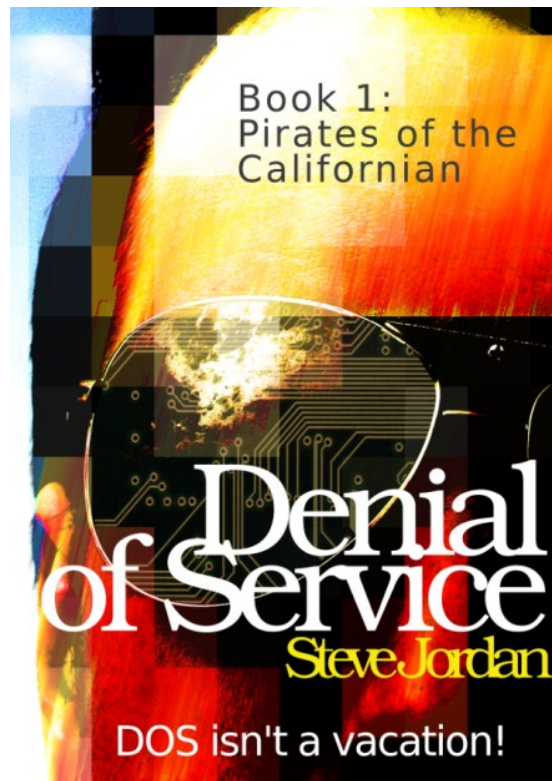


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What the hey, I had time to kill.

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Pilot: Pirates of the Californian

*By Steve Jordan*

## 1: Good Morning

It was developing to be a good morning. I'd stopped at the Starbucks on the way to the client site, and Christie was in that morning, which meant I could just saunter in, cool as hell, and say "Hit me," and she'd know I meant my usual "grande double-shot skim milk espresso with room, in my personal cup." I love a day that starts off where I don't have to say all that, especially before I've actually had one.

Then I got to the client site, where I didn't have to kill a half-hour for the IT guys to show up and let me into the computer rooms. IT guys are pretty good about being late for work, since most of them are either working late fixing computer problems, out drinking themselves blind after they get out of a full day's computer problems, or gaming 'til 4 in the morning with other IT guys trying to blast the memory of yesterday's computer problems away. Amazingly, Emmett showed up on time—hey, even IT guys sometimes get torched in the first round of GTA—and he let me right in.

Finally, I was relieved to discover that no one had messed with my scripts after I left last night. IT guys love to mess with scripts when they think they know something about 'em. Of course, that can be disastrous when they don't have the big picture, so you try to add something to the scripts designed to scare 'em off when they see it... either a nasty-weird piece of code, or a hidden instruction that makes their computer do something scary when they try to run it. Usually when that happens, they have the presence of mind to restore the old code, resave it, and get the hell out. This morning, the save timestamp indicated no one had been in there, which meant I didn't need to backtrack half a day of work to figure out what they'd messed with.

So I settled into work, finishing up the scripts needed to integrate their database of products and services with outside web services that needed access to them. The client was behind the times in their systems, but it was nothing I couldn't handle. I'd handled them before. And my scripts were good.

"Morning, M.D.," I heard as the door to the computer room opened. I nodded and waved, trying not to take my eyes off the line of code I was fixing. I liked Kenny, he was a nice guy, and easy to get along with. He was new to IT, the poor sucker. He actually wanted to be the head of IT at this company... that's how young and idealistic newbies can be. But somehow, he didn't see what running a major company's IT department was doing to his boss, Mr. Gravewort. Gravewort used to be a handsome, bright-eyed IT newbie, until he'd been given the department when his boss retired (at the ripe old age of 39). Now Gravewort is a terminally grumpy, short-attention-spanned, sleepless zombie with B.O. and dandruff, drinking himself headlong at his first heart attack. I think he's 33. How IT newbies didn't see that future for themselves, I never understood... some kind of profession blindness, probably caused by too many Red Bulls before 10 am.

"How's everything looking for today?" Kenny asked.

"Pretty good," I said, finishing the last touches on the code I'd started yesterday. "Once we test and confirm the handshake, we can move on to actual migration."

"Migration. Aces!" Kenny said, and headed for his desk, where he kept his stash of Red Bulls. While I heard the tab rip back, I got on the phone to my office.

"Bill, it's M.D.. Do me a favor and ping my client's server, so I—"

*"Schitzeiss."*

I paused. No one used my full last name. Not even Bill. Unless there was something wrong.

*"What are you still doing on that job, man? Go get lunch or something."*

"Dude," I said, "it's ten-thirty."

*"Get outta there, man," Bill said. "The old man's getting his ass chewed out by one of your clients. They went down to a denial of service attack last night. They're blaming you."*

“So what?” I said. “It’s not like I screwed anything up. DOS attacks are external, they’re outside of our ability to stop.”

*“Doesn’t matter,” Bill said. “I can hear ‘em through the door. You’re being fired as we speak.”*

I was about to tell Bill he was crazy, when the door to the computer room banged open loud enough to make Kenny spill his Red Bull. I turned around, and even my professional blood lost a few degrees of temperature when I saw Mr. Gravewort in the doorway, glaring at me.

“You!” he said, stomping across the room at me.

“Call you back,” I said to Bill.

*“Don’t bother,” Bill said. “I like my job.”* And he hung up before I did. Leaving me to face Gravewort.

“I just heard you fried a client’s servers,” Gravewort growled at me.

I shook my head. “Not me. It was a denial of service attack. That’s an outside attack, not an internal error. I didn’t do anything wrong.”

“Like hell!” Gravewort snapped. “I just got word you’ve been fired by your agency for gross negligence.”

“That’s nuts,” I replied. “They can’t fire me over that.”

“They just did! Time for you to leave, buddy!”

“Hey, hold on!” I suddenly realized I was about to be shafted, and got up out of my seat, bringing myself up to Gravewort’s height. “I’m almost finished with your database, here. Once it’s done, you and me both will be smelling like roses.” Which, in his case, was something to aspire to. In my case, it was just another notch on my already-impressive resume. Mind you, it would be a very big, pretty notch, and I wanted it. “All I need is a few minutes to—”

“I don’t have a contract with you,” Gravewort growled. “I have a contract with your *former* agency. And they just told me, if I don’t want to be sued, to throw you out of here.”

At that moment, the door to the computer room opened, and two of the client’s security guards elbowed their way in. I say “elbowed,” not because there was anyone in their way, but because they were so big they practically had to widen the doorframe enough to let themselves inside. They stood there, glaring at me, and I looked at Gravewort, in complete disbelief that I was being treated like this.

