

**Invasion of Privacy
and
Other Short Stories**
by
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Invasion of Privacy

If you're the person who murdered my wife and think you've gotten away with it, think again. I'm looking for you, and I'll eventually find you.

1. Losing Diane

"This is my last job, I'm just waiting for the computer to reboot and then I'll run a quick scan," I say to my wife, Diane, while working in a client's home. "I should be back in less than an hour. Have you been very busy?"

"There were several customers earlier," Diane says, "but it's been quiet for a while now. I'm thinking about locking up and calling it a day, but I'll wait until you get back. What do you think about going out to dinner tonight? I've been hearing about a new restaurant—I've got to go, someone just came in. See you soon, love you, bye."

Arriving at the store about an hour later, I sit in the parking lot a moment. I still get a thrill when I look at the small business we've created. It might not look like much, but I remember it without the new windows added to the front. There's a customer walking out, carrying a laptop. Trying to be friendly, I say, "Hi, how's it going?" He doesn't respond and quickly gets in his car and leaves but not before I get a good look at him. He's about my size, just under six feet, with long brown hair. There's nothing unusual about him except he has a spider tattoo on his face, just under his right eye.

"Diane, I'm back," I say while walking in the door. I'm surprised she isn't at the front counter since a customer has just left. She's probably in the backroom. I notice the X-770 laptop is gone. *Spiderman made a good choice*, I think while walking past the display of new computers. There's a pile of papers lying on the floor, as if they'd fallen from the counter. It isn't like Diane to let something like that go; I'm always teasing her about her compulsive neatness.

I'm starting to get a bad feeling; something doesn't feel right. "Diane, where are you?" I hear a noise coming from behind the counter and rush over to look. Diane's lying there on the floor, bleeding.

"Diane," I scream, "What happened?"

There's blood everywhere ... so much blood. I grab her and press my hand against the wound on her neck to try and stop the bleeding. The warmth of the blood and the sticky wetness of it, surprises me.

"You're going to be fine," I say, trying not to panic, "It's OK, I'm here, don't worry."

Her eyes are closed, but they flutter open briefly, looking at me. The vacant look in her usually bright blue eyes frightens me. She's trying to tell me something.

"Don't try to talk," I say while dialing 911.

"911, what is your emergency?" the young woman calmly asks.

"My wife is bleeding, please send help."

“What is your address, please?”

“738 Harrington, Jim’s Got Web, the computer store, please hurry.”

“Sir, I’m contacting the medical dispatchers. Are you with your wife right now?”

“Yes... Please hurry. I’m trying to stop the bleeding—there’s blood everywhere.”

“Sir, an ambulance is on the way. I need you to stay calm. Can you tell me what happened?”

“Someone stabbed her—the man with the spider on his face—please hurry.”

“Spider? Sir, what are you talking about? Sir?”

I drop the phone so I can use both hands on Diane.

“Diane, please... You’ll be fine—you’re ok. The ambulance is on the way. No, please, no...”

She’s trying to talk again. I put my face against hers and faintly hear, “I’m sorry ... I love you.”

“I know. I love you too. Diane, listen to me. You have to hang on. I need you. Diane, please ... Don’t leave me.”

I’m trying not to think about losing her. What would I do? *Keep pressure on the wound*, I tell myself. I can’t believe how much blood there is. The metallic smell and the sight of the blood is starting to make me dizzy ...

“Sir, can you hear me?” a voice in the distance asks, “Can you stand up? Let’s walk outside ... Easy—take your time.”

The fresh air helps to revive me, “Diane,” I yell, remembering what happened.

“Your wife is on her way to the hospital. I’ll take you there. Are you feeling better?”

Diane’s blood is all over me. I must have passed out. “Is she okay? Damn it, how long have I been out? I was trying to stop the bleeding. I can’t believe I fainted ... Please, take me to her.”

When we arrive at the emergency room, I run up to the desk, “Where’s my wife?”

“Sir, please have a seat, I’ll get someone to talk to you.”

A young doctor walks up to me, obviously uncomfortable. He doesn’t have to say anything; I can see it on his face. The only thing I hear him say is, “I’m sorry ...”

