

Author's Note

Finally, the book is finished.

Forty-Two Blue

By Rachel Schipul

Chapter One

Deep in midtown Houston, a glowing computer screen cast blue shadows over the windowless room of a renovated warehouse apartment. Programming books and trade magazines lay in scattered piles beside the laptop, a space cleared among them for a flat greasy box containing a single slice of cold pizza, the cheese long-since hardened into molded plastic. Despite the late hour, the heat was relentless, another unforgiving summer night.

Charlie popped a tab of speed and crunched it between his teeth. The bitter dust mixed with the salt on his lips, softening the sting of the drug, a precursor to the flood of energy that was on its way. He would turn on the a/c when his work was complete, when the rumbling of the old unit wouldn't distract him from his goal. Lights, too. The darkness was his physical cloak in the shadows of the Internet. It made him feel mysterious, even stealthy.

Charlie licked another drop of sweat from his upper lip.

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

He hesitated. Would anyone be watching? Charlie took a breath to slow his heart, fighting the effects of the speed, and forced his paranoia back under the surface. Eight hits so far. No indication that anyone was on their trail. Just get in and get out.

Charlie copied his favorite SQL string from a personal library and pasted the command at the waiting prompt. He took a deep swig from his Red Bull and watched the seconds tick by, his requests bouncing off a compromised server in China to cover his trail.

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

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

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Across town, another programmer sat in his cubicle also staring at a computer screen, shivering from the office air conditioner that kept the temperature a frigid sixty-two degrees. People and computers both functioned better in a cooler environment, or so it was written. Fluorescent lighting fully illuminated the Special Teams area and Phil Barnes' desk on the sixth floor of the OPTIN office building.

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

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

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

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

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

Three days later, Phil had succeeded in breaking down one of the functions, uncovering a series of commands that affected the Account Transfer module. Bad programming in this part of the system could bring down the entire OPTIN Trading System and then the shit would really hit the fan. But so far, no problems had been reported.

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

He really should bring it up with Jack, his supervisor. If there was a green programmer experimenting on the live system, someone needed to know. But in the end, pride overshadowed reason. Other programmers within the company brought their unsolvable problems to *his* group. Phil wasn't ready to admit defeat on this one. He would figure it out first, *then* alert his boss.

An anguished cry erupted from across the room.

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

"Becky?"

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

"I know the feeling."

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

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

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

"Gee, thanks." He shook his head. "I'll be out shortly. Only so much abuse a body can take."

"Your funeral. See you in the morning."

Phil sat back down and pushed the exhaustion aside. One hundred variables tested, only five hundred more to go. Twenty minutes later, Phil bolted upright in his chair.

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

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

He burned a fresh copy of the altered file to a CD and picked up the phone, then paused, his finger hovering over the speed dial to Jack’s home phone. Maybe he should wait until morning to tell Jack, at least until the sun came up. The idea of spending the next forty-eight hours trying to break down the other functions, under intense pressure from his supervisor, would sound a lot more appealing after a few hours sleep. An email would buy him some time.

He was midway through composing the message, when his computer froze.

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

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

Too keyed up to wait for the elevator, Phil loped down the six flights of stairs. By the third floor, his energy started to wane and he paused for a moment on the stoop. Whoever had inserted those functions into the accounting system had access to the company’s highly secured developers’ network. He reached the second floor. And that could only come from inside the building. First floor. It had to be someone who either worked or used to work in Programming.

Phil pushed open the door and scanned the lobby, nervously aware of the emptiness. A sudden feeling of vulnerability crept over him. He turned the corner and the hulk of an ancient locomotive, a gift from one of the company’s founders, loomed in the darkness, a silent sentry that blocked his path. He was leaving the building with confidential documents, cause for termination from the company, and maybe from someone else. A chill passed through his body and he stepped quickly around the engine, anxious to get out of the building.

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

The muted ding of an elevator reverberated in the lobby and Phil took a quick step back, half-hidden in the shadows of the locomotive, his chest throbbing as he stared toward the opening doors.

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

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

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

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

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

“Finishing up with the Japanese market. You?”

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

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

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

“Walk you to your car?”

“Sure.”

They walked in silence to the double glass doors leading to the parking garage. She politely turned her head away as Phil punched his personal security code into the keypad. The red light turned green and the locks retracted with a soft click.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Maybe a little.”

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

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

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

They moved toward a silver Mercedes.

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

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

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

“Here you g—”

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

Phil clutched his face, reeling from the pain, blood oozing down the front of his white shirt. He looked up, confused, as she pulled something from her purse. A cell phone? His eyes flicked from the device to her face and back again. She wasn’t using it like a phone. The woman clicked a small button at the base of the unit and a low electric hum floated across the night air. In the weak garage light, he could clearly see two silver prongs of a stun gun.