“Believe it,” Gravewort said, as if he’d read the last paragraph of my thoughts. “Get out of here, loser.”

## 2: State of Denial

They actually gave me the bum's rush out of there... one of the guards shoved me so hard as we hit the front door, that I almost stumbled and dropped my gear bag... and falling on my head and having the bag crack my skull open would've cost less in hospital bills than it would cost to replace most of the stuff inside there. "And stay out!" he shouted, like I was in some 1940s movie.

Inside, I was cussing up, down, sideways and diagonally. But outside, I was cool. The first thing I did was to call my office, to straighten those bozos out. That is, I tried to call. They wouldn't take my call... in fact, the voicemails didn't even connect. At that point, I noticed I had a message on my cell, so I accessed my mailbox to see what it was. It was a text message, from my agency, which read:

*"You are fired. If we ever see you within a mile of our offices, we will have you arrested. If you speak to any of our clients, we will call Homeland Security. Consider yourself lucky we're not suing you, you thieving hacker bastard."*

Wow. And I didn't even know you could get all that into a cellphone text message.

Boy, was I confused. What the hell happened? My boss knew a DOS attack wasn't my fault... he couldn't possibly blame me. One of our clients must have been pissed... but how or why they managed to put the fear of God into my boss like this, was beyond me. I didn't think any of them had that kind of pull. It was a weird situation.

But ultimately, it didn't matter. I was one of the best webmasters in town. I could think of a half a dozen companies right off that would jump at the chance of hiring me. So I got out my cellphone and started making calls, as I walked casually in the direction of Starbucks.

*"Sorry, Schitzeiss. Can't use you."*

*"We don't need anybody."*

*"Sorry, we got no openings."*

*"No way. And don't call me back."*

By the time I got to Starbucks, I was bewildered. What, did someone manage to blacklist me? How could they not want me? I shuffled up to the counter and mumbled, "Hit me."

"What?"

I looked up. And around. No Christie in sight. "Oh. Uh... give me a grande double-shot skim milk espresso with room, in my personal cup." I handed the cup over a second later, as in my shocked state I had almost missed the fact that I had just told them to fill it.

The barista looked at the cup, which I had put my own decorations on. In big letters, running from bottom to top, was the legend that he read aloud: "M.D. Schitz." Yes, I did that on purpose. What kind of a cool name was Michael Darien Schitzeiss, right? I was a hot programmer, and I wasn't ashamed of it. Normally, I thought it was pretty cool and ballsy. But right now, with everyone in the place staring at me, I just felt it was kinda silly. But he took the cup at last, and started the drink.

I stepped over to the cashier, and gave him my Starbucks card. The guy swiped it. He looked at his cashier, and he swiped it again. "Card's empty," he said.

I blinked. "There must be something on it. I just used it this morning."

"Well, you used it up," the guy said. "That'll be four twenty-nine."

Grumbling, I paid cash for the drink. Then I retired to a table in the corner, and got busy.

When you're a webmaster, there aren't many things you can't do from wherever you are. If you have a laptop and a wireless connection, you can access everything you have at once. I maintained accounts with four job boards, which I immediately updated with my available status. Then I tried to access my clients' websites, to see which one was down for the count from a DOS attack. Strangely, all of them were up... not even running slow.

Then I checked my e-mail accounts. A good webmaster always has multiple accounts, one at work, a personal account, a commercial account—usually good as a spam-magnet—and occasionally a few accounts designated for specialty uses, like heavy traffic from web forums or media sites. My work e-mail did not connect... they had deleted it that fast. There was nothing new in my personal and forum accounts, but my commercial account was full of spam job offers for every fast-food place and convenience store in town. Someone was trying to tell me something.

And while I was checking, I received an e-mail in my personal box.

*“You will never work in this town again.”*

Okay, now I was getting weirded out. Everything was happening fast, too fast for me to react to. It really felt like everyone in town was against me, and paranoid or not, that’s a lousy feeling to have. I was also reflecting on the fact that I needed to work, and had no intention of working at McDonalds. I needed to think of something. But I was out of my element, because I’d never had trouble getting work... I’d never been unemployed. What do you do when you’re unemployed? Did they still make you stand in line, like at the DMV, to get a check that wouldn’t pay the rent at the Y?

Was there still a Y?

At a complete loss, I finally remembered someone who had gone through unemployment and tough times, and could probably help me out to figure out my next move. I dialed my cellphone.

*“Hello?”*

“Hey, Pete. It’s Mike.”

*“Hey! What’s happenin’, little brother?”*

### 3: Cross-Country

San Diego was *hot*.

That was the first thought that came to me when I stepped off the plane. Actually, it was the first new thought I'd had as I stepped off the plane... up until now, I had been having the same first thought for most of the day, even before I got on the plane:

"How did I let my brother talk me into flying out here?"

I'd told him what happened, and I heard him whistle like he does when something sounds implausible. Then he'd said, "You better get some space. Take a sabbatical. Get out of town."

"Man, I just can't leave town."

"Bro, you live in Baltimore. Of *course* you can leave town. I know... come out here for a visit! San Diego's great this time of year! I'll fix you up with a few local honeys, and your problems will just melt away!"

"Can't afford to fly out there."

"Sure you can. Southwest is cheap. I even got some frequent flyer miles I'll let you have."

"Where did you get frequent flyer miles from?"

"From Gail. It was part of the settlement."

"Well, why didn't you ever use them?"

"Bro... who'd want to leave San Diego?"

The next thing I knew, I was flying to San Diego. Then transferring. Then flying. Then transferring. And finally flying in and landing in this little airport near the coast. I had to ask to make sure I was actually done hopping planes... then I collected my bag and gear, and headed for the pickup areas.

It didn't take but a minute after I walked out of the terminal, before a Honda Fit pulled up in front of me. The passenger side window came down, and my brother stuck his head out, from the driver's side, without undoing his seatbelt. Okay, I'm exaggerating a bit, but where I come from, a Saturn Vue is considered a sub-compact.

"Hey, Mike! You made it!"

"I made it," I agreed, and opened the passenger door, slipped my bags behind the passenger seat, and slid in after them. Pete looked healthy. He had always been handsome, and kept in good shape; now, other than just a trace of grey in his hair, he still looked fit and tan. Sort of like a real-world Bruce Campbell (in his *Brisco County* days). Interestingly enough, on a good day I could pass for a real-world Billy Campbell (in his *Rocketeer* days), which made us some pretty hot Schitzeiss when we were out on the prowl.

"Good to see you, bro," Pete said when I closed the door. "How you holdin' up?"

"Oh, I'm fine," I said. "Outside of the fact that I've been blacklisted in my own home town for no good reason."

