

Chapter 14 - April 4, 2003 PM

“So how’d you get into the building security system?” Mark Cohen asks Dom Montain. They’re sitting in chairs across from each other at a small round table in Dom’s office at hackoff.com.

“What’re you talking about?” asks Dom.

“Look, I know there is a backdoor into the security system. Someone told me about it, okay? I understand—”

“Who told you?” asks Dom.

“I get to ask the questions,” says Mark. “I’m the detective. So I know there’s a backdoor. Alright?”

“I don’t know that anyone told you anything,” says Dom.

“You call a phone number. You enter a code. The surveillance doesn’t see you when you go through a door. Like the door to Larry’s office. The system doesn’t remember when you use your RFID card to get into the office or even the building. The surveillance camera in the elevator doesn’t even see you.”

“Okay, so you know about the system.”

“Look, you’ve got an alibi. Why aren’t you telling me the truth?”

“When did I lie to you?” asks Dom.

“You didn’t tell me about the backdoor. You weren’t going to tell me anything until I proved to you what I knew. That’s what guilty people do. You did have motive to kill the deceased.”

“I didn’t lie. The backdoor is a secret. You discovered it; that’s fair. But I didn’t have to tell you.”

“This isn’t a computer game,” says Mark. “It’s real. Look, Dom, you’re a smart guy. You know if surveillance is right and no one went into Larry’s office, then it has to be suicide. And you know, if there is a backdoor, then anything’s possible. Your failure to tell me about that could be construed as obstruction of justice.”

Dom says nothing.

Mark continues: “I also understand now why you were surprised when I asked you about being in the deceased’s office. You thought you had the backdoor activated. You didn’t think I’d see you. Why didn’t the backdoor work? Why were you recorded going in and out?”

“The simplest explanation,” says Dom after a brief pause, “is that I never activated the backdoor and—”

“Tilt,” says Mark. “If you didn’t activate the backdoor, you wouldn’t have been surprised that I knew you’d been in the office.”

“I told you I was surprised because it took you so long to do everything else like check email that I didn’t think you’d have seen the log yet. That’s all.”

“Are you going to answer my question?”

“What question?”

“Why didn’t the backdoor work?”

“Why do you think I know how the backdoor works?”

“Because,” says Mark leaning towards Dom, “it’s impossible that you don’t. You wrote it.” He leans back.

“How do you know that?” asks Dom, leaning forward in turn, then straightening as Mark takes his time in answering.

“There are actually two reasons,” the detective says at length. “They reinforce each other. For one thing, the hack is really good. It not only disables selective elements of hackoff’s security system — that would be fairly easy for an insider — but it also seems to disable parts of building security which I’m guessing are on a totally separate system.”

“They are separate. What’s the second reason?” asks Dom leaning in again.

Mark relaxes further back into his chair. “I can’t believe that anyone else would be able to hack into a system you were responsible for. Security is one of your systems. So my guess is that only you can get into it. That’s the stronger reason. Unless you’re telling me there’s a smarter hacker than you around here.”

“Not likely,” says Dom. “That’s why I’m CTO.”

“What about the deceased? He wrote ‘Gotcha’.”

“That’s why I’m the CTO.”

“Because the deceased wrote ‘Gotcha’?”

“Because I’m the better hacker; better programmer, too. Look, nothing wrong with that; I’m not the CEO type and he was ... once was, anyway.”

“So, okay,” says Mark. “You’re the top hacker. You put the backdoor in the security system. How did you get into the building system, by the way?”

“It has an interface that lets us update its list of eligible RFIDs and get reports. Piece of cake to get full administrative rights, add some code. Almost too easy.”

“Did that worry you?” asks Mark. “If it’s hard to get in then fine, only you can get in. But if it’s easy, maybe anyone can and one line of your defense is down.”

“Right,” says Dom, “exactly what I thought. Good deduction. Once I got in I hardened up their defenses a little, did everybody a favor. Also made sure I get a notification if anyone tries to break in like I did or some other way. You’re right; it is our outer perimeter.”

“Anyone try to break in?”

“Sure; all the time. But that’s no big deal. Except for one, they were all amateur attacks. Probably didn’t even know what they were attacking.”

“And the one?”

“Nothing ... just not so amateur. That’s all. Nothing.”

“When did this nothing happen?”

“I don’t know. Six months ago, something like that.”

“What did you do?”

“Nothing. Didn’t have to. If I hadn’t hardened the system, maybe they would’ve got in but I did, so no problem.”

“Why?” asks Mark.

“Why what? Why wasn’t it a problem?”

“Not what I’m asking,” Mark interrupts, pauses, resumes. “What I’m asking is. Why’d you put the backdoor in?”

“Claustrophobia,” says Dom.

“I don’t get it. Are you claustrophobic? Even if you are, why does that make you put a backdoor in a software system?”

“Used to be,” says Dom. He pauses and resumes. “I used to be physically claustrophobic. I’m not any more. But I still don’t like to be trapped. Maybe just my gamer mentality. Look, just because you put up a fire escape doesn’t mean you know there’s gonna be a fire. But you can’t wait until there’s a fire, then put up the fire escape. Right? I mean, you gotta do it in advance. So I can’t wait to build a backdoor until I know I need it. Probably too late then. I build it right away. Like a fire escape.”

“Ever have to use it?” asks Mark, holding eye contact after the question.

“The backdoor?”

“I’m not asking about the fire escape. Have you ever had to use the backdoor.”

“I never had to use it.”

“You’re playing games with me,” says Mark. “I thought we understood each other. I didn’t ask you if you HAD to use it; I’m asking if you DID use it. Did you?”

“Well, you know, you build something, you have to test it. So, of course I did that. And if it’s built into something volatile, like someone else’s software, you gotta test it periodically — make sure it didn’t go away. So, yeah, I use it. But I never HAD to use it.”

“Why did you use it when you went into the deceased’s office the day before he died?”

“Didn’t say I did.”

“Dom, no games. I know you used it then. You know you did. It didn’t work and you were surprised when I knew you’d been in his office. Why did you use it? Why didn’t it work?”

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know what? Why it broke or why you used it?”

”I-don’t-know.” Dom’s voice is becoming mechanical, losing overtones and normal cadence.

“Okay, look,” says Mark almost kindly, “clearly we have a problem here. It’s in your best interest to come clean about this. This is a murder investigation and you had motive and you could’ve gotten in around the time of death without leaving a trace...”

“I didn’t do it,” says Dom. “You already checked my alibi; I know you did. I wasn’t there and I can prove it.”

“A couple of bartenders with criminal records say they know where you were — that’s not very good proof. Or you could’ve hired someone; told him

how to get in, or turned off security for him. I'm doing you a favor, telling you don't think you're in the clear; you're not."

"You-think-I-killed-Larry?" asks Dom in an even flatter and more mechanical voice.

"I didn't say that," says Mark firmly but quietly. "I said this is a bad time for you to start acting suspicious. I'm gonna do you more of a favor. I'm gonna ask you an easy question; let you relax; let you decide to answer my other question. Then I'm gonna ask the hard questions again."

"Okay."

"Don't use your talent for multiprocessing to think up a good lie to answer my questions with. That isn't gonna work. Yeah, I saw you start to do that. Use the time to relax so you can tell me the truth. Now I'm gonna ask the easy question. How do you turn off the building security camera in the elevator? There's a guy supposed to be watching those things. Doesn't mean he watches all the time, but he's supposed to. He's gonna notice if suddenly one of the cameras goes black. Then you draw attention just at the wrong time. How'd you do it?"

"I gotta tell you all my secrets?" asks Dom, but he is smiling.

"Tell."

Dom explains: "You're right: the camera can't go dark. Can't just freeze on the current frame either, because the camera pans. If it stops, it doesn't look right. What happens is that, when the code is active for entrance to the building, a certain elevator is dispatched to the ground floor the first time it's idle. I'm assuming that when it's idle and hasn't been called to a floor, it's empty.

Anyway, that means some pictures are being generated of an empty elevator. Okay? Now we capture that sequence — exactly twenty-seven seconds for a complete sequence. Start inserting that as a loop instead of what the camera's REALLY seeing. Still looks fine to the guy watching ... if he's watching. Then I get in, says it's me, testing, I get in and use my RFID to pick the floor. Now the software knows it's me that got in and not someone else. So, once it lets me out at hackoff's floor, it can let the real feed from the camera get through again."

"Pretty smart," says the detective. "I like the part about recording the loop right before you use it instead of using a prestored loop. I'm guessing that's in case there is something strange about the elevator that day. A light bulb burnt out. Graffiti. It's just been cleaned. Something like that."

Dom is suddenly animated. "That's right! That's exactly right."

"Why did you activate the backdoor when you went into Larry's office the day he died?" Mark asks gently.

"I-didn't-know what would happen," says Dom very quietly and mechanically. "I-didn't-know if he'd be there or not. I-told-you-that. If he wasn't there, I didn't want to leave him a message I'd been there."

"That's petty thin, Dom. You told me you got mad and went in to tell him he was a scumbag. I can buy that. But it doesn't sound right that when you're

mad you stop to think that — just in case he isn't there — you want to keep your visit secret. Because if he's there, he KNOWS you came in."