The police officer waiting for me says, “I’m sorry for your loss, sir, but I’ll have to ask you to come down to the station with me to answer a few questions.”

I don’t remember the ride to the police station. It’s as if I’m in a nightmare and I can’t wake up. I’m seated at a small table with the officer across from me. Looking around the room, I notice a large mirror on the wall. I wonder who’s watching us from the other side.

“Mr. Gotweb, where were you when your wife was attacked?” the officer asks.

“I was on a service call.”

“Can anyone verify that?”

“You can ask the customer. The work-order with his address and phone number will be on my computer.”

“OK,” he says, while glancing at the mirror, “We’ll contact him to verify that. Now, can you describe what you saw when you arrived at the scene?”

“I saw a man leaving the shop, carrying a laptop. He had a tattoo of a spider on his face.”

“Did you see anyone else there? Someone that can back up your story?”

“No,” I say, “there wasn’t anyone else.”

“Now, just for the record, were you and your wife having any problems?”

“Problems?” I ask, “What do you mean?”

“You know, how was your relationship? Are you having financial difficulties? Were you arguing a lot lately? Those type of things.”

“No ... What does that have to do with anything? Wait,” I say, suddenly realizing what he’s getting at, “Are you accusing me of murdering my wife? This is ridiculous! I told you who the murderer is.”

“Right, the man with the spider tattoo. Yeah, I’ve got that. Can you tell me anything else about him?” the officer asks.

“Anything else? Are you kidding me? My wife is dead. I’m covered in her blood. Her murderer has a tattoo of a spider on his face, how much more do you need to know? I can’t believe this. How many people have a tattoo like that? Why aren’t you out looking for him?”

“Sir, we know what we’re doing. I’m just trying to get all of the facts straight. That’s all I need from you right now. Let me know if you think of anything else.”

2. Taking My Life Back

The past few weeks are a blur. I can't believe Diane's gone. How can I possibly go on without her? Why should I? I can't even bring myself to go home; the thought of walking through the door and Diane not being there is too much to handle. I'm living in a cheap motel on the edge of town. I haven't even been back to the store since her murder. I spend most of my time sitting in bars, trying to drown my grief with alcohol. Somehow, the smell of stale beer and the haze of cigarette smoke is comforting. As I sit in the dark bar, staring at the small patch of sunlight on the floor sneaking in through the darkened window, I hear a conversation.

"Did you hear what happened to Bob's wife?" the bartender asks the man sitting at the end of the bar.

"No, you mean Bob the insurance guy?" the man asks. "What happened?"

"She came home from work and found a man sitting at her computer. He attacked her. He stabbed her and left her for dead."

"Jeez, is she okay?"

"Yeah, she's going to be fine. Luckily, Bob came home early and found her. He barely got her to the hospital in time."

"Man, that's terrible. Did she get a good look at the guy?"

"Well, not really, it happened so fast. But I guess she told the police the guy had a tattoo on his face. She said it looked like an insect or spider or something."

Am I dreaming? I can't believe this. It has to be Diane's murderer, and he's still in the area. Why am I sitting here, in this stinking bar? I can't let him get away with this. I don't know how, but I've got to find this guy.

The first thing I have to do is go back to my store, Jim's Got Web. It's a play on my name, Jim Gotweb. It's not a large store; we only sell a few computers a week. I mean, I do; I can't believe she's gone. She was my best friend and the only family I had. I've never been very good with people, probably because I've spent so much time alone, working with computers. She dealt with the customers and ran the store while I worked in the back, installing hardware and troubleshooting. Now, besides dealing with her death, I have to figure out how to keep the business running on my own.

Walking into the store, I immediately walk to the spot behind the front counter where I found Diane. Someone has cleaned up her blood. But it doesn't matter; the sight of her lying there in a pool of blood will always be with me. Walking around the small showroom, looking at the computers lined up on the display shelves by the front window, I think about how her death has shattered our dreams. Diane loved children. We'd planned to start our family once the store was more established. We often talked about our kids running around the shop and laughed about them becoming computer geeks like their dad. It's going to be impossible to spend any time here without thinking of Diane; everything reminds me of her. I find hand-written notes about tasks to complete, newspaper clippings of articles she liked, and a coffee cup with her lipstick on it. The smell of her perfume is still in the air.