Pete shook his head. "Capitalism sucks, all right. But now you're here," he said, putting the car in gear, "and you can unwind a bit, get your head together, and start anew!"

"You've been out here too long," I said. "You're starting to sound like a California hippy." I eyed the inside of the car. "Starting to look like one, too." Though I had to admit, it did look like San Diego was agreeing with my brother.

"Well," Pete said, "it sounds like you could use a bit of a change too, after what happened. Speaking of which, I guess you didn't figure out any more about the blacklist thing?"

"Sure didn't," I admitted. "It's like I accidentally stepped on the toes of a mobster, or Dick Cheney, or something."

"Watch that," Pete said jokingly. "We don't use that kind of language in these parts."

"Anyway," I continued, "it's like a conspiracy. I didn't do anything wrong, and everybody who is in the business knows that! Why this ton of bricks was dropped on my head, I don't know."

“Probably someone covering up their own mistakes by blaming you,” Pete said. And I could well believe that. “But if they’re that good at railroading you,” he continued, “it might not make any difference. You’re someone’s fall guy. Best to just get clear of the fallout, and go play in someone else’s yard for awhile.”

“Oh, you’re a big help,” I muttered.

“I am helping you!” Pete protested. “I’m keeping you from beating your head against a wall for no good reason! You’re better off getting a clean break, and starting somewhere else. Like here!”

“San Diego?” I said dubiously, not knowing a thing about the place... since my brother had moved here, I’d never been. “I don’t know...”

“Trust me, you’ll love it here,” Pete said. “It’s great weather all year ‘round. I’ll show you the beaches, they *rock*. And hot and cold runnin’ babes, everywhere! Man, you can’t go wrong in a place like this!”

“You didn’t do so hot,” I pointed out.

Pete looked at me like I was crazy. “Dude, I got *divorced*. Not *shot*. And believe me, there are no better places for a single guy to be than here!”

#### 4: Pete and the Ex

“Okay,” I admitted, “I can’t argue about the view.”

Pete smiled as he handed me a cold beer. “Huh? *Huh?* What’d I tell you?”

We were on his apartment balcony, four floors up. Immediately below us was the complex pool, and even in the middle of the day, there were a few honeys hanging out there, mostly lounging by the poolside in their Brazilian bikinis. Beyond, there was a clear view to the bay, a park, which I found out later was Centennial Park, and the beach beside it. Pete’s place was on Coronado Island facing east, so you could actually see the San Diego skyline across the water from there, which, since I didn’t know San Diego, was about the last view I would have expected to see from dry land.

The beach on our side of the bay was small, but incredibly beautiful. From there, I could see even more honeys hanging out (in every sense of the word) on the beach, and walking about on the sidewalks in flimsy sarongs over their bathing suits that barely made it legal for them to go out in public.

I turned away from the balcony and took a suck at the beer, and considered the apartment. It was a big place, a two-bedroom unit, with the bedrooms on the opposite sides of the unit for privacy. The kind of place where people love to entertain, or vacation, or just get away to have sex close to, but not actually on, the beach.

“How did you get this again?” I asked Pete.

“Gail,” he answered. “The settlement has this place paid for until the end of the year. Great digs, huh?” he swept his arms out to encompass the place, and I noticed now that it was a bit sparsely-furnished, as if most of the furniture had gone with Gail... wherever she was.

“Yeah... capitalism sucks,” I said. “And what are you gonna do at the end of the year? Are you even working?”

“Hey, one thing at a time,” Pete said. “First, we have to fix you up! Some time spent in town will be just the thing. You have baggies?”

“Huh?”

“You know, a swimsuit! And none of those speedo things, it just sets off the girls. In a bad way, I mean.”

“Uh, no,” I said. “I didn’t think to pack any...”

“Well, don’t worry about it,” Pete said, “we can get you fixed up...”

He was interrupted by a ring from the doorbell. Pete crossed the balcony, the dining room, the living room and the foyer, and opened the door. From the balcony, I watched as the opening door revealed a woman, just a head shorter than Pete, wearing a flowery minidress and high-heeled sandals that showed off her kickin’ body and incredible legs. Her hair was long and brown, and hung on her bare shoulders in attractive ropes. She smiled at Pete from behind oversized sunglasses.

“I thought that was your car outside. Sorry to bring you the bad news, babe... but I’ve come for the Cuisinart.”

Pete returned her smile and, as jovially as you can imagine, said: “You little b\*\*\*h. Come on in.”

This was Gail.

Pete’s ex-wife sauntered into the apartment and turned towards the kitchen, apparently not seeing that Pete had company. Pete followed her, looking to the balcony and waving me to follow him. As he walked, he was saying, “Are you at least gonna leave me the steak knives, babe? And maybe a whisk?”

“Not sure I can trust you with steak knives,” I heard Gail say from around the corner. I finally reached the kitchen, where I found Pete watching as Gail was knelt down in front of a cabinet, her upper body completely hidden inside the space.

“Wow,” I said, “those cabinets must be deep.”

“You kidding?” Pete said. “I could hide *her* in one, and no one would find her for days.”



I'd seen Gail stiffen when she heard my voice, realizing it wasn't Pete's. As Pete had cracked about stuffing her inside the cabinet, she had eased herself out, her arms wrapped around a blender that God himself must have made on the eighth day, and stood slowly up. She tilted her head down, so she could see me over her sunglasses, and after a moment, she smiled and put the blender on the counter.

"Well, hello, Mike! Long time, no see!" She came over to me and gave me a big hug, which surprised me a bit. I looked over at Pete, but he didn't seem to be at all disturbed by his little brother getting a hug from his sexy ex-wife.

"Uh, yeah, you too, Gail," I said finally, when she let me go. "I didn't expect to see you, since Pete said—"

Before I finished, Gail turned to Pete and said, "You better not have told your brother I died, like you did that car salesman, or so help me—"

"Not me," Pete said, throwing his hands up in surrender. "I only told the salesman that because I knew he wanted to hit on you, and I was trying to spare you the grief!"

"He might have been nice, you know," she said.

"Girl, he sold used Corollas," Pete asserted.

Gail paused, then shrugged with her eyebrows. "Point taken."

"So," I said when I finally had the chance to speak again, "I guess you two aren't exactly beating each other up over this divorce thing."

Pete shrugged. "Naw, not really. It was more of a professional disagreement than anything else."

Gail nodded. "Specifically, he didn't like that I had a profession."

"That's not true!" Pete said quickly. "I just wanted to travel some, that's all."

"Some," Gail repeated, then looked at me. "Like, for a year, on a boat... that he wanted *me* to buy! When I told him I couldn't leave my job here, much less would I buy him the boat he wanted, he turned into a whining a-hole for a solid year, and I finally said, 'enough is enough'."