"I-am-a-game-player."

"Yeah, you are. And I think you're playing games with me right now, Dom. I have something in my head that tells me when I'm being played with. And right now it's giving me an alert. You sure you don't want to tell me the truth now, make me less suspicious?"

"I-am-telling-you-the-truth." Dom gets up, walks to the window, looks out, turns around, comes back and stands behind his chair.

Mark is silent but makes eye contact whenever Dom looks at him.

Dom quickly breaks eye contact.

"Give you another chance," says Mark. "Why didn't the backdoor work?"

"I-don't-know."

"I think you're protecting someone. Why would you protect someone? You're in danger. You're hurting yourself. No one is looking out for you. Who are you looking out for?"

Dom just shakes his head. He is still behind his chair, supporting himself on the back of it.

"Who else knew about the backdoor?" asks Mark, gentle again.

"Larry knew. He told Rachel Roth. He shouldn't have. Did she tell you that? Did she tell you about the backdoor?" He is somewhat less mechanical now, almost eager, but not in control of his breathing.

"I haven't interviewed her yet," says Mark. "Who else knew? Who are you protecting? And how do you know the deceased told Ms. Roth?"

"I know because she tried to do the code and she did it wrong. I have the trace from her trying to do the code and getting it wrong and then she was on surveillance."

"You forgot my other questions," says Mark.

"He told her the code because he was screwing her," says Dom with desperation. "He wanted her to be able to come to his office without anyone knowing."

"I didn't ask you that. I asked you who else knew. And who you're protecting."

Dom now looks stricken. His head is down. But he says nothing.

Mark is still seated, looking up at Dom across the table. "Why did you tell the deceased about the backdoor?"

"He-would-have-expected-it. He would have known I would build it. We were partners then," says Dom recovering slightly towards the end. "When we built the company, Larry and I and Donna worked together. They knew what I could do."

"Did you tell Ms. Langhorne about the backdoor?" No answer from Dom. "Did the deceased tell Ms. Langhorne about the backdoor?"

Dom's head is down and rolling slightly from side to side. "Did DONNA tell YOU about the backdoor?" The explosion is accompanied by spittle, some of which remains on his lower lip.

“Why have you been protecting Donna?” asks Mark intensely. “No one is protecting you.”

“I’m ... I ... She...” Dom can’t find a sentence to go follow any of these words. “Did she... I... When...”

“Those are all good questions,” says Mark with a friendly smile. He gets up and walks around the table to Dom, pats him on the shoulder, then passes by him to lean on the window sill and look out across the sullen river running quickly uptown with the tide.

“Looks like they’re really starting to gentrify in DUMBO,” Mark comments, casually. “Wish I’d bought some property there a few years ago.”

Dom joins him at the window, looking out but unfocused. The men’s shoulders are about a foot apart but they are leaning slightly towards each other.

“Was it you or Larry told Donna about the backdoor?” asks Mark very gently.

“I-told-her.”

“Why?”

“We-were ... friends. We-work-together. Like I told you about Larry.”

“What were you three friends working on that needed a backdoor to come into your own offices?” Mark turns towards Dom when he doesn’t answer. Dom keeps staring out the window which is slightly misted by the dirty rain which has begun to fall.

“We-had-to-meet.”

“Why? Why in secret?”

No answer.

“Who were you keeping secrets from? Who were you afraid of?”

The questions are slow but persistent, like the rain, which is intensifying.

Dom stubbornly looks out towards Brooklyn, his head bobbing as if he were trying to find a clear spot through the streaked glass and wet air. “What-did-Donna-tell-you?” he asks finally.

“I can’t tell you that.”

“I-know-this-game. It’s-very-old. It’s-the-prisoner’s-dilemma. It-isn’t-fair.”

“It is what it is,” says Mark.

“I-think-I-know-your-character.”

“Excuse me?”

Dom takes a deep breath and his voice, when he speaks again, is regrouping. “I think I know your character. I’ve met you in games ... haven’t I?”

“I ask the questions,” says Mark. “Why did you have to meet in secret?”

“You told me you don’t play much. Is that true?”

“The question, Dom...”

“We were being threatened. antihack was attempting a hostile. For a while, it looked like they might win. Our own Board of Directors was turning against us. Our banker had betrayed us. Our people were getting frightened. Larry, and Donna and I believed in the company; we believed in hackoff; we knew it could be saved. And so we met.”

“You’re not telling me why you had to meet in secret. You’re the management team; you’re supposed to meet.

“We-did-not-want-people-to-be-nervous.”

“When you lie to me or tell me a half-truth, your voice changes. I take it the games you play online don’t have audio.”

“There can be audio but it’s the personae, the avatars, who speak, not the players.”

“What is the whole truth about why you had to use the backdoor and meet in secret?”

“We-didn’t-want-people-to-know-we-were-meeting.”

“We’ll come back to that,” says Mark. “Now an easy question; it’s about Voice over IP; I mean talking on the Internet...”

“I know what VoIP is,” says Dom.

“Good, I need your help. Can VoIP calls be traced?”

“In what way?” asks Dom. “Tracing in the traditional sense has more to do with POTS...”

“Pots?”

“POTS: Plain Old Telephone Service. When you do a POTS trace, you’re asking what phone number the call was made from. Because, if it’s a landline phone, that tells you the location of the caller. But, with a VoIP call, a trace that gives you the calling number doesn’t tell you anything about the location the call was made from because the number goes with the IP phone or VoIP adapter — like a cell phone number goes with the phone no matter where you call from.”

“Right,” says Mark. “Right. That’s my problem, see? I know what number a call was made from, but I don’t know WHERE it was made from. So, if it was a VoIP call, how would I know where the person was when the call was placed?”

“You need the IP address,” says Dom. “When the call is made, that IP phone is connected to the Internet somewhere so you need to know the IP address it was connected at. Then there’s lots of tools you can use to find out who the IP address belongs to — I mean what ISP. And the ISP probably can tell you where that IP address was assigned physically. Same way cops track down — try to track down — where a virus attack came from. You should know that stuff.”

“Yeah, well,” says Mark. “I’m not that kind of cop. My cases start with dead people, not computers with a sniffle. So I appreciate your telling me. How do I find out the IP address a particular VoIP call was made from, assuming I know the phone number?”

“Maybe you could ask the VoIP company,” says Dom helpfully. “I mean suppose the number belongs to Vonage — they’re the biggest — you can find out who the number belongs to. Then maybe you could get them to tell you what IP address the call you care about was made from. I’m not sure. Maybe they keep track of that; maybe they don’t.”

“Suppose people are using these IP phones to make calls from here at hackoff, could they hook them up here?”

“Yeah, sure. In fact, I fixed up the firewall so VoIP calls work fine here. A lot of our people have IP phones — they don’t like Verizon — and they want to get calls here when they’re here. Fine with us. They’re here long hours. So I fixed it up so they have no problem hooking up here and getting those calls through the firewall without endangering anything else.”

“So, can you tell what numbers might be getting calls or making calls from here at a specific time? Would other companies be able to do that?”

“We sort of could. Most other companies couldn’t. Either they don’t allow people to use their IP phones — firewall won’t let the call through — or they have no clue how to monitor. I can tell easily which IP phones or VoIP adapters are in use here, but it’s hard to know what the phone numbers are.”

“I don’t get it.”

“When it’s making a call, an IP phone doesn’t say to Vonage or whoever ‘Hey, I’m 212-555-6754.’ It says something like: ‘I’m MAC address 00-e0-f9-99-96-00.’ Already the Vonage server knows what IP address that MAC address is at because of the packet headers, and they know what phone number goes with that MAC address so they can set up the call and...”

“Whoa! This is good stuff, but I gotta understand. What’s this MAC address?”

”So,” says Dom, seeming very comfortable now, “since you can’t tell what device is gonna show up on what IP address, you’ve got to have some way to know which device is which on the network. So you make a network adapter for a computer or an IP phone, you build in a MAC address, you burn it into ROM — into memory.”

“So that should make it easy to catch hackers?” suggests Mark.

“It’s never easy to catch a good hacker. First of all, these MAC addresses usually stay in the local area network — VoIP is sort of an exception to that. And besides, who says you gotta tell the truth when someone asks what’s your MAC address?”

“Okay, I get that. Good thing I don’t have to catch hackers — too hard. But, like suppose I had an IP phone, how would I figure out what its MAC address is?”

“That one’s easy,” says Dom. “You turn it over. On the bottom, every one I’ve seen has a sticker with its MAC address.”

“So, are you saying you know the MAC addresses of any IP phones that are being used to make or get calls at hackoff? But you don’t know their phone numbers, right?”

“Right.”

“That’s cool,” says Mark. “Like if I was going to ask some company what VoIP phones were being used at a certain time, they could give me all the MAC addresses?”

“Like I said, most companies, no. But hackoff can, because we know what MAC addresses we have on our LAN and we know which are VoIP because only VoIP’s got a certain type of packet. I mean a computer might send some VoIP, too, if somebody’s using some kind of VoIP app like Skype but computers

send all kinds of packets. We got some device that's sending mainly VoIP, it's got to be an IP phone."

"Cool. Can I see that? Can you show me what IP phones are being used right now at hackoff?"