It's not as bad in the backroom. Diane didn't spend much time back here so there aren't as many things to remind me of her. There are few computers still sitting on the workbench; I'll have to figure out who they belong to and apologize for not returning them. As I begin working on them, I can feel myself relaxing for the first time in weeks. I've always enjoyed computers;

everything about them makes sense to me. Even when the problem isn't obvious, I know the answer is there; I just have to look at it logically to find it.

I need to get back into programming. Writing code has always helped me think clearly. Before Diane died, I was working on a program to remotely access customer's computers to diagnose their problems. That way, I could repair them without leaving the shop. If I'd had that program working, I'd have been here instead of on a call; maybe Diane would still be alive.

I have a few customers who have given me permission to access their computers to test my program, so I connect to one now. While scanning the files on the remote computer, I accidentally connect to the webcam. I see my customer sitting at her desk, reading. I immediately disconnect. That was weird. She didn't know I was there, watching her, but it sure felt creepy.

I wonder ... The news report says the killer was using the woman's computer when she came home, and he stole a laptop when he killed Diane. I don't know what he's up to, but it seems to be connected with computers. He's probably somewhere nearby, sitting at a computer right now. Theoretically, if I could get access to enough webcams on home computers, it's possible I'd find him.

3. Big Brother's Watching You

I've spent the past few months writing a program I call 'Big Brother.' When it's on someone's computer, I'm able to remotely access it and watch people in their homes through their webcams. Then it notifies me, the computer is added to my network, and the program emails itself to all of the user's contacts. Finding the murderer this way is a long shot, but I don't care; at least I'm doing something. I've installed the program on all of the computers in the shop; the new ones up front and the computers I'm working on. It's amazing how easy it is to access someone's webcam without them knowing it. The difficult part is getting the program installed on their computer.

I've installed Big Brother on flash drives and I plan to scatter them around town. I'm counting on people finding the drives and being curious enough to plug them into their computers to see what's on them. I've also added a few songs; while they're listening to the music, my program installs itself.

I'm sitting at the food court in the mall, looking around to make sure I'm not being watched, and set one of the drives on the table and walk away. Standing near a kiosk, pretending to look at the sunglasses for sale, I watch a group of teenage boys sit at the table.

"Hey, look what I found," one teenager says, while picking up the drive, "I wonder what's on it."

Without any hesitation, he plugs it into the laptop he's carrying and starts playing the music I've installed. This is going to be a lot easier than I thought. I spend the rest of the day dropping the infected drives in public places, and then I go back to my shop and wait.

I know it's pathetic that I'm sitting at my computer in the backroom of my shop, watching people. I feel bad about sneaking into their homes, invading their privacy. I know it's wrong to be spying on people. Everyone has the right to expect privacy in their homes. I try to be discreet and only watch long enough to see if the killer is there and then move on. Sometimes I can't help myself and watch a little longer than necessary. Being able to see what goes on in other people's home is addictive.

I have to admit there are a few homes that I visit regularly. I pretend they're family; I guess it makes me feel as if I'm a part of their lives. That's probably why reality shows are so popular on TV; they help people feel connected to something, when really they live a boring, lonely life. The Harris family's one of my favorites. I like watching them while I'm sitting in my shop, eating my TV dinner.

"How was school today, Johnny?" Mr. Harris asks his son at dinner.

"Fine," Johnny says, "We're going on a field trip to the planetarium tomorrow."

"That sounds like fun, Johnny," I say. They can't hear me, but I join in the conversation anyway.

After dinner, I check in on my other pretend relatives. I see that my "aunt" Lucy isn't doing very well with her Farmville game on Facebook. She's forgotten to harvest her crops again, so I do it for her before they wither and die. Then I drop in on my "cousin" Terry. He's looking at porn sites again instead of doing his homework. I put a temporary block on his internet and send him an official looking message reminding him that there's a math test tomorrow.

After a while, I come across a family in the middle of a big fight. I mean, it's really getting out of hand. The dad is drunk and verbally abusing his wife and son. I look up the home's

address and call the police. I tell them my neighbors are having a fight and to send someone right away.