I stared at my big brother, trying to imagine a year of his whining. Actually, it wasn't hard. "And you drove her out over that? What kind of a moron are you?"

Pete shrugged. "The free spirit kind of moron," he said. "Anyway, we're still friends and all. But this way, if I get the travelin' bug, I just go."

"So why haven't you gone anywhere?" I asked.

Pete grinned sheepishly. "Well, right now, I'm a little low on travelin' funds, so I'm—"

"Looking for work again," Gail finished for him, giving him a wry smile.

"Hey, that computer store gig was the pits," Pete said. "The employee discounts are crap at BuyMore!"

Gail shook her head sadly, then turned to me. "Well, hopefully, with the more level-headed brother around, you'll be able to get your sibling back together again."

I frowned. "Then again, maybe not."

Gail immediately saw the tension in my face, and the playful banter fell away. "Is something wrong? What happened?"

"Well," I explained slowly, "I got thrown out of my job and blackballed in Baltimore."

"Which isn't nearly as bad as it sounds," Pete put in. "Or... sounds worse than it is... or something..."

"I'm between jobs now, too," I went on, ignoring Pete.

"Weren't you doing web design?" Gail asked. "How do you get blackballed out of that?"

“Influential clients who like to blame others because it’s easy,” I said. “One of them had a DOS attack, and decided it must have been my fault.”

Gail had hung out around computer geeks like me and my brother long enough to know exactly what I was talking about. “What kind of moron blames a web guy for a denial of service attack?”

“The powerful enough to get people blackballed kind of moron,” I replied sadly.

“That really sucks,” Gail said, and Pete nodded sympathetically. After another moment, she put a hand on my shoulder. “Well, don’t fret. You’re a smart guy. You can do web design anywhere, you certainly don’t need to stay in Baltimore for that. You’ll get a new job going.”

Then she took her hand away, and turned back to the uber-blender. “Look, guys, I gotta go. You two take care of each other, don’t do too much crying on each other’s shoulders, and I’ll catch you later.” She wrapped her arms around the blender and cradled it against her chest, and started out of the kitchen. Before she passed, she stopped and gave me a peck on the cheek. “Chin up, smart guy.” Then she left the kitchen.

As she passed Pete, he called out, “No kiss for me?”

“No, but you can *bite me*,” she shot back amiably.

“Just let me know where and when,” Pete grinned as she walked out the door, using a shapely leg to pull the door closed behind her. Pete continued to grin at the door, until he turned my way and saw the incredulous look on my face. “Oh, shut up. C’mon, we have to get you some baggies.”

## 5: Blind and Confused

“Are you still here, man?” Pete asked as he approached me.

“Hey, you brought me out here to San Diego,” I said.

“No, I mean: Are you still sitting on your butt on the beach, instead of up and chatting up some of these babes walking five-deep around you?”

I looked around. As my brother had alluded to, there were a lot of pretty girls on the beach around me. I had a great view of them, too, as I had been sitting in a lounge chair all morning as they had been going by.

But, in truth, I’d barely noticed them. I couldn’t get my mind off of my work situation, trying to figure out if I could have actually done anything to piss someone off at me specifically (pretty sure I didn’t), or if I could have done something that would’ve let me keep my job (couldn’t think of anything). I’d checked my messages numerous times on my cellphone, but my e-mail and phone mailbox were still empty... and it had been *four days* now.

Pete, to his credit, took one look at me and knew exactly where my mind had been. “Look, bro,” he said, sitting down in the lawn chair next to mine, “if you’re gonna get back into the game, you have to clear your head... and moping about the past isn’t gonna help. You’ve got to get some R&R, you know... rest and redheads! And brunettes... and blondes...” he continued to muse, only partially distracted by the sexy hardbodies walking around him. “Listen, I know a girl who’s staying with a few friends in a timeshare off of Orange for the rest of the month. We should go by and see if they’re up to a bit of jet-skiing, and then maybe we can bring them back to our place, and you can get your mind off of things. Oh, for God’s sake... haven’t you even touched your mojito?”

I looked at the glass by my chair, sitting on the sand. “Man, it’s not even eleven.”

“Which is important *because..?*” Pete waved a hand to dismiss the notion. “Bro, you are on *vacation* from work. Loosen up and relax!”

“You know,” I said, trying to derail the subject a bit, “I can’t believe you can’t find work anywhere. I’ve seen your troubleshooting skills, you can find your way around a bad server or through a network with the best of ‘em. I mean, what happened to your BuyMore Nerd-Herd job?”

“Boring!” Pete sing-songed. “Man, they’d send me out to some grandmom’s place where I’d have to listen to them crying that three mouse buttons were too confusing for them! Or I’d be there in the shop, stuck in the cage in back, loading crappy software onto PCs that were barely powerful enough to run Word on! I just couldn’t take it! So, when Gail and I broke up, I decided to cut the ties and live a little!”

“In other words, you took the settlement money you got from Gail, and just quit to live off of that.”

“Didn’t I say that?” Pete said, smiling.

“Why’d she even give you a settlement?” I asked. “I mean, it’s not like you can’t work.”

Pete paused a moment before answering. “It’s, ah, complicated,” he said finally. “I encouraged Gail to give me a financial settlement, so I wouldn’t be tempted to sell a few things here and there in order to make ends meet.”

“What kind of things?”

“Well, mostly a few electronic... documents and files. Stuff of a nature that could lead to personal embarrassment if it was found out in the wild...”

“Oh my God,” I goggled at him. “What did you do, make sex videos? You lecherous little monkey! You blackmailed her with your own sex tapes!”

“Hey, she liked ‘em, too!” Pete defended himself. “And she never told me I had to delete them! But she wanted to make sure I wasn’t tempted to out them for beer money.” I looked at him... but partially because, in the back of my mind, I could picture my good-looking brother, and that smokin’ hot Gail, going at it in front of the camera... yeah, I’d bet that tape would be worth a few bucks. “It was her choice... I didn’t twist her arm!”

“Man, you are a piece of work,” I said, finally reaching for the mojito and a respite from this nightmare. But before the glass reached my lips, it was plucked from my hand. I looked up, to see Gail standing there, holding my drink. She stood barefoot in the sand, wearing a mini-skirted business suit, her hair pulled back into a ponytail, and her high heels in her free hand... I swear, with her body, she had the kind of look that could drive East Coast businessmen to abandon wives and drain bank accounts, though I supposed that around here, no one would even notice it. Much. And after just talking, and thinking, about her in a sex video... well, let's just say it was just a good thing my baggies were... *baggy*.