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

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

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

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

"What the hell are you doing?"

Without answering, she took another step toward him and held out the gun again.

Phil turned away from her, gathering his feet under him. She may have caught him off guard but he could outrun her. Immediately his entire body wrenched as the stun gun hit him again. This time planted squarely on top of his right kidney. He collapsed on the concrete floor, his mind in a panic, his body writhing in agony. Phil lost all sense of fear and pain as the current surged through him. The only thought he could put together was a single word. *Stop*.

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

Relief flooded over him. It had stopped.

As he lay exhausted on the warm, dirty concrete, Phil listened to the clicking of her heels as she walked away from him. Crazy bitch. Attractive, yes, but definitely not his type. These women's self-defense classes were going to get him killed one day. He tried to sit up but his body wouldn't cooperate. He felt drugged, his limbs heavy and unresponsive.

She was coming back.

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

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

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

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

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"Gerard Boitanni." Charlie said the name with a sneer, picking it at random from the list on the screen. "Level A client. Man, I bet you are *loaded*. Probably spend your days playing golf. And your nights, oh your nights, drinking fifty-year-old Scotch and fucking twenty-year-old blondes. Cabin on the lake, cabin in the mountains, vacation home in France. You wouldn't mind if I borrowed just a little, would you?"

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

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

He continued through the personal data on the screen.

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

He wiped a line of sweat from his upper lip and checked the account history.

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

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

The irony of it was too much.

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

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

He updated the last variable and resaved the file as a lascivious smile crossed his face. She would be pleased with this one. Last Thursday, during a particularly athletic round of sex, she had started talking about hitting another account.

"No one's watching, Charlie."

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

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

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

"Forget it, Charlie. I'm not in the mood anymore."

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

If she wasn't such a personal trophy, in addition to being a better-than-average lay, he would have gotten rid of her a long time ago.

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

"Thanks for playing, Mr. B."

He tossed his empty can toward the trash and missed.

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

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

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

"...and I almost chose you. Smart, very smart. You could have done it in half the time." She sighed. "But I just couldn't trust you."

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

"Oops."

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

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

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

“Let’s get this over with.”

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

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

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

“Here.” She brought the knife down slowly and pressed it into the chosen spot. The blade went in about a quarter of an inch, then hit a rib. Phil let out a small squawk of pain. At least his body was responding. And the pain was helping him focus. He started working on his leg muscles.

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

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

“Goddamn it!”

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

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

She bit her lip and turned her eyes away from his. “I didn’t want to. I told you that. It’s too late now.”

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

“I was watching you, you know,” she said. “It was the email to Jack that convinced me.”

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

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

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

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

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

He cracked open his eyes for one last look at life. She still knelt beside him, her face rigid as she wiped her hands on a towel and wrapped up the knife. He tried to focus his thoughts, the

random pieces of information floating around in his mind. Too smart for your own good. I was watching you. The email to Jack. Then the confusion lifted and he understood.

But the knowing brought him no comfort.

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

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

She glanced around the garage but saw no one.

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

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

Chapter Two

Earlier that evening, just outside the small Texas Hill Country town of Wimberley, Maggie Johanssen sat at a desk hunched over her own pile of printouts. Her eyes were dry and she reminded herself to blink. Her current client, CRS Business Solutions, had hired her to perform a cursory review of their network traffic after reading a newspaper article about employee electronic theft.

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

And Maggie had wanted to grab him by his necktie and yank until his lips turned blue. What ever happened to talking with your employees honestly and daily about their performance? What the woman needed was a course in common sense. One on how to be an ethical business executive.

But Maggie had bitten her tongue because she needed the work. And CRS was a major player in the online financial market.

Billing her clients under the ambiguous title of Network Securities Consultant, Maggie found her projects to be a combination of technical analysis, detective work and client therapy. Many of her clients, like CRS, wanted reassurances that their network was secure from attack by current employees and unknown outsiders. Others had general network problems such as viruses run amok or unauthorized emails being sent from their systems. Several faced ongoing hacking issues, such as denial of service attacks on their web servers, or defaced sites that prevented them from doing business online.

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

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

“I’m a frigging magnet,” she said to the milk as she reached for a Diet Coke. Her body’s affinity for electricity was something she had endured all her life. Her dad used to tease her, saying her dark, kinky hair was a result of sticking her finger into an outlet at an early age. She had his dark green eyes and olive skin but her mother’s frame, small and supple, a runner’s body. Her nose was slightly hooked, an everyday reminder of her Greek heritage.