"Sure," says Dom. He goes to his computer, clicks, types in a password, enters the last hour as the time he wants to search, clicks 'Okay', while Mark looks over his shoulder. Soon a list of four MAC addresses and associated IP addresses are on the screen.

"Great," says Mark. "Now enter 10:00 PM on March 31 through 3:00 AM on April 1."

"What?"

"Do it!"

Dom slumps, but does as he's told. Two MAC addresses show up this time.

"Who are they?" asks Mark.

"You-tricked-me."

"Who are they?"

"One-is-Larry."

"Who is the other?"

"I don't know every MAC address in the world." Dom is clearly miserable.

"You know that one. Who is it?"

"Donna-Langhorne."

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A few minutes later Mark is at the door to Donna's office. It's open but she isn't visible until Mark sticks his head in the door and looks to the right. Her desk is against the same wall that the door is on. Her computer is on the desk and she is seated at the computer in profile to the door. Her desk is actually an "L" with the short leg to her right between Mark and her. She is typing and appears not to notice him, although she straightens her back as his head comes in the door.

"Knock, knock," says Mark.

"Come in," says Donna. "Have a seat." She points to the side chair in front of the short leg of her desk. As Mark sits down, she swivels around to face him. "What can I do for you, detective?"

"You could start by telling me why you lied to me," says Mark quietly.

"Excuse me?" Donna's voice is calm.

"You were in the office before during, and after the time when the deceased was shot."

"I told you where I was."

"You lied to me about where you were," says Mark. "It's clear from the record of where your IP phone was used that you were right here in the office during the time in question."

“What are you talking about? I don’t understand.” She is still calm but her breathing gets shallow and there is a flush on the side of her neck. She touches the red spot as if it were warm.

“You don’t understand the technology — that’s what you don’t understand. And maybe you don’t understand that lying to me in this case is called obstruction of justice and that is a crime. Maybe you also don’t understand that setting up false alibis is what guilty people do.”

“What are you talking about? What technology?” asks Donna. She pats at her hair as if it’s become disarranged. There is now a flush on both sides of her neck.

“Maybe you should ask Dom for a tutorial on VoIP,” says Mark. “You thought that the caller ID from your phone would make it look like you were home at the time in question. In fact, your phone’s MAC address puts you in the office.”

“What’s a MAC address? Maybe I left the phone in the office and someone else used it? I don’t understand. I didn’t do anything.” Donna’s breath comes in shallow pants.

Mark holds her eyes. “You can ask Dom about MAC addresses,” he says. “You can ask him how it’s so clear you were in the office. You can ask him how I know about the backdoor that made it possible for you to be in the deceased’s office without leaving a trace.”

“Why is Dom doing this?” asks Donna. “He must be trying to cover something up. I can’t imagine why he’d want to implicate me. He must be covering something up; he is a hacker, you know. They can be very devious.” She seems calmer now.

“Donna, I’m going to give you one chance to come clean with me. If you didn’t kill the deceased, it’s in your interest...”

“I didn’t kill Larry. He killed himself.” She is agitated again.

“How do you know that?”

“Because ... because I saw him do it.”

“Okay. Now you’re telling me some of the truth. That’s better. Let’s start over. Why don’t you tell me where you were on the night of March 31 and the early morning of April 1?”

“Are you arresting me? Should I get a lawyer?”

“I’m not arresting you at the moment. I can’t give you legal advice other than that you have a right to be represented by an attorney at any time. My interest is in knowing the truth about that night and about how the deceased died.”

“I feel flushed,” says Donna. The redness has spread. “I’m flushed everywhere.” She gestures vaguely over her body and watches Mark’s eyes. They don’t follow her hand down.

“Do you want to tell me where you were and why?” asks Mark. “Please remember that I already know you were in the office and that I’ve had a long conversation with Dom.”

“Okay. Okay. I was in the office. I had a lot of things to catch up on and I was also hoping I could talk some sense into Larry.”

“Why did you bring your your IP phone from home into the office? Why were you trying to establish an alibi?”

“I wasn’t ‘trying to establish an alibi’, at least not in the sense you think.”

“Explain, please.” Mark is still careful to look only at Donna’s face.

“My husband is very jealous,” Donna explains. “He is particularly jealous of Larry even though he doesn’t have any reason to be. So, if I’m going to be in the office late when he’s away...”

“When who’s away?”

“When my husband’s away. If I’m going to be in the office late, I bring my IP phone. That way if he calls me at home, I answer. If I call him, he gets the caller ID from home. He doesn’t know all this technical stuff. He’s a lawyer.”

“Go on,” says Mark.

“Go on what?”

“When did you come into the office? What contact did you have with the deceased? Why did he shoot himself?”

“I came back to the office around 10:00 PM. I stuck my head in and asked Larry if we could talk. But he said he had a visitor coming in and wouldn’t be able to talk until later — around midnight. Then, when I went to his office at midnight, he said he wasn’t feeling too well. Had to rush to the bathroom. Now I know that’s gotta be the mushrooms; read about that in the paper. It was probably close to one when we finally did manage to get together.”

“Where?”

“In his office.”

“Did he say who his visitor was?”

“Not then, but he told me later it was a contractor named Ahmed Qali.”

“Did you see Mr. Qali in the office?”

“No.”

“Okay. Now think carefully before you answer this next question. I really want you to tell me the truth.”

“I am telling you the truth,” says Donna. The flush has receded.

“Why did you use the backdoor to go into the deceased’s office?”

“There is no backdoor to his office. It only has one door.”

“You know what I mean.” Mark is grim now. “Surveillance doesn’t show you going into the office. But you say you did. The only way that could be true is if you used the backdoor I talked to Dom about to turn off surveillance. Why did you do that?”

“Dom told you? What else did he tell you?”

Mark says only: “Why did you turn off the surveillance?”

Donna hesitates, then says: “Habit.”

Mark says nothing.

“It started during the hostile takeover attempt,” she says breaking the silence. “Dom and Larry and I didn’t want people — the employees — to know how seriously we were taking it. They were scared enough as it was. So we started using the backdoor so that surveillance wouldn’t show a whole lot of meetings in the middle of the night.”

“Okay,” he says. “But it doesn’t make much sense, I have to tell you, and it doesn’t look very good that you turn off surveillance go into a room; the person in the room is shot; your fingerprints are on the gun...”

“I already told you,” she says, the pitch of her voice rising for the first time. “I already told you how my fingerprints got on the gun, if they’re on the gun. I told you.”

“You also already told me that you weren’t here that night and you were. You pretended to have an alibi and you didn’t. You pretended not to understand my question about the backdoor. So it’s hard for me to believe you. It’ll be hard for a district attorney to believe you. It’ll be hard for a jury to believe you. It’s not good to start out telling lies.”

“Are you ... am I under arrest?”

“I told you: not at the moment. Now why don’t you tell me what happened in Larry’s office. It would be good if you told me the truth.”

“We argued,” she says. “We argued about Dom. I said that Larry should apologize — that we need Dom. Larry was stubborn. He said Dom was a baby; that he’s all washed up as a programmer, that he never was a good manager, that it is time to let him go. I said: ‘We need Dom. He can be managed. He needs to be stroked sometimes, but he helped build the company and he can still help us.’”

“How did the subject of Mr. Qali come up? You said Larry told you that his visitor was Qali. How did that come up? What did he tell you about his visit?”

“Have you talked to Ahmed?”

“Doesn’t matter. Not if you’re planning to tell me the truth. Doesn’t matter what I heard from Qali or Dom or anybody else. Just tell me the truth about what happened in the deceased’s office.”

“Ahmed came up because Dom is always fighting with him. Dom doesn’t like him. He never approves the work that Ahmed’s Jenin group does, so Ahmed’s had to go to Larry repeatedly to get paid. Larry brought that up as one more example of Dom being immature. He — Larry, I mean — was right about that — right that Dom didn’t deal well with Ahmed. So we’re arguing about Dom and Larry tells me that Ahmed was in earlier because, again, Dom has refused payment and Larry’s got to get in the middle and straighten it out...”

“You don’t look like you’re telling the truth,” says Mark. “Not the whole truth.”

“I’m trying, but you keep interrupting me. What do you mean I don’t look like I’m telling the truth?” She sits up straighter, pats her hair, touches the flush on her neck.

“Go on.”

“I think Larry really resented having to deal with Ahmed all the time because of Dom’s attitude. He didn’t like to deal with Ahmed.”

“Why?”

“For one thing, I think Larry was a little afraid of him. He had — or was having — an affair with Ahmed’s girl friend, Rachel. That didn’t help.”

“Did Qali know about the affair?”

“I don’t know. Probably. Seemed like everybody did.”

Mark says nothing.

Donna resumes: “Look, there is really more to this. More to Larry’s fear.” She waits. Mark says nothing. “Don’t you want to hear?”

“Go ahead.”

“Larry wasn’t only afraid of Ahmed. He was actually probably more afraid of the people around him; other Palestinians; members of the Jenin Group. Larry said there were people in the group who didn’t like the cooperation between what they thought of as a Jewish company — certainly an American company — and Palestinians. There are lots of factions — I mean everybody knows that. And they shoot each other sometimes. Larry said that more Palestinians get killed by other Palestinians than by Israelis over there. I don’t know if that’s right, but that’s what Larry believed. And he was afraid somebody might shoot him. That’s what he told me.