“No time for booze, Schitz-boys,” she said to me, “I’ve got something for you to do.”

## 6: To Do

San Diego is a small town, relatively speaking... so it didn't take long to get back to Pete's apartment, change into some street clothes (which, around here, apparently means putting underwear on under your baggies, and optionally adding a shirt), climb into Gail's sleek white Eclipse, and head back to the "mainland" and into the hills. The ride was better for me than for Pete, who crammed himself into the Eclipse's tiny back seats, but Gail had explained to him that he didn't have to go, so his discomfort was pretty much on him.

On the way, Gail explained what was going on. "My friend Fritz is a writer. He was having trouble selling his last book, so he decided to sell it as an e-book."

"You mean on that Kindle thing?" I'd seen a few of them on the subway once or twice, and I knew the newspapers were making a big deal about them, but I really didn't know much about the things.

"Not all e-books are for Kindles," Gail explained. "I, myself, like to read them on my Blackberry."

"You read books on a *Crackberry*?" Pete said from the back seat, and snorted. "Told you she was nuts."

Gail threw an exasperated glance at the back seat, then continued. "Anyway... Fritz is pretty sure he can make decent sales... but he just found out he needs to do better than that."

"Why?" I asked.

"Apparently," Gail explained, "he was having some money problems thanks to the last book's not doing so well, and he was hosed by his publisher. Practically no payout at all. So he had to re-mortgage his place, and the guys he went with have turned out to be on the shady side. They're trying to force him out if he doesn't come up with his next payment by the end of the month. So he needs to get these books sold, pronto."

"What's the book about?"

"It's science fiction—"

"Oh, Christ." Gail looked at me with wondering eyes for a moment, before she had to look back at the road. Even I knew that sci-fi fanboys were the cheapest sentient beings on the planet. Trying to make money selling anything to them was a lot like trying to extract your molars through the pores in your thigh. And with an e-book? Any web guy knows the average person believes electronic files are essentially worthless, since you can't just hold one in your hand. It was that kind of provincial thinking that often made my profession harder than it needed to be, while we wasted time explaining to them why information had value beyond its container.

It's the reason why e-books have made virtually zero progress in twenty years (although I don't know much about the Kindle itself, I know plenty about e-books), at least until Amazon started selling their Kindle thing, and suddenly people had something concrete to associate their books with. In a way, they were probably setting the e-book industry back another decade by doing that, but what did Amazon care? As long as they made their money, they'd sell the books letter by letter if they thought they could get away with it...

But this guy apparently wasn't selling through Amazon, which meant he had to negotiate the world of competing formats, confusing e-book sites, self-promotion and secure storefront madness that kept even people I knew out of the self-publishing biz.

"Listen," Gail went on, finally deciding not to wait until I responded from my internal monologue, "Fritz is a good guy. And I know you, Mike... you're great with this stuff. I want you to help him out. I'll pay you for your time."

"You? Why should you do this?"

"I told you, Fritz is a good guy. He's dating a friend of mine, and I'd like to see them hit it off... but he can't do that if he's homeless. Besides, if it works out, he can always pay me back."

"I don't know what I can do for him," I started to say.

Gail interrupted me by saying, "I'll pay you a thousand bucks if you can help him."

"But I'll think of something," I finished.

We pulled up to a house in a modest neighborhood... mostly one-story adobe-covered bungalows, in every bright color you can imagine. Gail and I got out, and didn't bother to wait for Pete to unfold himself from the back seat as we approached the front door. Before we reached the door, however, I heard a rapid patter that my well-honed city-sense identified immediately: *A dog approaching at ramming speed.*

I threw my head about in every direction, trying to find the source of the sound, when I saw it: Just coming around the side of the house, was a medium-sized all-white husky-or-something, and he had already locked his sights on Gail. Before I could react, grab Gail or step in front of her, the dog had left the ground with a single bark, and was arcing through the air directly at Gail's head.

## 7: The E-book Author

Gail had seen the dog coming, too. Without hesitation, she pivoted on a heel, leaned back, threw her arms out and caught the dog on the fly around its midsection. The momentum caused her and the dog to spin completely about on her planted foot, and when she stopped spinning, she was laughing, and the dog was happily licking her face like she was made of milk-bones. “Hi, Frosty! How’s my good boy? You’re such a good watchdog, yes you are!”

After a few more seconds of this, Gail put the dog down, pausing a moment to brush the dirt off of her suit, while the dog came over to me. He got up on his hind legs and leaned into me, sniffing at my chest (because that was as high as he could reach) and giving me one of those looks that tells you, if you were a foot shorter, you’d be getting the milk-bone treatment, too. Apparently having bestowed the Good Frosty Seal of Approval on me, he then dismounted and headed for the front door, waiting for me and Gail to meet him there. He barked twice at the door while he waited, and by the time we got to the landing, the door opened.

Inside was a tall, lanky guy with stylishly-tousled black hair, wearing shorts and a T-shirt with the Jeff Wayne *War of the Worlds* album cover art on it. He looked like that “Deiter” guy from the Volkswagen commercials. He saw Gail, and opened the screen, allowing her to step in (after Frosty), and giving her a fraternal hug and a kiss.

Then he looked up at me and Pete. “So, these are the guys?”

Gail, in response, nodded at me. “He’s the guy.”

He looked at Pete next. “Isn’t that your ex?”

Gail shrugged. “Yeah, but he might be useful anyway.”

Pete narrowed his eyes at her. “After that, I’d wait in the car, but I’m afraid I’ll be caught in it if it shrinks in the rain.”

Fritz finally smiled, and waved his hand. “Come on in.”

Fritz’s place was relatively clean and sparsely-furnished, not a lot of bric-a-brac. Against the wall of the living room was an inexpensive LCD TV, a sofa facing it, and a coffee table between them. The dining room had a round table and four simple chairs. In one corner of the living room was a corner devoted to a desk, the laptop sitting on it, and a file cabinet next to it. And that, ladies and gentlemen, was the contents of the house as you walked in. No throw rugs, magazines on the tables, football by the door, car keys on a hook, or even pictures on the walls. This guy could teach Spartans what “Spartan” means.

He waved us at the dining room table, and asked, “Anyone want a Dos Ex?” Pete and I said sure, and he went to the kitchen, returning a few seconds later with three open bottles. He asked Gail again if she wanted anything, but she indicated she had to go back to work, so she wouldn’t drink anything. We all sat down at the table, and Fritz leaned back in the chair, which creaked just a bit underneath him. Frosty bravely curled up behind Fritz’s leaning chair and dozed off.

“So,” I said, “you’re trying to push a sci-fi e-book.” It came out sounding lame, like I was judging him, which I hadn’t meant it to.

