didn't like whores. He liked to turn women *into* whores. The feeling of power was every bit as pleasurable as his ejaculation—perhaps more so. The fact that he was making money off this girl by doing a live porn Web cast for Cheko's Web site was even sweeter. She was being broadcast to the world, and the file would never go away. Gragg made sure he was never filmed above the waist.

As he moved away, he yelled, "Bukkaki!" And a dozen men surrounded her. She was already sucking on her date's cock. The meth was working its magic on her as the cameraman zoomed in.

Gragg zipped up his pants and moved away, feeling the endorphins course through his body.

Heider suddenly appeared next to him, laughing. "You're an evil man, Loki." Heider handed him a bottle of water.

"At least I got laid tonight."

Heider poked a finger into Gragg's chest. "At least I don't need a thousand people to orchestrate a blow job." He looked back at the girl starting on another guy. "Is she gonna remember any of this?"

"Probably not. And even if she does, she won't. If you know what I mean." Gragg looked at his watch. "Listen, meet me back at the car at three A.M. sharp. I've got to meet the Filipinos."

Heider nodded absently, still watching the girl work.

Gragg punched his arm.

“Ow!”

“I mean it. Meet me at the car at three A.M. sharp—or you’ll have to bum a ride off the Albanian mob. Got it?”

“All right. I got it. Now if you’ll excuse me . . .” At that, Heider stepped away to join the circle of men.

By 3:15 A.M., Gragg and Heider were back on the Katy Freeway heading east. Heider was leaning against the passenger door fucked up out of his mind.

“That MPEG video over the dance floor. It showed rams butting heads. Butting their heads! Their fucking heads!” He was weeping, but then suddenly erupted into uncontrollable laughter. He was apparently laughing about having just been crying.

Gragg focused on driving. He headed north and east for a half hour or so, then exited in a seedy industrial district amid rail sidings. They rattled along potholed streets. With each bone-shuddering bump, Gragg winced. The ground effects on his Si were going to get thrashed at this rate. He also felt like a prime car-jacking target in this industrial wasteland.

Yet, as he looked around the deserted factory streets, it didn’t look like a popular gang hangout. The streets were too broken and criss-crossed with railroad sidings for the street-racing scene.

Before long, Gragg found the street he was looking for. He turned down the dead-end and parked next to a rusted chain-link fence topped with brand-new razor wire. It enclosed flatbed tractor-trailers in various stages of decay.

At the end of the street stood a brick factory building marked INDUSTRIAL LAUNDRY CORP in faded paint. The windows near the roof glowed with fluorescent light from within, and the double doors near the loading dock were open wide, letting a wedge of light splay out across the weed-encrusted sidewalk. Signs in some Asian script covered the backs of both open doors. A couple of men in white aprons smoked out front, apparently on break.

Gragg turned off the car and looked at Heider’s dozing form. He quietly pulled a piece of paper from his own jacket pocket and glanced at the code number written on it in pen. He took his car keys from the ignition and carefully slipped them into Heider’s pocket. It wasn’t difficult. In fact, he hoped he could still rouse Heider, who was out cold.

He nudged him. No response. He shoved Heider. Then finally shook him. "Heider, man! Wake up."

Heider awoke slowly, still high out of his mind. "What the fuck, man?"

"I need you to pick up the new encryption key from my contact. He's in there." He pointed.

Heider squinted and looked back at him like he was insane. "Fuck you, man. You go."

"Heider. Take a look around you. I'm not leaving my car sitting out here—and you'll fall asleep the minute I'm gone. You know what I put into this ride?"

"Well, then, why the fuck did you park a mile away, asshole?"

"A semi was just in the loading dock."

"I don't know who your fucking contact is."

"Just give them this code number." Gragg handed him the piece of paper. "They won't even ask who you are. You're just picking up the code."

Heider wavered fuzzily, trying to process what Gragg just said.

Gragg sighed impatiently. "Christ, Jase, why do I have to do everything? I arranged the business; I keep you supplied with new gear—and I got you laid tonight."

Heider conceded this by nodding reluctantly.

"When are you gonna start pulling your weight, man?"

Heider squinted at the two dumpy middle-aged Asians smoking and chatting two hundred feet away.

Gragg pointed. "Oh, they sure look dangerous."

"Fuck . . . all right. Just don't do this shit to me without telling me first, man. I don't like surprises." Heider exchanged a last serious look with Gragg. Gragg just rolled his eyes. Heider sighed and got out.