“Larry doesn’t ... didn’t scare easily. He was a tough guy, ‘specially after he went to jail. But he was worried. Worried for himself; worried for Louise. So he asked me to get him some bullets for his gun.” Donna pauses.

“Go ahead.” Mark is impassive.

“And I did. I mean he couldn’t get them himself because he’s an ex-con, so I got them for him. He told me what kind and all and I went to a store in New Jersey and bought him twenty bullets. That’s what he said he wanted. He wanted them because he was afraid.”

“Do you have a receipt for the bullets?”

“No. I paid cash; threw the receipt away.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. Just didn’t seem to be something I wanted to create a record of. I felt sort of guilty buying bullets. I mean the whole thing was sort of scary, so I didn’t keep a receipt.”

“Before, when I asked you who might want to kill Larry you didn’t say anything about the people he was afraid would kill him. Why?” Mark looks angry.

“Because I know he shot himself,” says Donna. “I saw him do it. I told you that.” She pauses and then resumes when Mark doesn’t respond. “I mean I wouldn’t have been doing you any favor if I’d sent you off after these guys when I knew perfectly well they didn’t do it.”

“Go on and tell me about the rest of your discussion, about Larry killing himself. Before you start, remember how important it is for you to tell the truth. You were there; you lied about that; your fingerprints were on the murder weapon; you probably bought the bullet that killed him...”

”But I told you about that voluntarily,” Donna protests.

“And that was a good idea,” says Mark. “Go ahead, please.”

“Okay... Larry and I were arguing about Dom; I already told you that. I wanted Larry to apologize, get Dom to stay. He said he’s not gonna do that. So Larry and I disagreed ... not the end of the world ... I mean it shouldn’t be the end of the world ... and-and then...” She swallows spasmodically, then puts her head down on her arms and sobs.

“And then?”

Donna is still sobbing, head down, and doesn't answer.

“So are you telling me Larry shot himself because you didn't agree?”

“I don't think so,” says Donna, pulling herself upright but not drying the tears. “I ... I don't think so. I think it was an accident. But he was disturbed; I mean much more disturbed than he'd usually get when we argued; we argued a lot. I think he was disturbed by Ahmed's business. And he was feeling sick. He'd been in the bathroom being sick and he looked pale, the mushrooms I guess. So I just don't know.” She sobs again but doesn't put her head down.

“An accident?” asks Mark. “Guy puts his gun to his head and pulls the trigger and you call it ‘an accident?’”

“You have to realize ... I think I already told you ... anyone can tell you ... Larry puts that stupid gun to his head and pulls the trigger all the time. I mean, that's the USUAL thing for him to do when he has an argument with someone and he finally gets tired of arguing: He says he's the boss, then he puts the gun to his head and he says ‘I bet my life’ and he pulls the trigger. And it goes ‘click’. It always went ‘click’.” She stops, sobs, and doesn't say any more.

“So you're telling me,” says Mark, “that you didn't react when he put the gun to his head at the end of your ‘argument’ because that's what you would expect him to do?”

“That's right,” she says. “That's exactly right. I mean ask anyone. How could I know this time would be different? He always does that. That's how we know when to stop arguing.”

“But there isn't usually a bullet in the gun when he puts it to his head?”

“No. No, of course not.”

“So why would he do that with a bullet in the gun? Why would he put a loaded gun to his own head and pull the trigger? Did he play Russian roulette, had he ever done that?”

“What's Russian roulette? I mean I've heard of it but I don't know exactly what it is.”

“It's when someone puts a bullet in one chamber of a revolver, then spins the cylinder so maybe the bullet's under the hammer, maybe there's an empty chamber. So, when he pulls the trigger, maybe he gets shot, maybe it just goes ‘click’. Did the deceased ever do that?”

“Yes,” she says. “Yes, he sometimes spun something but I don't think there were ever any bullets in it. It always just went ‘click’. I don't think he had any bullets until he got afraid of the Palestinians. If he had any, wouldn't make sense to ask me to buy them, would it?”

“Did he spin the cylinder this time?”

“No,” she says. “No, he didn't.”

“Were you surprised that he didn't spin it?”

“No.”

Mark is silent.

Donna continues: “I wasn't surprised because that's different. I mean Larry was pretty predictable. If there was a long discussion, we didn't know

what to do, lot's of alternatives, Larry got tired of that and made a decision, then Larry says 'we'll pick this one' and he spins the thing, puts the gun to his head, and pulls the trigger. When just two of us are having an argument and Larry wants to say it's over, no more arguing, he puts the gun to his head without spinning the thing and he says, like I told you, he says 'I bet my life' and he pulls the trigger and he won't argue anymore."

"So why do you think there was a bullet in the gun this time? Why did he put the gun to his head with a bullet in it and pull the trigger?"

"I think... I mean I don't know but I think maybe he put the bullet in the gun because he was afraid of Ahmed and he knew he had a meeting with him. Then, like he forgot. And he played with the gun like he always did and he shot himself by accident. Maybe because he was upset. Or sick. Maybe the mushrooms, I don't know."

"You have a problem," says Mark.

"Anyone can tell you he always does that," says Donna.

"Your problem is that you lied. Wouldn't have been as much of a problem if you'd told us the truth, but you lied. And you tried to set up an alibi. You used the backdoor to get into his office. You bought the bullet. Your fingerprints are on the gun. Even if someone believes everything else you said, why would you set up an alibi and use the backdoor if you didn't know what was gonna happen? Doesn't make sense. Doesn't hold together."

"I'm telling you the truth ... I'm telling you the truth now."

"Why didn't you call 911 right after he shot himself? That's what woulda made sense."

"I don't know," says Donna. She is sobbing again and breathing heavily. "I don't know. I guess I panicked. I mean ... I mean it was horrible. Half his head blew away." She pauses.

Mark says nothing.

She continues: "I knew he was dead ... anyone would know. There was nothing anyone could do for him. I mean, if I thought there was a chance, if I thought there was something that could be done, he could be saved or anything like that, then I would've called 911 right away. I would've. But he was dead and it was so horrible. I didn't know what to do. I guess I panicked. I ran out of the room. I ran to the ladies room. I threw up... Then I went home. I don't know why, but I went home ... I changed my clothes ... I got myself together. I came back to the office. I guess I hoped by then someone else would've found him. That it would all be taken care of. I mean that he'd be taken away. But he wasn't. Nothing happened. Everything was just like when I left. So I had to do it. I called 911. I did. You know that. It was me that called."

"Was there blood on your clothes?" asks Mark.

"No, no blood."

"Why did you change? Why did you have to go home to change?"

"I didn't go home TO change," she says. "I went home AND I changed. I mean, that's different. I don't know why I went home. I told you that. I panicked. I went home. I get home and I take off my clothes." She looks at him.

He looks away and says nothing.

Donna continues: “I take off my clothes. I don’t know, it’s a girl thing. I take off my clothes. Then I take a shower. There was no blood. No. I looked ... I did ... I mean anyone would. But there was no blood, so I took off my clothes and took a shower. I washed all over. Like there was blood, you know, but there wasn’t. I washed all over and then I put on clean clothes. And I came back in to the office. That’s what happened.”

“Did you tell your husband what happened?”

“No. He was away. I told you he was away. So I didn’t tell him.”

“You didn’t call him? Didn’t tell him anything?”

“No.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. I mean we’re not that close anymore, really. I just didn’t.”

“You were worried — at least you said you were worried — that he’d be jealous if he knew you were in the office with the deceased. You were close enough to worry about his being jealous. But you didn’t call him to say you’d just seen the deceased shoot himself? Or even just to ask his advice? He is a lawyer.”

“Sometimes,” she says, “jealousy is all that’s left. Maybe I didn’t call him because I still didn’t want him to know I was in the office. I don’t know. I didn’t, though. I didn’t call.”

“Did you see anyone when you left the office?”

“No. I mean there were a few people in the street. I got a cab. I saw the cabbie.”

“Did you get a cab receipt?”

“No.”

“They always give you a receipt,” says Mark. “It’s the law. They always give you one of those little tiny receipts that print outta the meter. You didn’t get one of those?”

“I don’t know,” says Donna. “Maybe I did, maybe I didn’t. Maybe this cabbie doesn’t obey the law. Maybe I just balled it up and threw it away. I DON’T KNOW. I never keep those things anyway, and I just don’t remember.”

“Strange thing for an accountant not to keep receipts, isn’t it?” asks Mark. “Don’t you need ‘em for your records, for your expense account and stuff?”

“I don’t keep them,” says Donna. “I don’t have one. So what? What’s it matter? I already told you I was there. I told you what I saw. What I did. You think I made that up? I wasn’t really there? Is that what you think now?”

“I don’t think anything, yet. You told me a couple of different stories. I’m trying to figure out what’s the truth. What’s not. I’m thinking this whole thing doesn’t look very good with lying, with setting up an alibi...”

“Okay,” Donna interrupts. “Okay. So you don’t like me. Don’t say that all again. Don’t say all of that about the alibi, about my fingerprints on the gun, about the bullets. I told you about them, remember? I didn’t have to tell you about them, but I did. I told you about the Palestinians. I told you everything.”