But Fritz just shrugged. “Yeah, I know it sounds lame.” (I was gonna have to check my inner monologues for leaks.) “But if you know how to write ‘em, you can get quite a following going.”

“I’ll take your word for it,” I said. “Have you sold e-books before?”

“Yeah,” he said. “My last book was released as an e-book after the paperback came out. It sold some, but the hardback and paperback had already grabbed most of the sales, and my publisher wouldn’t let me discount the e-book enough to get any good numbers of its own.”

“But now you’re going without your publisher,” I said, and he nodded. “So what’s the real problem here?”

Fritz paused. As a web guy, you have to know how to listen to clients, what they say, and what they don’t say. When they say things that sound overly simple, it usually means they don’t know how something works. When they get overly technical, it means they know how it works, but they don’t want to be bothered to do it themselves. And when they get quiet, it means there’s something besides web building going on.

“Are you expecting trouble from someone?” I ventured.

Fritz looked at me, and I knew I struck nerve. “My mortgage guys,” he finally said.

I could tell by the look on Pete’s face that he made the same notation of his words as I did. “Mortgage *guys*? As in, *not* a company?”

“Yeah, pretty much,” Fritz said. “Just some local guys with money... sort of the neighborhood’s ‘unofficial bank.’ But when things go wrong, they don’t cut you as much slack as the bank.”

“Loan sharks,” Pete named them. He glanced at me. “Trying to move up in the world.”

“And they know,” Fritz added, “that if they can get me out of here, they can sell this place for twice what I bought it for in this market. They’ve been buying up and reselling all kinds of properties up here in Californian Hills... that’s the name of the neighborhood. They already know about my e-book plans, and they got tech guys of their own. Based on what I’ve heard of their IT savvy, they’re likely to set up a DOS attack on my site. Anything to make sure I get little to nothing from the sales.”

I nodded, thinking hard. Threatening the guy with a DOS attack. There must have been some kind of revenge-karma at work here, and it was certainly pushing my buttons. “Is the book online anywhere yet? Is there any chance they have the book already?”

“No,” Fritz said, and he reached into his T-shirt and fished out a small device I recognized. It was a USB storage key, but one with a powerful biometric encryption system in it... you needed a fingerprint and a password to open it. “The book’s in here, and I haven’t put it online yet. I haven’t even e-mailed it to anyone, other than the copyright office for registration.” He stuffed the key back into his shirt. “Can you help me?”

I looked at Pete and Gail. “I think so,” I said. “I need to know a little more about the e-book first. But if your ‘guys’ are that intent on getting you, they might have the place bugged. Let’s do some travelling.”



## 8: Planning

“Okay, we’re ready,” Pete announced as he rejoined us in the dining room. His dining room, that is... we were now back at his place, where we set up a few very paranoid precautions against being tapped.

Web guys know about most of the tools spies use to tap into places. After all, IT guys built ‘em for them, and web guys have used most of ‘em. Most of them aren’t very effective, unless they are placed in advance, and no one’s had time to bug Pete’s place yet, so we had a good level of protection going. The second kinds of technology were pretty sophisticated, but could be defeated by relatively simple means. For instance, the basic telescope, used to eavesdrop on conversations... sitting inside and drawing the blinds took care of that.

The more sophisticated lasers are designed to detect the vibrations in windows created by conversations, and turn those into sounds that can be recorded. Tuning Pete’s stereo into a daytime talk show, and tilting the subwoofer against the nearest window to the conversation, would effectively mask any real conversations inside.

And finally, I made sure Pete’s PC was unplugged from the web. Really good programs can activate a PC remotely, and if it has a mike or camera, others can watch the room without the owner even knowing. Once Pete’s machine was disconnected, we were safe.

And finally, we’d brought Frosty along, and he was sitting by the front door. If anyone tried to sneak up and listen the old-fashioned way, Frosty would hear ‘em a mile away, and we’d know about that, too.

Satisfied we were safe, I took out my laptop. It was a Toughbook, hardened and secure, which I did my serious work on. I started it up and, making sure the wireless features were disabled, I set up a new secure folder in a folder in a folder, using a few normal-sounding file names that no one would notice as significant, but that related to keywords I knew well enough that I would always be able to find the files without trouble.

Then I held out my hand. “Fritz, I need your e-book.” Naturally, he gave me a skeptical look, so I explained. “I just need it to create a dummy file that will look legitimate. It’s part of the process. I’ll also use it to concoct our viral marketing campaign.”

“Really?” Fritz said, his eyes lighting up. Everybody reacted that way to “viral” campaigns, which could spread word about a person, product or service seemingly faster than light itself. When they worked. “What are you going to do?”

“I don’t know yet,” I said. “But hopefully the story will suggest something. If not, I’ll just wing it.”

Fritz nodded and handed over the key. I plugged it into the laptop, then turned it towards Fritz and let him put in the password and his fingerprint. Then I turned it back to myself, and copied the e-book into the secured file. It was a Word doc, which I’d expected, and which would make my job easier.

“Okay,” I said once that was done. “Now, here’s the plan. We want to make it look like the mark will be able to stage a DOS attack on your e-book server, and take you out. But we’re going to pull a switch on him, and send him to a dummy site. While he DOS-es that to death, you’ll be selling on the other site. Very simple, very easy. Which formats did you plan to use for your e-books?”

“PDF, Mobipocket, ePub and eReader,” Fritz replied. “Those are already made, though.”

“That’s okay, these are for dummy files, too.” eReader may have been the only one I hadn’t heard of before, so I made a quick note of all of them in a notepad file. I knew where I could go online to find free conversion software for all of them besides the PDF, which I already had. They might not be pretty, but they were for the suckers, so it didn’t matter.

“Is your pay site set up already?”

“Not yet,” Fritz replied. “I was going to do that next.”

“Okay, I’ll take care of it, then,” I told him. “If you’ve already set up any accounts for them, like with Paypal or something, let me have them. I’ll need to use what you’ve already created, because the guys’ll know about them. Then we’ll create a new account for the real transactions.”

“How are people going to know the real site from the dummy site?” Pete asked. “For that matter, how are you going to steer them from one to the other?”

“We can ID their IP address by using cookies in the viral campaign and comparing it to any other correspondence you’ve gotten from them via e-mail, and arrange to redirect that IP to the dummy site,” I explained. “That’ll work for the mark, but not for every IP that a DOS attack will come from. So we use the viral campaign and embed something in it, something we know the mark will ignore, but any interested fan will find and check out. Then we put the link to the real site in there.