Gragg watched Heider stagger down the street toward the lighted factory door less than a football field away. Once Heider was gone, Gragg grabbed his own backpack and quietly got out of the car. He slipped behind two Dumpsters and from the darkness watched Heider approach the men.

The Asian men watched impassively as Heider labored up to them. Heider said something and handed the piece of paper to the nearest guy. After reading it, the man pointed toward the open doorway. Heider walked through and stood silhouetted for a moment before one

of the men walked in after him and shoved him forward. The other man scanned the street, threw his cigarette to the ground, and then walked inside—pulling the doors shut behind him. They closed with a resounding bang, leaving the street dark and quiet.

Gragg knelt down, shivering now in the cold autumn air. He waited for about a half hour before he heard the doors open again. Footsteps clacked across the pavement, heading his way. Gragg knew that Heider never wore anything that could remotely clack on pavement. So he hunkered down as a younger Filipino in slacks and a sport coat walked past the opening between the Dumpsters. Gragg heard his own car alarm chirp off, and the man got inside. He started the car up, raced the engine a bit, and then peeled off in a wild, squealing U-turn back down the street.

Gragg slumped down against the brick wall behind the Dumpsters. He felt the cold of the brick seep into his back.

Maybe he shouldn't have hacked the Filipino's Web server. Why couldn't he have left well enough alone? How had they caught on?

Damn! They got my car. Thank God it was registered under a false name.

Gragg sighed, and took out his GPS receiver. He found the nearest cross street on the map, then flipped open his phone and selected a saved number. After a few rings, it picked up.

"Yeah, I need a cab."

Chapter 5:// Icarus-Seven

Jon Ross raced his Audi A8 sedan onto the Alcyone Insurance corporate campus, then quickly slowed down as he noticed several police cruisers and unmarked cars near the lobby doors. He turned down his music—a relentlessly pounding techno track—and motored at a more civilized speed past the squad cars. Interesting. No flashing lights, though.

Ross headed for the parking garage.

In a few minutes he was echoing across the granite-floored lobby, approaching the security desk. “Hey, Alejandro.”

Alejandro smiled. “Jon, my boy. How’re you doin’ tonight?”

Ross swiped his consultant’s badge and signed the after-hours access list. “What’s with the police cars?”

“Oh, there was a computer break-in. The cops are down in the data center.”

Ross stopped writing. He looked up. “A break-in?”

“Yeah. It’s something what these people can do. It’s all computers nowadays.” Alejandro leaned closer to Ross. “Ted Wynnuk was askin’ about you. I won’t tell nobody I saw you if you want to clear out.”

Ross finished signing in. He smiled. “Thanks, but not necessary. It was probably some twelve-year-old kid.”

Ross headed down the clean white corridor of B2. Soon he reached the accounting department’s data center and slid his badge through the reader. The door clicked open, and he moved briskly toward his office at the far wall. Then he slowed. The lights were on in his office. He forced himself not to stop, and instead resumed a normal walking pace.

He opened his office door and was greeted by the sight of two se-

verely groomed men in inexpensive suits and comfortable shoes sitting on the edge of his desk. One was a Latino, the other Caucasian, but they shared the same humorless expression. Hadi Sarkar, the night shift data center supervisor, sat at Ross's keyboard, pecking away behind them. He turned somewhat sheepishly to face Ross.

One of the clean-cut men reached into his jacket and withdrew credentials, which he flipped open. "Jonathan Ross?"

"Yes?"

"I'm Special Agent Straub. This is Special Agent Vasquez. We'd like to ask you a few questions about last night. Your colleague, Hadi here, has been able to shed some light on things, but he tells us you're the real expert."

Ross glared at Sarkar and put his laptop case down on the desk. "I'm happy to help any way I can. What's all this about?"

"You were present in Alycone's data center last night?"

"I was working under contract for another department, but Hadi requested my help. His development servers had become infected with what appeared to be a kernel rootkit."

"And you have experience with computer viruses?"

Ross paused. He had to be careful here. "Look, I'm a database consultant. Computer security is part of my job. I know what I need to know."

"Why did you make Hadi and his coworkers promise not to tell anyone about your help?"

"Because I was breaking the rules to help Hadi. That endangered my contract here. I made that clear to him."

"So you were asking Hadi to lie on your behalf?"

"I was asking him not to tell people that I was doing his job."