“Harry, you should go to bed,” the wife says, “You’re drunk and you don’t know what you’re saying.”

“Oh yeah, you think I’m so drunk? Well, can a drunk do this?”

He reaches out, grabs his wife, and throws her into the next room like a rag doll. His son runs over to him and starts hitting him in the stomach, screaming, “I hate you, I hate you!” Then, his dad grabs him and tosses him on top of his mom.

“To hell with the both of you!” he says.

Without thinking, I turn on my microphone, “No, to hell with you!”

He’s the only one in the room and is obviously confused by the voice coming out of his computer speakers.

“Who’s there?” he slurs, as he looks around.

“This is the police,” I say in a deep voice. “We have the house surrounded. Come out with your hands up.”

“How did you get in my computer?”

“We’ve been watching you,” I say, “We know you don’t want to hurt your family. Give yourself up peacefully and we’ll make sure you get help.”

As he stands there thinking, the police arrive and his wife lets them in.

“I do want help!” he cries as he walks towards the police with his hands up.

As I watch the mother hug her son and talk to him about his father’s problem, I realize I don’t have anyone to talk to. Diane and I can’t dream about our future and talk about our plans to have kids. I’ll never be able to watch them grow up and share the experience with the one person in my life who mattered to me. Diane’s killer took all of that away from me. Is that fair? Is it wrong for me to try and find the person who ruined my life, even at the expense of stealing a few moments of someone’s privacy? Where do one person’s rights end and another’s start? If I invade a person’s privacy without them knowing it, what’s the harm?

I guess it all comes down to the question of whether I’m willing to risk the consequence of going to jail if I’m caught. I am. What do I have to lose? My life has come down to sitting here alone, watching others live theirs. What kind of life is this? I hardly leave the backroom anymore. But there are many people out there who need help. I think about all the abused children, the homes getting broken into, and who knows what else that’s going on. I could help a lot of them by contacting the police or sending them information to get help. Maybe that would give me a reason to go on.

4. Meeting Roger

I need to hire someone to help me run the store. Someone to deal with the customers and the phone calls from the bill collectors. I hate it when I have to stop working to answer the phone or talk to someone who walks in the door. I've thought about putting an ad in the paper, but what would it say?

"Wanted: someone to run my computer store while I sit in the back room and watch people on their webcams to try and find my wife's murderer."

That would get some attention. No, I need to find someone who isn't going to ask a lot of questions. It'd probably be best if they knew a little about computers but not enough to figure out what I'm doing. There's a kid who comes into the shop a lot, messing with the computers. He looks to be about sixteen. I decide to talk to him and find out a little about him.

"Hey, how's it going?"

"Hey," he responds without looking at me.

"So, you like computers, huh?" I don't know what else to say.

"Look, mister, if you don't want me messing with the computer, just say so. It's a piece of shit anyway."

Great, I think, he's a smart ass. I can deal with that.

"What do you mean, a piece a shit?" I say. "That baby's got a 2.6 GHz Pentium processor and 1.5 gigabytes of ram. It's a monster."

"A monster? More like a dinosaur. Now if you'd upgrade the processor to a Core i7, add a DDR3 memory module, and a GTX 650 Ti graphics card, it might be able to play some of the older StarCraft games without crashing."

"Are you a gamer?" I ask.

"No, not really. There aren't any games worth spending my time on. I'm a code monkey. I like to program. I hear that you are, too. Or were," he says, finally turning around to look at me.

"Where did you hear that?" I'm surprised he knows anything about me. I've always been kind of a loner, never really had any friends. While all the other kids spent their time playing sports, I was learning to program.

"I go to Lincoln High, same school you went to. Mr. Griffin still teaches computer science. He says I remind him of you. At least, the way you were," he adds with a smirk.

"Hey, I might not be up on all the latest and greatest technology—who has time to keep up with that shit? But, I still know my way around a computer, don't worry about that." Why am I defending myself to this kid?

"So, you still program?" he asks. "What have you been working on, figuring out the odds on the college basketball tournament so you can fill out a winning bracket?"