“The dummy site will look just like the real site,” I continued. “We don’t want the mark to get wise. He will go to the fake site, along with the rest of the DOC traffic, while the real site is sitting pretty on another server with another ISP.”

I shut off the Toughbook. “So, we need a viral campaign. Why don’t you tell us about the novel, and we’ll see what we can brainstorm up?”

Fritz agreed, and was eager to tell us his story. I don’t read much sci-fi, but I had to admit, it sounded interesting as he went on. Once he finished, we started throwing ideas back and forth, and trying to figure out inventive ways of approaching them. A few hours passed, and we prevailed upon Gail to order pizzas and wings to go with Pete’s beer.

By that evening, we had a plan.

Finally, it had gotten late. Fritz was yawning a lot, and Frosty hadn’t had dinner, so we decided to get them home. While I stood out on the balcony, ordering my strategy in my head, the others were saying goodnight in the living room. I finally heard the door shut behind me, and the place was quiet for awhile.

A minute later, I was aware of someone else on the balcony. Expecting Pete to be bringing me a beer nightcap, I held my hand out. I was surprised when a hand, not a beer, slipped into it, and turned my head around.

“Gail! Aren’t you taking Fritz home?”

“I talked Pete into doing that,” she said. “There’s more room in his car for a tall guy and a dog, anyway.” I reflected on how badly they had fit into her eclipse, at that, and nodded. “Besides, I wanted some alone time with you.”

“Alone time, with my brother’s ex?” I said. “Hello, awkward.”

“Not really,” she told me, and joined me on the balcony. “Pete and I were always swingers, even when we were together. And now we’re not together. Trust me, he wouldn’t mind if you and I spent some quality time together.”

“Oh, really? And what if I minded?”

“Oh, excuse me,” Gail said with a smile. “Nobody told me you were dead.” And she turned my head towards her, and kissed me. I immediately thought of Pete’s comments about sex videos, the thoughts punctuated by her talents with the liplock, and I started revising my immediate plans. IT guys do a lot of their work at night. But most of us are smart enough to know when to blow work off, if it means getting some. Namely, every time it comes up.

When Gail finally pulled back from me, I asked, “Are you sure Pete won’t have a problem with this?”

“Are you kidding?” Gail said. “We’ll have to lock the door to keep him from joining us. And oh, yeah: We’d better check the room for cameras first.”

## 9: Preparation

By the time Pete came out of his room, I was already busy at the dining room table working over my Toughbook. “Morning, super-stud,” he said, which confirmed that he knew what I’d been doing last night. Not that it would have been hard to figure out: The way Gail had carried on last night, the walls would’ve had to be four feet thick to guarantee no one else heard us. “Coffee?” he offered.

“Please,” I said. All I’d found was cans of Donald Duck orange juice, and I needed more than that. “Don’t suppose there’s a Starbucks on your block?”

“Not quite, but it’s not far. What’cha want?”

“Ohh...” It took me a good few seconds to switch gears enough to rattle off my drink of choice, as usual. “A grande double-shot skim milk espresso with room, in my... oh, I don’t have my cup...”

Only then did I look up, to notice that Pete was standing there and holding out his cellphone in my direction. I realized I had just dictated my drink order to someone. Once he was sure I was through, he brought the phone up to his own ear, and said, “You got that? Good. Be there in five.” He hung up, and smiled. “A little sweetie I got on the hook down there. Maybe I’ll bring her by later. How’s it going?”

“It’s going,” I said non-committally. Pete nodded, shrugged, and headed for the door. Only then did I notice he was still wearing his sleeping shorts. “*Dude—*”

“S’okay,” Pete called over his shoulder, “I’ve got Gail’s account card. Be back soon!” The door closed, leaving me alone again. After a moment, I quickly glanced around, just to make sure I really was alone in the apartment this time. As nice as last night had been, I didn’t have time for the distraction right now.

When you’re duplicating a website, you have to be careful that the two sites look identical. Since different sites might be on different servers at different ISPs, that meant checking your site’s appearance and links to make sure everything works the same on both sites. If you don’t do this, you might tip off your mark that he’s been played for a sucker. And with loan sharks, that was never a good idea. So I was neck-deep in Fritz’s site, which would become the bogus site, and the new, real site I was setting up, making sure you couldn’t tell one from the other. I’d also have to “spoof” the domain name window, to make it look to the sharks that the bogus site was in fact the real site... so far, there was no way to create two sites with the same domain name on the web, thanks to the careful work of ICANN. But being creative with your site naming could accomplish the same thing.

For instance, Fritz’s site was named after his book, “Blue Shift Bandits.” One of the great things about standard browsers is, they display site names and other things using sans-serif fonts. In standard sans-serif fonts, and in many serif fonts, the number one and the lowercase “l” all look alike. (So does the uppercase “I,” but you can’t specify caps in domain names, so that particular similarity isn’t something you can take advantage of, except in internal pages.) So you can swap them interchangeably in your domain name and create identical-looking sites at brand new domains. I had already registered a new domain substituting a “one” for the “l” in Blue, giving me my new site with the identical-looking domain name, under an alias with a Paypal account that I’ve used before... so the sharks wouldn’t know who to look for.

Of course, some creative googling could still reveal my new site to them. So I had to prepare a surprise for the sharks, to keep them busy while the new site did its work. Most site attackers expect that they won’t get caught orchestrating a DOS attack. This is usually because they can use a temporary site long enough to create the attack viruses, then ditch it before they can be traced. But we knew in advance that they were coming, and when you knew in advance, there were things you could do about it. Things that would keep them too preoccupied to google spoof addresses.

By the time Pete got back with my coffee, I had the dupe site up. Now it was time for the fun work.

Viral campaigns are interesting things: They work because they play on people’s emotions or curiosity, hook them either with assumed veracity or just plain entertainment value, and are subsequently passed around to others. Sometimes, they don’t have to be real, truthful, or even that well-done, as long as they are clever. So the trick is, figuring out what’s real enough, truthful enough or clever enough to become viral.

Unfortunately, people know about viral campaigns now... so they won't fall for just anything. You have to be very careful, or someone will expose your viral campaign for what it is, and everyone will ignore it. However... sometimes, that's exactly what you want. If you can get enough people to check out the guy who had the incredibly big *cojones* to do some crazy online stunt, you'll achieve the same thing as a viral campaign that has everybody fooled.

So what was I gonna do?

What else? I was gonna use porn.