Sarkar jumped in. "I was requesting advice merely, Jon."

Ross folded his arms. "Hadi, your exact words were that you had tried everything you could think of and wanted my help." He turned back to Agent Straub. "A rogue process somewhere in his data center was broadcasting packets to the Web last night. Hadi couldn't find it. The process was incredibly stealthy—possibly a kernel rootkit."

Sarkar shook his head emphatically. "There is no way to hide the source of network traffic, Jon. I told you this."

"Well, the test bed servers were definitely involved. Test servers are usually the weakest on security. They have beta software and they're

frequently reconfigured. So I had Hadi kill Icarus Servers One through Ten, and the packet broadcast stopped—even though it wasn't supposed to be originating from there."

Agent Straub nodded, taking notes. "So you knew right where to look, then. . . ."

"That wasn't my point."

Agent Vasquez ignored the discussion and picked up the phone. He dialed while Ross glanced at the computer screen. Sarkar had the Event Viewer maximized. "I see we're starting the hunt on my machine."

Straub slid his credentials back into his suit pocket. "We haven't ruled out an inside job."

"Of course. Forget the fact that I was the one who advised Hadi to shut that system down. Hardly something I'd do if I was the one running the exploit."

"You might, if you realized it had been discovered. It seems convenient that due to your involvement, the hard drives were erased."

Ross was poker-faced. "The rootkit destroyed the machine when I tried to shut it down. In any event, FBI forensics can reconstruct data from a wiped drive."

Vasquez hung up the phone. "They want us in the main data center."

As they moved down the hallway, Sarkar kept groaning softly and shaking his head. Ross didn't take the bait. Sarkar finally muttered, "Jon, I had no choice but to tell them."

"Hadi, I've been in this business long enough to know better." Ross knew that no good deed goes unpunished, and though he hadn't technically done anything wrong, helping Sarkar out with his little problem could result in the loss of his contract with Alcyone. Or worse, he thought, eyeing their FBI escort.

"They were asking questions about what we did. This is the FBI, not human resources. They talked to us separately, and I knew that Maynard would mention you. Jon, what was I supposed to do? I do not wish to get deported."

Ross grimaced. "I should have known better than to get involved, Hadi."

"I am not a Muslim. I am a Hindu. You will tell them, won't you?"

Ross didn't respond.

Sarkar looked genuinely pained. "I am sorry, Jon."

"Ted Wynnuk probably called the Feds in to force Accounting's hand and have my contract canceled. He doesn't like having people down here who don't answer to him."

"Ted didn't call the FBI, Jon."

"Then who did? You?"

"No one did."

Ross stopped walking. "What do you mean?"

"They came here on their own. Because of what the Icarus-Seven server did."

Ross looked back to the FBI agents. Straub motioned for him to keep moving.

Just what have I gotten involved in here? Ross wondered.

There were a lot of people in the data center. It was almost acceptably warm as a result. Sarkar's boss, Ted Wynnuk, leaned against a counter, glowering beneath thick eyebrows as he listened to two techs Ross hadn't seen before. This was probably the A-team—the daytime shift. They looked at Ross with the special contempt reserved for young consultants.

Half a dozen uniformed Woodland Hills police officers were in here along with more FBI agents. They were talking with a network admin—a pear-shaped guy with bad skin. He was probably Maynard. Pear-shaped pointed at various server racks enthusiastically. At least someone was enjoying this.

What happened?

As soon as Ross entered the room, everyone stopped talking and turned to face him. The sudden silence was almost embarrassing because Ross knew he had none of the answers they were looking for. He decided to ask the obvious question. "Anybody want to tell me what's going on?"

All eyes turned to someone behind Ross, so he spun on his heel to face a trim man in a crisp suit. The guy looked like a fifty-year-old varsity quarterback. A leader of men.

"Mr. Ross. I'm Special Agent Neal Decker, L.A. Division. Do you know why we're here?"

"Because of last night?"

Decker sized him up. It unnerved Ross that no one was talking.

But Decker was in no hurry. He finally placed his hand on a disconnected rack server sitting on the nearby counter. "They tell me this computer killed two men earlier today."

The shock took a while to work through Ross. He had expected some sort of child pornography ring, or a credit card scam. "Killed? How?"

"I was hoping you could help us explain that."

"Why on earth would you think that?"