“I don’t think so,” says Mark. “I don’t think you told me everything.”

“Look...” says Donna. Then she says nothing.

Mark waits but she still doesn't go on.

"Look, what?" he asks finally.

"Nothing."

"You were gonna tell me something. You were gonna tell me something, then you decided not to. Don't have to be a detective to know that." His tone is friendly.

Donna still says nothing.

"If you'd told me what you knew right away," says Mark, "you'd be in less trouble now. But you didn't. You lied about where you were; you tried to set up..."

"Okay, okay, don't say all that stuff again. I can prove it happened like I said it did. I can prove he shot himself."

"That would be a good thing." Mark's tone is sardonic. "Please go ahead."

"I have a video. I have a video of what happened in his office."

"You were video taping him shoot himself?"

"No, no, of course not. There was a camera above his door. It takes a video — not a great video, but you can see what's happening in most places in his office. It tries to look wherever sound is coming from. The camera sends stuff to this thing I have here that records it. I have the video of when I was in the office." She points to a small grey box on her credenza.

"So I can see and hear for myself what happened?"

"You can see it but you can't hear it. There used to be audio but it broke. So I just have video."

"Did the deceased know you were bugging his office?"

"No."

"Why did you do it?"

"Because I didn't trust him anymore. He was acting strangely. I had to protect the company. I wanted to know what he was up to."

"What was he up to?"

"I didn't find out anything. I didn't see anything that unusual. I didn't hear anything — when I had audio I mean, I didn't hear anything that unusual. But I was worried, so I watched."

"Were you blackmailing the deceased?"

"What do you mean?"

"I think you know what I mean," he says. "Did you watch him with girl friends in the office? Did you threaten to send tapes to his wife?"

"How can you say that?" she asks.

"That's what people do with sneaky cameras. And you didn't want to tell me about the camera. Even when you're in lots of trouble and you have the video to get you out, you didn't want to tell me about the camera. So now I wonder: What you were using the camera for? Why you didn't want to tell me about it?"

"I didn't do any of that stuff," she says. "You just don't like me, that's why you think that."

"Why didn't you tell me about the camera?" he repeats.

“It’s embarrassing,” she says. “I really didn’t want it to get out that I had this thing in my CEO’s office. And then, after he’s dead, it’s his reputation, too. I mean, I don’t want to explain that he’s getting irrational, that I don’t trust him. And how’s the whole thing sound for the company? I care about that, so I didn’t say anything.”

“How far back does the tape go?”

“It’s not a tape. I think it’s a hard drive or something. It’s in this box and my computer can get to it and that’s how I watch it. It just does six hours, something like that.”

“So you could see the meeting with Ahmed?”

“Right.”

“So you knew who he was meeting with? It’s not that he told you that.”

“He did tell me... Yeah, I did peek. I did look at the video. But Larry told me, just like I told you.”

“What else is on there?”

“Nothing, really. There’s Larry; he’s in his office. He does stuff. He gets up, he walks around. In the beginning a guy brings him some pizza. He puts mushrooms on it like he always does. Like I said, must be what made him sick.”

“Do you know anything about the mushrooms?”

“No.”

“Are you sure? You’re not going to tell me something different later? You’re not going to say you didn’t want to get embarrassed so there’s something you didn’t tell me about the mushrooms?”

“No, I swear.”

“Okay,” says Mark. “Show me the tape of your meeting with the deceased.”

Donna swivels back to face her computer. Mark comes around the “L” of the desk to stand behind her, looking over her right shoulder at the screen. She hits a few keys and clicks a few buttons. A grainy, jerky video shows up in a box about two inches square in a window on the lower left corner of her screen. Mark asks Donna to make it bigger but she says she can’t. He brushes against her chair and excuses himself as he moves to look over her left shoulder; he has to stoop close to her to see the image past her shoulder since it is at the bottom of her screen. Their arms touch, but Donna doesn’t move back or sideways to give Mark an unobstructed view.

In the little window, Larry is sitting alone at his desk. The camera is apparently mounted somewhere near the door and high with a fish-eye view of most of the office but it can’t see the wall it is on or the first few feet of the two adjoining walls. At the lower right of the window, there is a digital display of picture time and date. The video starts at 1807 03312003 and flickers forward.

“Is that the beginning?” asks Mark. “Is that when you turned the camera on?”

“It’s the beginning of the video because only the most recent six hours is kept,” says Donna. “I always left the camera on.”

“Why did you stop it at 2:07 AM the night of the murder?”

“MURDER? There was NO MURDER!” Donna’s chair back hits Mark in the stomach as she comes upright in her seat.

Mark straightens and steps back, but says nothing.

“I’m going to show you,” she says. “I’m going to show you there was no murder. It’s in the video. That’s what I’m showing you. How do you know that I stopped the camera? When I stopped the camera? What are you saying?”

“Obviously you stopped the recording at 2:07 AM if the recorder only has the last six hours,” says Mark. “My question is: Why did you stop it?”

Donna has to twist around and look up to talk to Mark. He doesn’t move back far enough to make this easy, and as she speaks, he continues to monitor the on-screen window where Larry still sits alone

“I stopped the camera,” she says finally, “because there was nothing left to record. Larry was dead. He wasn’t... I mean there was nothing left to record. Doesn’t that makes sense?”

“It would make more sense if you told me the whole truth about why you were recording,” says Mark.

“I am telling you; I did tell you. Why don’t you believe me? I have a video.” She twists back to look at the video.

“Why didn’t you erase it?”

“It was ... I mean, I don’t even know how to erase it. It’s just there and it gets written over when more is recorded. I didn’t even think of it.”

“You thought to stop it. You could have left it going. Six hours later, there would have been no trace of your having been in the deceased’s office.”

“I ... I didn’t think of all that. I just thought Larry’s dead and how he died and I turned it off and I went home. I mean ... like I said ... I was panicked.”

The tiny Larry on the screen gets up from his desk and walks towards the camera. He’s slightly bent over and has a quizzical, pained look on his face. He passes under the camera and out of sight. The picture is of an empty room.

Mark says: “And now you conveniently have this video that is gonna show me how innocent you are, taken in a room you first said you weren’t in at that time. Pretty convenient.”

Donna’s expression turns from frightened to angry as she twists to look up at Mark again. The flush moves from her neck to her cheeks; her mouth is slightly open and she is breathing through it. “That’s not right. You’re harassing me. You have no business...”

“We are going to leave this room,” says Mark. “Right now. Please stand up and leave the room in front of me ... well in front of me.”

“Are you arresting me?”

“You haven’t left me any choice. I would’ve stayed and watched the video and seen if you’re telling the truth. But I’m not setting myself up for a harassment charge; we’re outta here. I’ll watch the video after I arrest you on suspicion of murder.”

“Wait,” says Donna. “Wait. If you just watch the video, you’ll see I’m innocent.” Now she is cajoling. “Arresting me isn’t going to do either of us any good. I mean...”

“Let’s go, please,” says Mark. He moves to the office door, opens it, and steps half way into the hall.

“Why don’t you watch the video by yourself if you’re afraid to be with me?” Donna suggests. “I mean I’ll go take a walk. I can use it. I’ll come back in a while. that’s what I’ll do. And then you’ll have seen the video. You’ll know that I ... that Larry shot himself. That I didn’t do anything. And then...”

“Here’s what we’re gonna do,” says Mark. “We’re going to go out of this office to reception. I’m going to write you a receipt for this box with the video in it; all nice and in public. We’re going to go back with a witness and take this box outta here. And I’m gonna put some nice yellow police tape across your door...”

“That’s awful,” says Donna. “You’re arresting me.”

“You do exactly what I say and, if the video shows what you say it shows, then I don’t have to arrest you right now,” says Mark. “I’m not promising you don’t get arrested later. I’m not promising anything at all. But I’m telling you what you gotta do if you don’t want to get arrested right now.”

“How am I supposed to explain the tape on my door?” Donna is slightly teary. “How do I explain that?”

“If I were you, I wouldn’t explain anything. Just find somewhere else to work while we get your office searched and see what other toys you got besides the recorder. And while we get the software for the recorder off of your PC.”

“Could you search some other offices, too?” asks Donna. “Do me a favor and search some other offices?”

“Can you give me a reason to search any other offices?”

“Well,” says Donna, “I mean if you search the other offices then it won’t look like—”

“No. That doesn’t work. That’s why you want me to search the other offices; it’s not why I’d want to search the other offices. You tell me something helpful I might find, I’ll look anywhere. You think I should look in Dom’s office for something?” Mark is still standing in the hall just outside her door. There are gaps in their conversation as people walk by.

“No,” she says. “No. Why Dom’s office?”

“Let’s go,” says Mark. Reluctantly Donna follows Mark out to reception where he laboriously hand-writes a receipt which Donna has the receptionist copy. The receptionist becomes their chaperone and walks back with them to retrieve the video recorder which Mark unplugs from a USB port on Donna’s computer and from an Ethernet port in the wall. He has to crawl under the desk for this but smiles slightly as he does.