Wow, I think, that's a good idea! "No, have you?" I ask, and he rolls his eyes and shakes his head. I haven't talked to anyone about programming for a while, and I have to admit I'm a little excited about showing off some of my work. "OK, smart ass," I say, "If I show you what I've been working on can you keep it to yourself?"

"Who am I gonna talk to? I don't know anyone who understands a word I say."

I get the feeling I can trust this kid. He reminds me of myself at that age. "So, what's your name?"

"Roger Sanchez," he says while following me to the back room.

“My name’s Jim Gotweb, by the way.”

“I know. ‘Jim’s Got Web,’” he says, making air quotes. “What a catchy name for a computer store.” Again with the rolling eyes.

“You come up with something better.”

“How about just ‘Got Web?’ You know, like the old ‘Got Milk?’ slogan?”

Damn, that’s good, I think. Oh, well, it’s too late to change it now. I don’t plan to tell him about my program; I’ll just give him a little information to see his reaction. I show him a block of code I’ve been working on and watch as he scans it.

The code I show him isn’t directly related to my network, so I’m shocked when he says, “So how big is this network?”

“What are you talking about?”

“C’mon,” he says. “Why else would you be running a hidden program that allows you to gain remote access? I’m assuming that you’re sending the program to other users through their email. So, what’re you doing, spying on people through their webcams?”

Damn, so much for not telling him about my program. He’s already figured it out.

“It’s not like that at all,” I say, flustered. “Well, I guess it kind of is, but it’s not what you think. I mean, I’m not spying on people. Well, I am, but not the way you think I am.”

“Calm down,” he says, “I’m not going to turn you in. So what are you doing?”

I take a deep breath and say, “My wife was murdered. I’ve seen the killer and I’ve told the police what he looks like. They haven’t been able to find him, so I’m looking for him myself; one computer at a time.”

“Man,” he says, “What are the odds of finding one person by randomly looking at computers? What if he doesn’t use email, how would you get the program installed on his computer? How do you know he even has a webcam?”

“I try not to think about it too much,” I say. “I probably have a better chance of winning the lottery. But I have to do something. In the mean time, I’ve seen child abuse, robberies, and other stuff. I’ve been able to help a few of them, but I need someone to run the shop while I monitor the network.”

“I’m sorry about your wife,” Roger says, “I know what it’s like to lose someone. My mom killed herself last year. I should have helped her. I knew something was wrong but I didn’t realize how bad it was. She needed someone to talk to and I wasn’t there for her. If there’s anything I can do to help, count me in.”

5. The Naked Lady

Roger's been working with me for a couple of weeks, although it hasn't turned out as I'd planned. He spends all of his time in the backroom working with me instead of out front.

While browsing through the new computers on our network, Roger says, "Hey, Mr. Gotweb, take a look at this."

I've been trying to get him to call me Jim, but I think he looks at me as if I'm an old man. I'm only twenty-six, but I guess to a sixteen-year-old, that's ancient.

"What is it?" I ask, while getting up from my computer.

"It's a naked lady, and she's really hot," he says.

I'm shocked when I see the woman on his monitor; she looks a lot like Diane. She has the same short, black hair and the intense green eyes, but I have to admit—Diane didn't have a body like that.

She's completely naked, at least from what I can see, and as I stare at her beautiful breasts she says, "Well, hello boys. I was wondering when you'd stop by to visit me."

"Is she talking to us?" I ask.

Roger says, "I've been warning you about a hole in Big Brother. I think she's found it. She's using the program to watch us."

Sitting at her computer, staring into the camera with a big grin on her face, she says, "Houston, we've got a problem."

"She's hacked Big Brother?" I ask, "That's impossible."

"Oh, yes," she says, "how would some dumb girl be able to do something like that?"

"What the hell's going on? Can you hear us?" I ask, in complete shock.

"Yes, of course I can. Why are you so surprised? As much snooping as you've been doing, it shouldn't seem weird to you at all. Now, I've shown you mine, so show me yours. Take off all your clothes," she says.

Standing there dumbfounded, I notice that Roger has a blank stare on his face and is starting to take off his shirt.

"What are you doing?" I ask, "Have you lost your mind?"