Decker smiled good-naturedly. "A lot of people are suspects right now. But once we get the people in here to help us interpret the evidence, we'll know more. In the meantime, we'd like to take you gentlemen in for questioning." His gaze spanned the room to include all the men who were present during the incident.

A wave of dread washed over Ross. "We're not under arrest?"

"No. I'm asking you to voluntarily come in for questioning."

Ross wondered what would happen if he said no. Of course, he couldn't say no. What about a lawyer? "I must tell you, I'm just completely floored by this."

"I'm certain you are."

This guy was disconcertingly calm. He gave the impression that he knew more than he was letting on. *Goddamnit.*

Just then a man appeared at the glass data center door. He was the linebacker to match Decker as quarterback. His casual confidence seemed to indicate he wasn't FBI—the agents here were all keyed up in Decker's presence. No, this guy was an outsider to them. The man rapped on the glass, and a Woodland Hills patrolman opened the door for him. The newcomer showed a badge and was let inside.

"I'm looking for an Agent Decker."

Decker and the FBI agents turned and moved forward, hands extended. "Detective Sebeck. We spoke on the phone." They shook hands. Decker turned to some of his crew. "Agent Knowles, Agent Straub, Detective Sergeant Peter Sebeck, Ventura County Major Crimes Unit. Detective Sebeck was heading the murder investigation up in Thousand Oaks." Handshakes all around.

Then everyone turned back to Ross.

Sebeck pointed at him. "Who's this?"

Decker leaned against the counter. "This is Jon Ross, one of Alcyone's independent computer consultants. He designs their corporate data systems. Isn't that right, Mr. Ross?"

“Certain systems, yes. Not this one.”

“Is he a suspect or a witness?”

Ross thought it was a good question.

Decker was calm as ever. “That depends.” He looked to Ross. “Tell me, Mr. Ross, why is it that no one at your home address has ever heard of you?”

Damn it to hell. . . .

Chapter 6:// Exile

“Ms. Anderson?” The security guard stepped from the guard shack and ducked to look into the Jaguar XK8.

Anji Anderson looked down her nose at him from behind the wheel, lowering her Vuitton sunglasses. “Yesss. Open the gate.”

“Ma’am, if you could drive off to the right here, I believe Mr. Langley wants to have a word with you.”

“I think you should open the gate.”

“Ma’am, Mr. Langley—”

“Mr. Langley—whoever that is—can call my office if he wants to speak with me.” She dug through her glove compartment and produced a drive-on studio pass. “Now, open the gate.”

“Ma’am, I’m afraid you’re just going to have to pull off to the right, there.”

“Why? Do you know who I am?”

He gave her an incredulous look. He obviously knew who she was.

“And why do you keep calling me ‘Ma’am’? What is this, the Ponderosa? My name is Anji Anderson—although later you’ll be calling me ‘That Bitch Who Got Me Fired.’”

“Ma’am, there’s no call for cussing.”

“Cussing? Okay, Clem, I won’t cuss no more, as long as you open the fucking gate.”

His look hardened. He leaned down closer. “Look, if you don’t pull off to the right, you’ll wish you had. Now park over there.” He pointed.

She just laughed. “Ahhh, I guess there’s only so much shit you’ll take for eight bucks an hour, eh?”

“Pull over to the right.”

A car behind her honked.

"And what if I don't?"

"Pull over to the right!"

Another guard approached the car.

"Oh, you called for backup. You need protection from a helpless woman, Clem?"

The second guard eased the first away from the car and then turned to her. "Ms. Anderson, using your superior social position to belittle a powerless employee does not speak well of you."

She stared at him.

"The fact is that we've been instructed by your superiors to prevent you from entering. If you want to know why, I suggest you pull over to the right."

She nodded slowly and put the car in gear. "Okay. I will." She yanked the steering wheel to the right and accelerated madly into the walk-on lot.

Anderson was burning with anger after walking in high heels from the far corner of the parking lot. She was going to raise hell about this with Walter Kahn. She was *talent*. She shouldn't have to put up with facilities crap.

When she finally reached the guard shed again, the second guard pointed to a pedestrian gate where two people waited for her, one a trim woman in a tailored suit, the other another security guard. Anderson slowed down and then stopped. She stood there not liking what she was suddenly thinking.

The woman motioned for her to approach.

Anderson took a deep breath and walked up to them as composed as she could manage. "What's this all about?"