“Now,” says Donna as Mark straightens up. “Now what I’d like you to do is seal this room off. We can’t be too careful after what happened to Larry. Please be sure to conduct a very thorough search. I wouldn’t ask this if I didn’t think it was important.”

Mark looks surprised, then recovers. “Right, Ms. Langhorne,” he says. “Please be sure not to leave New York City until I have given you clearance.” He leaves with the recorder.

“I asked to have the office searched,” Donna explains to the receptionist. “After what happened to Larry, I wanted it searched. They’re so afraid for my safety that they don’t want me to leave the City.”

“Right, Donna,” says the receptionist. “I thought Larry shot himself. Then why...”

“Of course he did,” says Donna. “Of course. But we don’t know why, and you can never be too careful.”

Before the afternoon is over, the receptionist, her girlfriend, her boyfriend, her mother, her brother, and her aunt all sell the hackoff.com stock they got as friends and family at the IPO and have held ever since. They didn’t sell when they could have had a huge gain but waited, as many did, for further gains. They didn’t sell during the long decline because it only made sense it would reverse. But, after the receptionist calls them, they each call the broker who holds the stock and accept the loss of about \$14.50 a share.

The broker tells his assistant that he isn’t completely surprised that a whole related group should sell at once; he’s seen rumors spread before and he knows about the CEO’s death. He is surprised, he says, that one of them mentions the CEO’s “murder” since everyone knows he shot himself.

#

Like many Wall Street firms, Barcourt fled the downtown area after 9/11. The executive offices once housed in the World Financial Center are now located in a twenty-story building on 58th Street. Detective Mark Cohen and Rachel Roth are meeting near there at a fern bar she suggested.

It was Mark’s idea to conduct a very “informal interview”. Even though Rachel has, as far as he knows, no good alibi for the time of Larry’s death, the video clearly showing him pulling the trigger himself in front of a horrified Donna seems to make alibis unnecessary. Except for the mushrooms, of course, Mark told Captain DeNapoli. And except for the fact that everyone is lying to him about something. He said he was sure about that. He didn’t tell his supervisor about the call he recently received from Louise Lazard about a visit by Rachel Roth. It is this visit he is meeting with Rachel to discuss.

The window of the bar is festooned with hanging ferns; there are a few dead fern leaves on the table when Mark and Rachel sit down. Mark brushes them into a pile against the window. He orders a Coke; she orders a chardonnay recommended by the waiter. Mark is wearing a blue blazer and a light blue shirt with the collar open; most other men in the bar have ties and many are wearing suits. Even Rachel is in a pin-striped suit with a knee-length skirt and a cream-colored blouse with a dense row of pearl-like buttons.

They make small talk for only a few minutes before Mark says: “Ms. Lazard told me about your visit.”

“She said she was going to. I would have preferred that she keep it to herself, frankly, but she didn’t see it that way. Still, I’m glad we spoke. I didn’t want her to think badly of me. I wanted her to have a good memory of Larry. It

was the right thing to do.” She draws herself up and looks at Mark as if for affirmation.

“Yes,” says Mark after a pause. “Yes, it was the right thing to do.” He waits.

“I didn’t want her to think Larry and I really had an affair. It was important she know it was a charade. I took a risk that she wouldn’t see me, wouldn’t believe me; but I think she was glad I came — once she agreed to let me talk to her at all.” She smiles and stops.

“So,” Mark says finally, “as I said, Ms. Lazard told me about your conversation. It would be helpful, though, if you could tell me what you told her. It’s better to hear things directly, I’ve found. Is that okay? Do you mind going over this again?”

“What happens to what I tell you?” asks Rachel. “Louise told me you have a video that actually shows ... that shows that Larry ... that it was definitely suicide. She was sure it was murder, she said, and now even she’s almost convinced it wasn’t. So I guess I’m surprised there’s still a murder investigation and that you even want to talk to me. So I think it’s fair to ask what you plan to do with what I tell you.”

“Probably it just goes into a report,” says Mark. “That is assuming you’re going to tell me the same thing I heard from Ms. Lazard. You wouldn’t believe how many reports there are even when an investigation is closed without an arrest. And the file is full of people saying — excuse me for saying this, but it’s a fact — the file is full of talk about the affair you and the deceased were supposed to be having. Naturally, that’s one of those things that provides a possible motive. You know we were very eager to talk to Ahmed. Even Ms. Lazard was regarded as having a motive. All very traditional really. And she did have a motive, since she believed there was an affair. But, since the video, then it’s mainly a chance of getting everything wrapped up as tidily as possible. Also, what you told Ms. Lazard may provide a motive for the suicide. The way we cops are, you know, we like to have a motive even if there isn’t a murder. So maybe what you tell me helps us write some nice, neat final reports.”

“What about the mushrooms?” Rachel asks. “Don’t you still have to investigate them? I read about them in the *Post*.”

“I wouldn’t believe everything I read in the *Post*. Most people figure he just picked the wrong mushrooms. That’s easy to do, apparently.”

“Okay,” says Rachel. “Okay, I’ll help clean up your reports. But one question, one thing I need to ... want to know is how confidential are all these reports? I have nothing to hide. I’d be happy to have people know, actually, that Larry and I weren’t having this mad affair like everybody thought. But there’s the stuff about Ahmed ... about him and me. If I talk to you, am I gonna... going to ... read all about this in the *Post*?”

Mark assures her that his reports are confidential. He tells her, though, that if there were a trial, maybe even if there were a lawsuit, then what she told him could come out. Also, she’d probably be called as a witness if that happened but, given the rumors, that would probably happen anyway. Rachel

does not appear completely reassured but agrees to tell the story to Mark the way she told it to Louise.

The story starts with Larry agreeing to hire the Jenin Group Ahmed represents to do some programming work for hackoff. They do the work and almost everybody is very happy. They do some more work — something a little harder this time — and almost everybody is happy again. The almost part is Dom. According to both Larry and Ahmed, Dom doesn't like using the Jenin Group; he doesn't like outsourcing at all and he seems to have taken a particular dislike to Ahmed, perhaps because he's an Arab. Every time Ahmed wants to get paid, he's got to appeal to Larry directly because Dom won't okay the payments.

Then they decide to use the Jenin Group for something much bigger than they've done before. This involves giving the group access to some of the source code — Rachel's not quite clear what that means, but knows it's important. While they're working on this project, a problem comes up. As she understands it, Dom called the Jenin Group directly and demanded the source code back and access to their computers. He told them they never should have had it, even though Larry had given it to them. He was very insulting to the people he talked to. It would have been better if he'd just talked to Ahmed, but that's not what happened. He called directly.

One of the people that Dom insulted was a young Palestinian, most of whose relatives had been killed by the Israelis. This guy is something of a hothead under the best of circumstances and these aren't the best of circumstances. Before anyone can calm him down, the guy disappears with a copy of the precious source code.

That's only the beginning. Things go downhill from there. Yasir — that's the name the hothead has taken — disappears. People figure good riddance because he's hard to work with, but he's also the kind of angry young man they were trying to provide alternatives for and he is a very smart programmer. But soon there's an email from him at an untraceable address. He has a copy of the source code, he says. Unless he is immediately given ten million dollars, which he will use to advance the *Intifada*, he will use the source code to enable him to mount an attack of some kind on hackoff customers. He will, he says, net much more than ten million dollars from that before he is through.

And there are some threats. If any authorities — particularly the Israelis — are alerted, or if any attempt is made to update the software at hackoff customer sites to protect against an attack, he will both launch a devastating blitz on the sites and he will kill Larry Lazard. No one is sure whether he is actually in the US but he does give two frightening demonstrations. He tells his contacts to tell Larry where he can find evidence on customer computers that this guy is able to get inside and he emails a photo of an object which has been stolen from inside Larry's office.

It is Ahmed who has to tell Larry all this, and he obviously feels terrible about it, although some of it is Dom's fault for insulting Yasir to begin with. Normally, Ahmed would not involve Rachel in his business — he is very traditional that way — but she can tell how upset he is, particularly since he

doesn't usually show any emotion at all. She insists that he tell her what is going on and, to her surprise, he does — even enlists her help in talking to Larry because he's afraid Larry will think that he's part of a conspiracy to extort money from hackoff.

The three of them talk. Larry will not consider the possibility of paying the ten million and Ahmed agrees with him, although Rachel is not so sure. The men are sure that this will just lead to further demands. Larry says he doesn't take the threat to kill him seriously. Figures if the guy was into killing he would have already killed Dom but he didn't. But he takes it seriously enough to be worried for Louise. Finally, Larry decides that he can single-handedly write some code that will somehow defeat this guy before he can detect that the sites have been updated. Rachel doesn't understand the technology but apparently, once an update is distributed and applied, it won't matter that this guy still has a copy of the old source code.

The plan is that Larry will do this work; he reminds them that he was once a good hacker — wrote the "Gotcha" attack as everyone knows. Meanwhile they will pretend to negotiate with Yasir as long as they can keep him going. Try to bring down the price, even though Larry says there's no price he'll pay. Try to find a way that Yasir can assure them that he won't just come back for more once he's been paid. Stuff like that.