"Oh, I thought we were supposed to do what she says. Sorry."

"Spoil sport," she says. "So what are you guys up to?"

I'm still in a state of shock that someone has broken into our network, and I have to admit, part of that shock is because it's a beautiful, naked woman.

"I'm not going to stand here and justify myself to you. How did you find our program?"

"I saw it attached to an email a client sent me. I knew right away what it was, so I opened it to take a look. It's not bad coding, but it's a little buggy, so it wasn't hard for me to alter it. Then I waited around for you guys to come visit me."

"You sat at your computer naked, waiting for us?" Roger asks.

"No, I have an adult webcam business I run from home. So what're you guys up to?"

"If you want to talk we should meet somewhere," I say.

"Fine, I'll be right there."

"What? You know where we are?"

“C’mon, Jim,” she says, “Get with the program. Now, you guys need to straighten things up a bit. You’re going to have a visitor.”

About an hour later, she walks into the store. I’m completely unprepared for the effect she has on me. I’ve seen her naked, so you’d think I’d know what to expect, but seeing her in person is another thing completely. She must be six feet tall, with long legs and an athletic body. Her short black hair frames a face that could belong to Diane’s twin.

“Hi, Jim, got web?” she says while smiling and looking around the room. “I’m Melanie. So, this is where you keep the junk for the customers—show me the real toys.”

Roger laughs and says to me, “I like her. I told you this stuff was crap.”

Roger leads her into the back room while I try to collect myself. Somehow, this woman whom I’ve seen nude has hacked into my program and now she’s in my store. It doesn’t seem real.

When I walk into the back room, Roger’s showing her our network. “This is Big Brother,” he says proudly.

“What are you doing?” I say, “Don’t show her that.”

“Look, Jim, you need to calm down,” Melanie says while browsing through our database. “You’re going to give yourself a coronary. You guys aren’t what I expected to find; you don’t look like the perverted type. At least, you don’t,” she says, smiling at Roger. “I can tell this code was written in a hurry, as if you’re on some kind of mission.”

“We are,” Roger says. “We’re trying to find out who murdered Mr. Gotweb’s wife. He’s seen her killer’s face; he has a spider tattoo. We’re searching through people on our network to find him. While looking for him we’ve been finding people that need our help, but we’re having trouble keeping track of all the computers.”

I’m shocked that Roger’s telling this stranger everything. “What in the hell are you doing? I’ve told you how important it is to keep this to ourselves.”

Roger’s looking at Melanie like a lovesick puppy. “I know, but I think we can trust her. I think she’s one of us.”

She looks at me for a moment with a compassionate look in her eyes and then turns to Roger, “You should write a program to keep track of all the computers for you. It would look for predefined activities, like certain keywords used in a search or other suspicious activity. Then it would flag the computer and send you a notification.”

Trying to regain my composure in the presence of this incredible woman, I say, “Actually, we’ve been working on a program like that, but we keep hitting a dead end. It’s difficult to monitor so many computers at the same time.”

“You wouldn’t have to monitor all of them at once,” she says, “You could batch them into groups and levels. Whenever a computer starts getting flagged, it’s moved up to a level that gets monitored more often.”

The buzzer sounds, telling us a customer has walked into the store. Right away, Roger and I start arguing.

“It’s your turn,” I say.

“No, I did the last customer, remember? The lady that said her computer’s memory was leaking so she needed more.”

“Yeah, but you didn’t do anything except tell her we were out of memory.”

“Geez, what’s the matter with you guys?” Melanie says, laughing as she leaves the backroom. “What’s so hard about dealing with customers?”

“Hello there,” she says seductively to a man looking at laptops. “What can I do you for?”

“Oh, hi,” he says, obviously surprised to see her standing so close behind him. “I’m looking for a laptop for my son’s birthday, but these seem expensive.”

“They do cost a little more than the ones at the big box stores,” she says. “But you also get the peace of mind of knowing that if anything ever goes wrong with it, we’ll come to your house and fix it.” Then she adds with a wink, “Day or night.”

“That was amazing,” I say when she comes back to the workshop after selling the laptop. “Is there any way I can talk you into working here?”