The woman extended her hand from between the bars. It was like visiting hours at the state penn. Anderson extended her own hand for a cold handshake. "Ms. Anderson, I'm Josephine Curto from Human Resources. There's been a change in your contract status at the network."

"My agent is negotiating a contract renewal. It doesn't lapse for another five weeks."

"Yes. I see. Those negotiations are over. The network decided not to renew your contract. Please understand this decision came down from corporate. I'm just delivering the news. We thought your agent would have told you."

Anderson felt the tears welling up, but sucked in a breath and forced them back down again. She looked away and pressed her forefinger and thumb against the bridge of her nose—then looked back sharply at Curto. “*This* is how you decide to tell me I’m fired? I’m standing here like some kind of vagrant in the street. What am I, a threat? What am I going to do, shoot up the place?”

Curto was unperturbed as she attached papers to a clipboard. “That’s not the concern. You are known to studio personnel and have access to a live television broadcast. I’m sure you can appreciate that the network doesn’t want you getting on the air at this difficult time.”

“Difficult time?” Anderson tried in vain to form her thoughts into words several times. The tears threatened again. She finally blurted out, lamely, “I have fans. You’ve seen my fan mail? There are men and women in Marin and Oakland and Walnut Creek—people who’ve asked to marry me. What are you going to tell them about my sudden disappearance?”

“I have no idea how to respond to that question.”

“You should let me do a final broadcast.”

“Lifestyles reporters don’t get farewell broadcasts, Ms. Anderson.”

“What about Jim McEwen? They had a big send-off when he retired.”

“Jim was the anchor. He worked at the studio for thirty-two years. You’ve been here six.”

“This is no way to treat talent.”

“That’s hardly at issue here.”

Anderson realized Curto was smart for being on the other side of the bars. She took another deep breath and tried to center herself. “Can’t I at least go in to say goodbye to Jamie and Doug and the others?”

“Oh, see, now why are we having this conversation? It’s not productive,” Curto said. She pushed a clipboard and pen through the bars. “Can you please sign these?”

Anderson just stared at her indignantly. “I’m not signing anything.”

“You want your personal effects, right?”

“My personal effects? You mean you people emptied out my office?”

“Anji, what do you think is going on here? This is a large corporation with global responsibilities. Emptying out your office wasn’t a

vengeful act. It was a work order. Just sign the documents, and let's get this over with. This is not fun for you or me."

Anderson grabbed the clipboard and pen. She slapped it against the bars right in front of Curto's face and started reading the COBRA and 401(k) documents. She felt like a public spectacle. A loser standing outside the gates where everyone could see her. The grips and cameramen stared as they drove in through the nearby gate. She started tearing up in humiliation. Someone was punishing her. But who?

She finally just signed all the papers without reading them and shoved the clipboard back through the bars.

"We'll deliver your personal effects to your home."

Anderson hurried away, rushing for the distant refuge of her car.

"Ms. Anderson. My pen."

Anderson had been starting pitcher on Wisconsin State's girl softball team. She stopped, turned, and hurled the pen at the corporate ice bitch with all her strength. The woman took it right in the torso. Had it been a Mont Blanc, she would have been sucking for air. But it was just a Bic, and the woman shrunk back.

"There's no call for that!"

Anderson stormed away, her mind running in fast-forward to all the bad things that were sure to follow. Someone had dynamited a bridge on her road to success. She hadn't prepared for this at all. Fucking terrorists.

She mentally ticked off a list of her friends. They were all in the business or attached to the business. Who could find her a soft landing at another station? If not in San Francisco, then where? Not Madison, Wisconsin, again, please, dear God.

Then it hit her that Melanie hadn't warned her. That bitch had let her be publicly humiliated. Anderson pulled her cell phone out of her handbag and speed-dialed her agent. It rang three times and went to voice mail.

"You've reached the office of Melanie Smalls. Ms. Smalls is not available at the moment. To reach her assistant, Jason Karcher, press 3349."

Anderson punched in the numbers.

"Ms. Smalls's office. Can I help you?"

"Jason, it's Anji Anderson. Put me through to Melanie."

"Hi, Ms. Anderson. Melanie's on another line. Do you want to hold?"

"Look, I'm standing out here in front of KTLZ, and they've locked me out of the studio. Get Melanie on the damned phone."

"Okay. Hang on."

Anderson reached her car and clicked the remote. She got inside and cleaned up her mascara in the rearview mirror while Barry Manilow tortured her on hold because it looked like she had emphatically not "made it." The anger built inside her with each passing verse.