But there's a problem. Larry can't work on this during the day because he's got to be a CEO and also because he doesn't want Dom to find out what's going on. He is absolutely adamant that Dom not be involved in fixing the problem — that Dom not even be told that there IS a problem, given how he felt to begin with about the Jenin Group having the source code. And, because of the way they protect the source code, Larry can't work on it out of the office. Also, it's very sweet really, even though he says he's not worried about getting killed himself, he doesn't want to expose Louise to any danger. And he doesn't want to tell her what's going on any more than he wants to tell Dom — less maybe.

"You never got to know Larry," says Rachel, "but once he made up his mind, it just didn't change."

So Rachel came up with the idea of the fake affair. It gave Larry a reason to stay late at the office and away from Louise. Ahmed hated it, of course. But he also felt so bad about the extortion and the threats and everything that he let them go ahead with it. The idea amused Larry, although he felt bad for Louise. But he knew he was protecting her, too; and he was sure he could make it up to her later. He's pretty sure Yasir isn't really going to try to kill anyone; that's just a threat, and not one it does him any good to carry out even if he can. Once the threat is over and Yasir doesn't kill him, then Larry figures he'll be able to tell Louise.

"Of course," says Rachel, "that's part of why I had to tell Louise. I knew Larry meant to, and it would be too cruel just to leave it the way that it was. Especially since there was no longer any threat."

A couple of weeks ago — it seems like a million years — Ahmed got word that Yasir was found dead in a mosque in Jenin. Not at all clear who killed

him, but very clear that he is dead. This sounds like good news but Ahmed doesn't want to tell Larry until he is sure that Yasir doesn't have any accomplices who might plan on carrying on the attack. Apparently the guy's a known loner, so there's hope. Also there had been absolutely no leaks about where he's hiding, which also might mean he's working alone. No new threats come. There are no answers to the negotiation emails. Soon the email addresses that Yasir has given start to bounce mail. It looks like there is nobody following up. They even put word out on the street in Jenin that former friends of Yasir could be richly rewarded. But not a peep.

On March 31 Ahmed gets a message through his uncle that means to him it's time to talk to Larry. He is eager to do this himself after all everybody's been through. He also wants to get paid for the project the rest of the Jenin Group has now finished, but the main reason for the visit is to tell Larry that the threat is over, they can all go back to normal life.

"How did Ahmed say Larry reacted?" asks Mark.

"He didn't say," says Rachel. "He hasn't said. In fact, he isn't talking to me."

"Why's that?" asks Mark.

"Look," says Rachel. "I told you a lot of stuff that's very personal, very hard to tell, because you said it would help with your report. Fine, I did that. And I told Louise. I'm glad I did that, I think. But now I don't see any reason why I should go into my personal life with Ahmed. I don't. That's not going to help your report. Can't you tell from the video how the meeting went? Louise says the meeting is on the video, that it goes back six hours or something before Larry ... before he died."

"I'm going to tell you something about the video," says Mark. "I'm going to tell you because I believe you really want to help and wouldn't deliberately put Louise or anyone else in danger. I'm going to tell you, but then I'm going to expect your cooperation."

"Or what?" Rachel looks Mark in the eye.

"I think you'll want to cooperate," says Mark. "So, here's the scoop on the video. First of all, it's a video, just that, no audio for some reason. So we don't know exactly what Ahmed said to the deceased or the deceased said to Ahmed. We do see them meeting. We see Ahmed come into the office and we see the deceased is surprised to see him, surprised that he can get in without setting off the alarm. But he doesn't look like he's afraid of him; that's good. It even looks like Ahmed gave him a present.

"They both sit down. They don't smile; they don't shake hands. Ahmed has his head down for a while, we can only see the back of his head in the video by the way, not his face. But we can see the deceased's face. He is mainly listening. He does not look like he's getting good news. He only talks a little, like he's asking questions. We think Ahmed is talking most of the time but, like I said, we can't see his mouth. We can sometimes see his hands are moving in front of him. His head is bobbing; so we're pretty sure he did most of the talking. And he did it slumped over. Again not like good news. But we don't know what he said.

“Then Larry gets up. We see that in the video. He gets up and he’s angry. He’s yelling, but we don’t know what except at least one ‘fuck you’. Ahmed gets up, turns around, and leaves the room. We see his face. It has no expression.”

“That doesn’t mean anything,” Rachel says. “He NEVER has an expression.”

“Ms. Roth,” says Mark. “I believe you don’t know what happened at that meeting. I believe you thought you were telling me the truth when you said Ahmed went downtown to give the deceased good news. But that’s not what it looked like in the video. I haven’t told that to Ms. Lazard yet, but I’ve got a big decision to make — and you can help — about whether she needs police protection. I’m also going to have to talk to Ahmed Qali again. There’s a lot he didn’t tell me. I’m hoping for everybody’s sake that he’ll be more forthcoming now. But it’d be a big help if you tell me how you can live with someone and not be talking to him.”

“I have to think,” says Rachel. “I’m not going to be rushed.” She is quiet for over a minute.

Mark waits.

“Okay,” says Rachel at last. “I’m disappointed that Ahmed didn’t tell me the truth, very disappointed. In fact, I feel used. I don’t know what he told you when you interviewed him. I take it he didn’t say anything about the problem with Yasir?” She waits, but Mark doesn’t answer the implied question.

“Anyway, I’ve told you about that. And I’ll tell you about our relationship. I’m not sure what he told you about that either but, if I had to guess, I’d say not much.

“We have been lovers for years. That’s no secret; and we’ve been living together quite a while. Stop me if this is too much or too little detail, please.” She is expressionless, as is Mark. “Like every relationship, ours had its ups and downs. My being Jewish and him being Muslim made things interesting in both a good and a bad sense. I’m ethnically Jewish, anyway — neither of us is very religious. It kept us both away from our parents, but that was probably a good thing. The cultural differences were tougher. I’m naturally expressive, demonstrative; he’s ... well, you’ve met him; you know ... he’s a cold fish. That was hard on me; I’m sure my sloppy emotions were hard on him. We’re both ambitious; we both work hard; we both understand people who are ambitious and work hard so that was a good thing.

“Despite the chauvinism built into him by his upbringing, I always felt that he gave my career and my accomplishments the same respect he would have had I been a man. I could’ve used more affection, but I certainly got respect. And I knew that he really did care for me. I knew that living with me put a huge strain on family relationships that were very important to him, but that he had chosen me. So, even if he couldn’t say it in so many words, I was pretty sure he loved me.

“We always kept our business lives very separate from our personal life together. Obviously, he couldn’t take me to dinner with his clients. I guess I could’ve involved him more in my business life but I didn’t. Almost the only exception was our relationship with the Lazards. Frankly, I set that up because

I hoped that, if Ahmed had some clients who weren't Arabs, we could have a more normal life. Larry ended up being a customer of both my bank and Ahmed's Jenin Group; that's just what I hoped would happen. And Ahmed and I socialized with Larry and Louise every once in a while.

"So, as I told you, when I heard about this problem with Yasir, I was crushed. This was more than just a client problem for both of us, it hit at one of the few ways that we could have a 'normal' life together — I realize I'm making a Western value judgment when I say 'normal' but there you are. It was an important part of our relationship. And I felt really bad for Larry. First he almost lost the company to antihack — and I wasn't able to be any help to him in that as his banker. In fact, I think he sort of blamed me for what a bad position hackoff was in as a target of a hostile. But he got through that thing with antihack because they had the bad luck to get hacked themselves, and he thinks he's in the clear, and then there's this thing with Yasir not only threatening the business, but saying he's going to kill Larry. I felt badly about that. Especially because if it weren't for Ahmed and me, Larry wouldn't have this problem. And then I felt bad for Ahmed because if it weren't for me he wouldn't have this problem. Us Jewish girls are good at guilt.

"So, like I told you, I got the idea to help Larry buy time to protect the company by pretending that he and I were having an affair. I just meant to help and it did give him cover. I knew Ahmed wouldn't like the idea but we had to do something. But what happened is that Ahmed started treating me like I really was having an affair with Larry. He withdrew even more into himself. He moved into a separate bedroom and said that we should split at the end of our lease. I kept hoping he'd get over it, but it just got worse and worse.

"I thought that when he got the good news about Yasir being dead... I guess that's not a very nice way to put it, but it did certainly seem like good news at the time... I thought after that we could get our relationship back together. He did tell me he was going downtown to tell Larry about Yasir's death. That was more talking than we'd done in weeks. But, when he comes back from seeing Larry, it was back to the silent treatment. I was awake when he came home... I don't know why I'm giving you all this detail but might as well get it out. When he came home, I hoped he'd knock on my door, talk to me — but nothing. I called to him through the door, but no answer. It's even possible he didn't hear me. I didn't want to call out. I wanted him to come back to me."

She wipes away precisely one tear.

"He sent me an email yesterday," she said. "He says he's leaving the apartment, but that he'll continue to pay his share for the duration of the lease. No reason. No emotion, of course. And, it's ... it's hard. And it's very hard that Larry is dead. I'm lucky to have a career, I guess." She draws herself up, pats her hair, which isn't out of place. "There isn't any point in feeling sorry for myself. There, have I told you what you need to know?"

"Yes," says Mark. "I think you have. You cleared up why the two of you aren't talking. Of course, I have no way of knowing what you're not telling me, if anything. I may have to speak to you again after I talk with Ahmed."