“You can’t afford me,” she says, “But I do miss writing code. I wouldn’t mind hanging around a couple hours a day, just to sharpen my skills.”

“Great, and if a customer comes in you could take care of them,” I say hopefully.

“I’ll take my turn,” she says, “You guys need to learn how to work with the customers.”

6. Fainting Goat

Melanie and I have developed a good working relationship. It's been difficult sitting next to someone who looks so much like Diane and has such an incredible body. But I think I've been doing a good job of keeping my fantasies under control.

"Is there a problem?" Melanie asks from across the large desk we share while monitoring the network.

"No, why?"

"Because," she says, "every time I look up, you're staring at me. Is there something you wanted?"

Maybe I'm not doing such a good job. "I'm sorry, I'll try to be more careful. It's just that you look so much like Diane."

"Oh, I see. I'm sorry. Would you feel better if I were sitting here naked?"

"Well, yeah, that would be great," I say with more than a little enthusiasm.

"Forget it, I'm not stripping for you. The only reason I'm here is to help with the network."

"I've wanted to ask you something," I say. "It's none of my business, so you can just tell me to go to hell, but I'm curious. Why do you sit naked for all those guys? I mean, you have the skills to get a great job doing anything you want in IT."

Judging by the look on her face, I may have overstepped a boundary. She's quiet for a while then finally says, "I was a software development engineer for seven years. I was the only female working on a team of chauvinist pigs. Against my better judgment, I got involved with one of them. At first, Stan seemed to be a great guy. We had fun and spent a lot of time together away from work. Everything was fine when we were alone, but at work he acted completely different. He was always complaining about my work and trying to make me look bad in front of everyone. I eventually quit the job—and him.

"I decided to use my looks instead of my brains. Men find me attractive, so why not use that as a way to make a living? I make more money sitting at home naked than I can at any IT job, so why shouldn't I? I admit I've missed programming, but now that I've found you guys, I'm doing it again, so I've got the best of both worlds."

"Mr. Gotweb," Roger says from across the room, "we've been getting a lot of hits on 322.203.5.4; I think you should take a look at it."

"What's going on?" I ask.

"There was a sudden spike in volume around midnight last night and someone's on the computer now, googling 'ways to clean up blood.'"

"Bring it up and we'll see what's going on."

Roger connects to the computer and suddenly I'm staring into the eyes of a very haggard looking man, sitting at his monitor. It always surprises me when I see someone on my screen; it looks like they're staring right at me. Of course, they can't tell that I've accessed their camera, but it's still creepy.

"So, what are you up to, Jackson Heller at 2452 West Brighton?" I say aloud, while reading the report. "You don't look like you've gotten any sleep. What happened last night?"

I see something sitting on the floor behind him; it's a bottle of ammonia and a sponge.

"Looks like he got the blood out of the carpet," I say. "What's he looking for now?"

Roger says, "He's searching for 'ways to dispose of a body.' Do you think he's killed his wife?" Roger has a note of excitement in his voice. There hasn't been much action lately and I think he's starting to get a little bored with my project.

"That's what it looks like to me. We better act fast if we want to catch him with the evidence."

"Fainting Goat?" Roger asks hopefully.

Roger has developed a worm that we can activate to make the user's computer start acting up. He's nicknamed it the 'Fainting Goat,' after the domestic goat whose muscles freeze when it panics.

"Good idea," I say, "Go for it."

Roger types in a few keystroke commands, and Jackson's computer freezes.

We laugh when Jackson beats on the monitor screaming, "C'mon, you piece of shit, not now."

He reboots the computer, which has no effect. There's a sticker with the store's phone number conveniently located on the front of every computer that's been in the shop. A few minutes later, I get a phone call.

"Jim's Got Web, If you're up a creek, we'll send a geek." I haven't gone on a call since Diane's death, but the catchy slogan we used back then comes naturally to me.

"Yeah, I've got a problem with my computer. Send someone over right away."

Our plan is for Roger to work on the computer while I pretend to be training him.

"I still don't understand why I can't be training you," Roger says as we walk up to the house.

He's upset about having to pretend he doesn't know what he's doing. "Look, Roger, he probably knows I'm the owner of Jim's Got Web. How would it look if I had a kid showing me how to work on a computer?"