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

“Won’t need this anymore,” he had told her with a hint of sadness. Two years ago in the midst of the market crash, he had traded thirty years in the oil and gas industry for a lucrative retirement package. Her parents had packed up the bulk of their thirty-five years in the States and

moved back to Greece. Maggie missed them more than she had expected to, her mom's unending support, her dad's gentle wisdom.

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

Maggie refocused her thoughts on the CRS project.

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

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

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

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

She clicked over to her Internet browser and tracked the IP address range to an Internet Service Provider based in Michigan. They only had ten servers and could probably list most of their accounts by name.

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

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

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

What up, M?

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

Can you talk?

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

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

"All Unix?"

"That's the one."

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

"I need to know if any of their customers are employed by a company called CRS Business Solutions, based in Round Rock. They have locations throughout the U.S., I think one just outside of Detroit."

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

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

"Spill."

"This guy snuck in through the HR system of one of our up-and-coming online institutions and allocated himself a buttload of stock options." She described the alterations made

to the virus and the auto-run program used to install it. “Made close to four hundred grand when they took the company public.”

“No kidding. Did he get busted?”

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

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

“Bueno.”

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

#

She was going through the system records, looking for corresponding timestamps when the phone rang. The screen listed the caller as Nikolai H. Dalakos and provided both his home address and phone number. She clicked Answer.

“Hi Maggie. It’s Nick.”

“Well if it isn’t my long, lost brother. Haven’t heard from you in forever. Hold on while I switch to the phone.” She took off the headset and picked up her cordless.

“How are you?” she said, heading into the kitchen again. She rinsed and chopped lettuce while they talked about family and friends, then sprinkled on black olives, feta cheese, parmesan and topped it off with lots of creamy Caesar dressing.

“Well, the reason I called –”

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

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

“Shoot.”

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

She stopped tossing the salad and rolled her eyes.

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

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

“Okay, I’m biting.”

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

“What’s in the access logs?”

“We set triggers in the system to record certain events, such as user logins. We then use this data to analyze system activity and determine when we have the most legitimate traffic or when repeated unsuccessful logins might indicate a hack attempt.”

“Nick, you dork. I know what an access log is. I meant what’s *weird* in the access logs? Are you getting hacked?”

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

“I imagine that’s a fulltime job.”

“No kidding. The hackers are getting smarter every day and the costs of keeping our network clean are spiraling out of control. And our government won’t step in and do anything about it.”

“I’ll write my congressman.”

“Okay, I’ll get off my soapbox. I’m just sick of wasting time and money on these bastards.” Maggie heard him take and release a deep breath.

“So back to your network problem...”

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

“Sounds like they have it under control.”

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

“Depending on...”

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

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

Why didn’t anyone trust their own IT groups? They paid their technical staff outrageous salaries, sent them to extensive training, put them in charge of their most valuable business asset and then looked outside for analysis of security breaches. Maggie had faced more than her fair share of pissed off network managers. She wasn’t anxious to start poking her nose into someone else’s territory again.

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

“It always is.”

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

“Ah, the sweetest words.”

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

“Tomorrow? What’s the rush?”

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

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

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

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

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

“Hmm. I might be willing to trade services for an overnight boat trip.”

“Great!”

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

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After dinner, Maggie checked her current Hotmail accounts and found a new message, sender ‘taz9951’. Randy. Must have been a no-brainer.

She scanned the attached file for viruses, unzipped it and read the names of eleven CRS employees who used Hotwerks for their Internet access. She compared this list to her printout. Seven were sales reps. They were immediately ruled out – she had never met a sales rep with the

technical snap needed to break into the multimillion dollar systems they sold. That left her with one office manager and three support reps.

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

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

Maggie started with the manager. Filtering the list again for only SMITGO, she followed the first entry to the personnel file of Andrew Hale, another manager in the Michigan area. Interesting. He was looking at the personnel files. But not his own.

"Gordo, you little sneak."

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

"Looking. But did you change anything?" She scanned the audit trail. "Nope. Didn't change copy the records. Just browsing."

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

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

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

"Oh, but what's this?" Maggie checked the timestamps on the file. "Clever girl."

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

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

"Busted."

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

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

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

But what about Gordon Smith? He was just a petty snooper, poking his nose into other people's business. Wrong, yes. But illegal?

Opening a C++ programming package on her computer, Maggie constructed a quick, little program to run unnoticed in the system. She then reaccessed the CRS system and uploaded the file. The program was set to delete itself after the first run.

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