Finally Melanie clicked on. "Anji, what's going on?"

"I've just been fired at the studio front gate—publicly humiliated. Josephine Curto tells me that you knew my contract wasn't being picked up."

"Who the hell's Josephine Curto?"

"Some toady from Human Resources."

"Anji, we're still in negotiations with the network, and I wasn't told that any decision had been made. The ball was still in Kahn's court."

"Josephine just told me that my agent knew about this, Melanie. I just signed papers!"

"Well, she doesn't know what the hell she's talking about, and what do you mean you just signed papers? Why would you sign papers?" Melanie's voice became muted. "Jase, check the fax machine."

Anderson started crying again. She hit the dashboard—angry with herself for being so emotional. "Damn it, Melanie. Why didn't I see this coming? Who the hell did the network get to replace me?"

"Don't beat yourself up. We'll see if we can get you something on the E-Channel or—"

"No! Stop. I've been trying for six years to get on a serious news desk. I can't afford to do any more fluff pieces. I'm a journalist, not a damned fashion model."

There was silence on the other end.

"Hello?"

"I'm still here. Anji, you don't have the right pedigree for it. You haven't been a journalist, honey. Not really. And you weren't talking serious journalism when we got you onto the San Francisco affiliate."

"I'm realizing—"

"You're realizing you're past thirty and fluff reporting is for twenty-four-year-old news models."

"Exactly."

"That's a problem."

“No, it’s a challenge.”

“Anji, what you’re talking about is starting back at square one and reinventing yourself. No, actually you’re starting at square negative one because you’re already known as a fashion and lifestyles reporter—meaning you have all the journalistic heft of a British tabloid. It’s going to be a stretch, and at my age, I don’t stretch.”

Anderson searched for words. This was unraveling fast.

“Honey, you’re too old to intern as a serious journalist. Unless you’re a proven hard news reporter at thirty, you’re not going to be a hard news reporter.”

Anderson bit her lip gently. Performed in front of the right man, that used to solve a lot of problems. She realized that Christiane Amanpour probably didn’t bite her lip.

“Unfortunately, major networks are consolidating news production in Atlanta, and laying off in most markets. I could try to get you a spot on a cosmetics infomercial casting in L.A.”

Tears flowed down Anderson’s cheeks.

Chapter 7:// Daemon

Yahoo.com/news

E-Murder@Video Game Company—Thousand Oaks, California: A booby **trap** sprung **via** the **Internet** claimed the life of a **Cyber-Storm Entertainment employee** Thursday. An off-site death earlier in the day is also under investigation as a related homicide. **Programmer Chopra Singh**—project lead on the bestselling MMORPG game *The Gate* was electrocuted in company offices. **Lead detective Peter Sebeck** of the **Ventura County Sheriff's Major Crimes Unit** confirmed the killings were carried out via the Internet.

Sebeck was already staring at the ceiling when his alarm clock sounded. He switched it off by touch, and kept staring at the ceiling. He'd gotten in late last night. Even so, he hadn't slept. He kept turning the case over in his mind. That's what he'd taken to calling it: *The Case*.

The FBI had taken over. They were forming a temporary task force with local law enforcement, but the Feds were in charge. Agents were photocopying files and interrogating suspects when Sebeck left at two A.M. Decker was some sort of workaholic.

Sebeck explored his sense of loss. *The Case* no longer belonged to him. Why did it bother him so much? He was afraid he knew the answer: He felt truly alive only when something horrible was happening. That was the dirty secret behind every promotion he had ever received.

He'd miscast himself in the role of authority figure. A decision made

one afternoon fifteen years ago. He had had to grow up fast, back then—after the baby—but he sometimes wondered if he wasn't just pretending. If he wasn't simply acting the way he thought he should act. The way others around him did. He didn't even know who he'd be without this role. Pete Sebeck was just an idea—a collection of responsibilities with a mailing address.

He tried to recall the last time he actually *felt* something. The last time he felt alive. That inevitably led to thoughts of her. Memories of the trip to Grand Cayman. He tried to remember the smell of her hair. He wondered where she was right now, and if he'd ever see her again. She didn't need a damned thing from him. Maybe that's what he loved most about her.

Sebeck's cell phone sounded from the nightstand, scattering his thoughts. He glanced over at his wife's side of the bed. She roused slightly. He grabbed the handset and sat up. "Sebeck."