"You mean, how would it look if people knew?"

He had a point. Roger's been teaching me ever since I hired him. How can someone so young know so much?

"I'll make you a deal—next time you get to be the instructor," I say while ringing the doorbell.

When Jackson comes to the door, we both take a step back, surprised by his appearance. He looks like death warmed over. The desperation and panic in his eyes reminds me of a wild animal backed into a corner, planning to fight his way out.

"I'm really sorry that you're having trouble with your computer," I say as he leads us into the living room. "We've had a rash of problems lately that seem to be related to a conflict in the BIOS, caused by an improper installation of the software."

As Roger looks at me, rolling his eyes, I continue, "We should be out of here in less than an hour. Don't let us stop you from whatever you're doing."

He doesn't say a word and stands behind Roger, watching him as he boots up the computer. I was afraid he wouldn't leave us alone long enough to get a look around the house, so I have another plan. Melanie should be coming to the door any minute now. Hearing the doorbell, Jackson mutters, "Now what?" as he goes to answer the door.

After he walks out of the room, Roger says, "Conflict in the BIOS, caused by improper installation? What kind of crap is that?"

"Never mind, smart ass," I say while heading out of the room.

“Hi, I’ve got a flat tire,” Melanie says, “could you help me change it? I don’t know anything about cars.”

“No, I’m busy, you should call a tow truck,” he says and starts to close the door.

Melanie immediately starts crying, “I don’t have time to wait for a tow truck. My mother is dying. I have to get to the hospital. Can’t you please help me?”

She’s good. I can’t imagine anyone refusing to help her. As Jackson follows her to the car, I tell Roger to watch out the window and let me know when he’s coming back. The first place I look for evidence is in the garage. After checking the trunk of the car and not finding anything, I decide to check in the basement. While heading down the stairs, I start worrying that I won’t be able to hear Roger yell, so I call him on his cell phone.

“Did you find something?” he asks excitedly.

“No, I’m going into the basement to look around. Can you see Melanie’s car?”

“Yeah, it’s right out front. It’s not going to take him very long. He already has the spare tire out and is setting up the jack. Melanie’s talking to him non-stop, trying to distract him, but it doesn’t seem to be doing much good. I bet she’s pissed. She’s used to guys paying more attention to her.”

“Just keep watching and let me know when he’s done. I see something that looks suspicious, hold on a second.”

There’s a pile of rugs and towels that seems out of place in the clean, tidy basement. As I get closer, I can see blood seeping out of the rugs. I carefully pull back the top layer. There’s an outline of a body under the pile. I’m not crazy about looking at a dead body, but I’ve gone this far. I remove a blood soaked rug. The dead woman’s eyes are open, staring blankly at me. I remember Diane, dying in my arms.

“I’m sorry,” I say to the dead woman lying there, “I promise he won’t get away with it.”

My doubts about invading people’s privacy are gone; this is my reason for doing it. People have to be held responsible for their actions. I don’t know how long I stood there, staring into those eyes, thinking about Diane, when I suddenly realize Roger’s yelling into the phone.

“What are you doing?” he says. “Can you hear me? He’s coming! Get up here, quick!”

Running to the stairs, I tell Roger, “Try to stall him. Go to the door and keep him from coming into the living room.”

“Stall him how? He’s already coming in the door.”

“I don’t know, use your imagination, tell him you’re thirsty or something. You’ve got to give me time to sneak back into the room.”

I make it up the basement stairs before Jackson sees me. “What’s going on?” he says, “What are you looking for?”

“I’m looking for Roger ... Oh, there you are,” I say to Roger standing behind him. “Come on, we’re done here, we should get going.”

Jackson looks at us for a moment and then pulls out a gun, hidden in his waistband. “You’re not going anywhere. Get back down into the basement, both of you—now!”

I’m trying to think of a way out of this when suddenly his gun goes off. A bullet crashes through the window and Jackson falls to the floor. Melanie’s standing behind him holding a tire iron, a big smile on her face.

“Wow,” she says, “That was exciting. I’ve always wanted to do that. You guys really know how to have fun.”

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