“Well, tell me what he says,” she says. “He certainly isn’t going to tell me.”

Mark doesn’t tell her what Louise told him.

“The funny thing is, Mark,” Louise said, “she did fuck Larry. I believe her that the affair was a fake — even if she didn’t want it to be a fake. But I can always tell a woman who’s fucked Larry.”

As Mark leaves the restaurant, his mobile phone beeps that it has a text message:

```
Message from:  
917 555 3098  
Donnas office IPvid shows  
Dom putting shrooms larrys  
Office. Confirm no audio and  
nothing pre 1615
```

#

Mark texts back instructions to get a warrant for Dom’s arrest on charges of attempted murder. He also orders that Ahmed be brought in for further questioning. When he gets back to his office, he congratulates the tech who brings him the video.

“How did you get back past the start time?” asks Mark. “That’s great.”

“Well,” says the pleased tech. “Thanks. I looked at the device. Turns out it partitions its memory in two hour chunks. So every two hours it flips over and is ready to use another buffer if you know what I mean...”

“I don’t, but go ahead.”

“So that means that current buffer always contains some older data that is inaccessible through normal software but hasn’t yet been physically overwritten. Once I knew that, I just hacked something together to read the buffer and found an extra hour-and-a-half. By luck, it starts with Dom Montain in the deceased’s office.”

“Fantastic,” says Mark and settles in to watch the video.

He sees Dom already in the room. He stands indecisively for a few minutes, then paces around the room, looks out the window, and finally walks to the shelf on which sits a clock with the wrong time, some empty file folders, and Larry’s jar of mushrooms. He watches Dom take a baggie from his pocket, and then, back to the camera, do something which cannot be seen. He then sees Mark shake Larry’s bottle of mushrooms thoroughly and put it back. Part of the baggie protrudes from his pocket. He faces the camera as he leaves the room.

Mark’s computer chimes that he has mail.

#

From: Cpl. Harry FitzGerald

Sent: Friday, April 4, 2003 7:55 PM
To: Det. Marcus Cohen
Subject: Attempted Arrest of Dom Montain

Attempted apprehension of suspect DM at home address, office and West tenth squared tavern. Suspect not found at any of these locations. Are continuing watch. Advise.

From: ultramole@znowherez.com
Sent: Friday, April 4, 2003 7:55 PM
To: mark cohen
Subject: temporary unavoidable absence

mark,

it is necessary for me to avoid arrest for awhile. i do not intend to hide forever; I think it is my karma to be arrested and im not trying to defeat it but not ready to play that game yet. there is something I must do first.

i have been looking at video which is the same as what donna gave to you. for a while I couldn't figure out where that came from because I monitor devices on our network and would have noticed a strange device. but once I knew what to look 4 I found it. must have been installed by a master hacker because it sends with the ip address of a bunch of different computers in the network so it always looks like them sending. it always sends to donnas computer but sends broken packets that the computer ignores and whatever the recorder is picks up. i can retrieve it from my log records.

i don't expect you to stop looking for me; you have your role to play and i have mine. i don't think though that you will find me until im ready to be found.

if you are willing to cooperate to the extent your role allows, email me back. i have more to tell you if there is some way for it not to be used against me. there is good reason why I might have wanted to put larry out of commission for a while - note that i am not saying that i did - but I DID NOT try to kill him. I do not kill.

you can email me by replying to this email. you will get back a message that your email bounced but it will get to me.

BTW, i know who you are. you are "columbo" and you and I have played against each other in some big games. I knew I recognized the way you ask questions but you threw me off because you played dumb which should have been the tip off.

From: Det. Marcus Cohen
Sent: Friday, April 4, 2003 8:02 PM
To: ultramole@znowherez.com
Subject: RE: temporary unavoidable absence

Dom:

Good to hear from you. It would be even better to see you - better for you, too, I think.

That being said, I do want to work with you, particularly if I have your word that you will surrender at the appropriate time. However, it is very difficult for me to attempt to get any kind of immunity for you while you are a fugitive. Moreover, you haven't given me any idea what kind of thing you can tell me that you want immunity for.

I do remember ultramole; should've guess that was you, especially with your fondness for backdoors. It must have been hard for you to take a backseat to the author of Gotcha seeing that kind of hack is very much your MO. Or did you learn hacking from the deceased?

From: Mail Delivery System [MAILER-DAEMON@nypd.gov]
Sent: Friday, April 4, 2003 8:02 PM
To: Det. Marcus Cohen
Subject: Undelivered Mail Returned to Sender

This is the Postfix program at host mail.nypd.gov.

I'm sorry to have to inform you that the message returned below could not be delivered to one or more destinations.

For further assistance, please send mail to <postmaster>

If you do so, please include this problem report. You can delete your own text from the message returned below.

The Postfix program

<ultramole@znowherez.com>: Name service error for
name=znowherez.com type=A:
Host not found

From: ultramole@znowherez.com
Sent: Friday, April 4, 2003 11:59 PM
To: mark cohen
Subject: the audio will blow your socks off

you wanted me to tell you more about what kind of information i have. Okay. im going to do better and give you the info and put you under obligation to help me

i have posted an audio which I recorded unknown to the people you will hear. it is at [hackoff.com/~\[your mother's maiden name\]/~\[your father's middle name\]](http://hackoff.com/~[your mother's maiden name]/~[your father's middle name]). you will need a password to get into it which i will text message you with for better security.

the audio will tell you about an attack that has been planned on hackoff customers that will happen soon if steps are not taken and which can be successful. larry was part of planning that attack and i was always against it and have tried to stop it. i must remain free until i have ended this threat.

i did not learn anything about hacking from the author of gotcha. that would have been impossible.

the fact that you were given the video of me and told about the backdoor has released me from certain loyalties which i would have been bound by otherwise so it would be good if we could find a way to work together.

###

After getting an instant message from Dom that the password for the file is Mark's mother's social security number, Mark begins to listen to the audio file. One voice is Ahmed. It is soon clear that the other is Larry Lazard.

#

Larry: I have a much bigger job for the Jenin Group than we've ever given you before.

Ahmed: I am pleased that we have earned your confidence, Larry.

Larry: Yeah, well, I still do have a confidence problem actually.

Ahmed: Have we not performed our work satisfactorily? Have we not delivered on the schedule we have promised? I know there has been some unpleasantness with Mr. Dom Montain but...

Larry: Yeah, all of the above, or we wouldn't be giving you anything else. Look, here's the problem. To do this job you're gonna need a copy of some of our source code. That is a big risk for us. We never let the source code out.

Ahmed: Mr. Montain will not like this...

Larry: If MISTER Montain would've done this job himself like I asked him, then I would not be turning to you. I would not need the Jenin Group for this if he would do his fucking job. But he won't so I'm turning to you. It is very, very fucking important that Dom not find out you're doing this work or get any idea at all that you have the source code.

Ahmed: I understand, and I appreciate your confidence.

Larry: Yeah, well appreciation is one thing. I need your personal word that our source code will be safe. That it will be seen only by those with a need to know and only to do this particular job.

Ahmed: You have my word.

Larry: What I need the Jenin Group to do is to look at this code and figure out how to attack a very few sites that I will give you a list of. These sites are hackoff customers.

Ahmed: Is this a test?

Larry: Yeah, I like that. A test. You could call it that. It is time that customers understand that it's not safe to use only our software protection; they need our monitored service as well to protect them. The problem is that our software's been too fuckin' good or hackers are too fuckin' incompetent. Nobody has gotten in trouble because they don't use the monitored service. Of course, we don't want anything really bad to happen to these customers, but I'll give you messages to leave inside their security that will indicate to them that they are vulnerable.

There will be a little publicity about this after hackoff has come up with a fix. There will be no real harm to the customers, of course. But they will see that they are living on borrowed time if they rely on software protection alone. They really need our managed service.

This is really in the customers' own interest. Someday some real hacker is going to break in and do real harm if they don't wake up. This will do them no real harm but

it will show them how important it is to use our monitored service.

Can you do this job?

Ahmed: Yes, I believe we can. We cannot give you a price, however, until we have looked at the source code and ascertained the difficulty. How will we get the source code; I assume it will not be from Mr. Montain?

Larry: You assume right, buddy. I have the code you need here on this DVD. I am assuming you will guard it with your life.

Ahmed: You have my word, my friend.

#

Mark listens to the tape a second time. Then his phone rings.

“Mark Cohen?”

“Yes, this is. Who’s calling please?”

“Mark, this is Rachel, Rachel Roth. I just got home and Ahmed’s gone. Your police were here looking for him, waiting for him, but he’s gone. He left me a note.”

“What does it say?”

“I can’t, Mark. I can’t tell you on the phone. I misjudged him. Oh, shit, I did.”

“What has he done, Rachel? I’m sorry you’re disappointed but...”

“No, Mark, you don’t understand. You don’t understand at all. He wants me to show you the note. He says I’m to bring it to you myself.”

“Are the cops still there?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, let me speak to the one with the most stripes on his sleeve. I’m gonna ask them to bring you down here.”

After talking to the sergeant, Mark orders an airport and ticket watch for Ahmed Qali and a trace on recent tickets in his name. The trace will come up dry.

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