"Detective Sebeck?"

"Yeah. Who's—"

"This is Special Agent Boerner, FBI. I just sent an e-mail to your home address. The agent in charge wants a response before you're in this morning." Someone yelled in the background. Boerner clicked off without saying goodbye.

"Hello?" Sebeck stared in irritation at the handset. *Rude asshole*. He glanced at the clock: 6:32 A.M.

His wife sat up on the other side of the bed and stretched in one of her full-length nightgowns.

"Laura, I have to jump in the shower first. I've got a full day ahead."

"Fine, Pete."

"I won't be long. Go back to sleep."

Sebeck ran through his ablutions in fifteen minutes, dressed, and tied his tie on the way downstairs. He ducked into the kitchen.

His son, Chris, sat reading the morning paper. The kid was getting big—muscular big. Sixteen. Almost the age Sebeck was when he and Laura conceived the boy. Had it really been sixteen years? "Why don't you get a shovel, Chris?"

Chris had a bulging mouthful of cereal. The boy grabbed at his dad's suit jacket as he walked past. Chris flipped the paper over to reveal the front page. There was a color picture of Sebeck over the headline:

"Internet Killings Spark Federal Investigation." Mantz was also in the picture to his left. Sebeck stopped short and picked up the page, reading slowly as he sank down into a seat at the table.

Chris chewed his way back to speech. "L.A. *Times*. That's big."

Sebeck just kept reading.

Laura walked into the kitchen.

Sebeck glanced up. "Did you see this?"

She looked down at the page. "Not a great picture of Nathan." She went over to the stove to make tea.

Sebeck handed the paper back to Chris, but kept looking at Laura. "I won't be able to pick up Chris from practice today. I've got the FBI here, the national media, and God knows what else."

"We'll manage."

Chris lowered the paper. "The Feds are interrogating the insurance guys. You think they did it?"

"I'm not the one questioning them, Chris." Sebeck stood. "From here on out, I'll be lucky to be in the loop at all." He glanced at his watch. "I gotta go."

Sebeck headed down the hall to the den. Once there, he dropped into the desk chair and hit the power switch on the computer. While the computer booted, he moved a gaming joystick off to the side and tossed two soda cans into the trash. He called to the kitchen, "Chris, I won't keep asking you to clean up in here when you're done!" No answer.

The computer desktop came up. Sebeck launched his e-mail program, then clicked the GET MAIL button. He waited as 132 messages downloaded. *Goddamned spam*. When it finished, the message subject lines ranged from "Barely Legal Teens" to "Nigerian Exile Needs Help" to "Lolitas Take Horse Cock."

He searched his inbox for the FBI message. It was near the top and had the subject line: "Case #93233—CyberStorm/Pavlos" from *boernerh@fbi.gov*. Sebeck double-clicked on it.

Strangely, as the e-mail opened, the screen went black. Then the words "Testing Audio" faded-in. The hard drive strained. Sebeck stared in confusion. What did he do? In a moment, the words faded out and were replaced by a grainy video image of a man. It was hard to tell his age or precise appearance due to the poor video quality. It was amateurish—poorly lit and off-center.

The man looked thin and pale—a condition emphasized by his

standing against a featureless white background. He was completely bald and wore what looked to be a medical gown.

What the hell was this, some sort of FBI lab report?

It took Sebeck a moment to realize that the video was already playing. The man swayed unsteadily—his pixels adjusting like colored tiles. Then he looked directly into the camera and nodded as if in greeting.

“Detective Sebeck. I was Matthew Sobol. Chief technology officer of CyberStorm Entertainment. I am dead.”

Sebeck leaned forward—his eyes fixed on the monitor.

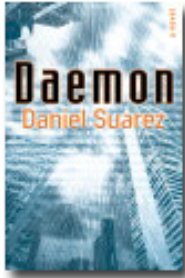
“I see you’ve been assigned to the Josef Pavlos and Chopra Singh murder cases. Let me save you some time; I killed both men. Soon you’ll know why. But you have a problem: Because I’m dead, you can’t arrest me. More importantly: You can’t stop me.”

Sebeck stared in stunned silence.

Sobol continued. “Since you have no choice but to try and stop me, I want to take this moment to wish you luck, Sergeant—because you’re going to need it.”

The image disappeared, revealing the e-mail inbox again.

Sebeck didn’t move for several moments. When he finally did, it was to forward the message to his sheriff’s e-mail address.



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