## 10: Distracting with Porn

Any web guy knows porn is the easy way around anything. You want it found? Use porn. You want it hidden? Use porn as a distraction. You want everyone to check it out? Give it a porn connection. In this case, it would be the cover to Fritz's book, which he fortunately hadn't created yet. Using trusty Photoshop, I whipped up a book cover that included a certain star of stage, screen, silken sheets, yacht decks, private plane lounges, limo back seats, doctor's offices, and the occasional honeymoon suite closet (hey, I don't judge 'em, I just pick 'em), and roughed up a set of futuristic clothing over her otherwise naked body... in such a way that everyone who saw it would know who it was, and how to find the unencumbered photo my art was based on. It was like dangling a carrot the size of... well, a really big carrot... in front of those sci-fi fanboys. Then I added a male, same notations as above, for the fangirls.

Then I sent that cover art shot to numerous e-book-related forums I dug up after a quick search, making sure the art was also a link to the bogus site. The bogus site included an easy-to-find page I'd thrown together on how to Photoshop cover art, which included source links. This material would suck the fanboys in like flies, because if there's one thing fanboys like to do, it's to know easy ways to make salacious content of their own. For the wimming, I added a few comments and links to sites that discussed the affairs of said male porn star with the wife of a certain Latin heartthrob. (Later, I'd remove the art and material, and leave a message from the author about an over-zealous web guru with questionable taste.)

I knew the sharks wouldn't be likely to go that far in. All they wanted was to block the site. So, other than probably looking at the cover, they wouldn't bother going any further in trying to find out how to make their own, or read beefcake gossip. That page would be ignored by them, and visited by everyone else. Which is why the link to the real site would be embedded in that page, where the sharks would never see it, but every fan would. The real site would provide a date for the beginning of the sale, and a link to a fresh bookmark (and a warning that the old bookmark would be no good before the sale date) that would bring them to the new page, while the sharks would have a link to the bogus page, and wait for the moment to launch their DOS attack in the wrong place.

Pete watched me work, occasionally making comments as to how to make the Photoshopped cover more salacious, or the text more likely to draw in the fans (think 'fratboy humor') and turn off the sharks. In this area, Pete was good. By lunchtime, I had a site, and some wicked cover art, that would've made Penthouse sit up and take notice.

And finally, came the coup de grace: *The distraction*. Today's distraction would be brought to the bad guys courtesy of the letters "java" and "script." And there were plenty of places to go online to find custom-made and customizable scripts designed to do everything from force-feed you dialogs and naughty pictures, to siphon everything off of your computer, and everything in-between. What I had in mind was a bit more elegant than those, but it would be just as interesting. I started to work on that, just as a ring came from the door, and Pete let in Gail and Fritz.

"How's it going, guys?" Gail greeted us. Well, she said it like it was us, but she looked directly, and only, at me when she said it. Pete saw it, too, but he only grinned and rolled his eyes. One of these days, I'd have to understand how their relationship worked. But today was not the day... I had better things to do.

In the meantime, Gail came around me from one side, and Fritz on the other, and peeked over my shoulder at the website I'd created... and the salacious cover art. Fritz's eyebrows instantly shot up above his hairline, while Gail's eyes popped (hey, there's a reason I picked that particular porn star... reaction is *everything*). Then Gail looked at me and said, "You boys really are all alike, aren't you?"

"All part of the plan," I said, and explained it in detail to them as I continued to work. Once I was done explaining, everyone seemed to agree that it was a great strategy. Gail even tousled my hair from behind, a sign, I suppose, that she approved of me.

"You're evil," was her actual comment. And then: "So, what's next?"

"That's what I'm doing now," I replied. "Just a little javascript for the bogus site, and another for the real site. The script from the real site is designed to find the script from the first site, the bogus site, which everyone will hit first, and render that script non compos mentis." Yeah, even I didn't know what I'd just said, but I think I got the point across.

"And those who don't go to the real site?" Pete asked.

“Those people will get a surprise on the release day,” I explained. “The first script will execute, and they’ll be too busy dealing with that to worry about anything else.”

“Busy doing what?” Gail asked.

In return, I looked back at her and smiled. “What? You think I’m gonna ruin the surprise? Wait and see, babe. Wait and see.”

And with that, I was done with my scripts. Just one thing left to do, and for that, I turned to Fritz. Pointing at the mouse, which had its cursor hovering over an “Okay” button, I said, “Care to do the honors?”

Fritz just smiled, extended a finger, and slowly lowered it towards the mouse.

## 11: Gail's Place

About two hours later, I sat in Gail's Eclipse as she got back in the car. We were in front of Fritz's place, where we had just dropped him off after the four of us had had lunch, in celebration of the execution of The Plan. Then Gail had offered to take Fritz home, and asked me to come along. That's right. Right in front of Pete, she asked me, and not him, to come along. And Pete didn't mind a bit. One of these days... but I'd already thought that earlier. Right then, I just said "sure," and rode along.

So now, Gail put the car in gear and headed back toward the Pacific. But well before we got there, she made a turn and headed into a neighborhood that so far I hadn't seen. In no time, my eyes were bugging out of my head, as I took in multi-million-dollar mansions and hundred-thousand-dollar cars, driveway gates as tall as a house, and actual security posts, complete with suited guards.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

"There's no reason you have to hang around Pete all the time," Gail told me.

"He didn't seem to be doing so bad," I commented.

"Of course not," she said. "I paid for that apartment. But wait'll you see how the other half lives."

After a few twists and turns, we angled into a private driveway, and I watched as one door of a three-door garage opened up before us. The house connected to the garage wasn't as big as most of the mansions we'd passed, but it was by no means a shack, either. We drove into the garage, and I saw a Jeep Cherokee parked in the second bay of the garage, and a bicycle in the third bay. Gail shut off the car and got out, and I followed, catching a last glimpse of the spacious front lawn before the garage door closed on it.

She opened a door to the rest of the house, and I followed her through it. Inside was almost beyond my abilities to describe... nothing like the homes I'm used to seeing, or being in. There was a lot of space, multiple levels with wide staircases bridging them, lots of chrome railings, lots of windows, and light that seemed to come in from windows I couldn't even find. The furniture was modern and sexy-looking, and expensive-looking art hung on the walls or sat on the floors or tables. If there was an echo in the house, it might not have been from the sheer size of the place alone... I'm pretty sure sounds were bouncing in and out of my open mouth, too.

When I found my voice, I said, "Is this... really all yours?"

"Yes," Gail nodded. "I got it cheap from a former investment banker who took what he could, then took off for Aruba."

"I'm not going to ask what constitutes 'cheap'," I commented drily. "Tell me again what you do for a living... 'cause I don't remember you ever telling me."

"Pete didn't tell you I was a CPA?" Gail shook her head. "I guess he was ashamed to admit to sleeping with a corporate wonk."

"Right. Like anyone would be ashamed to sleep with you," I shot back amiably. "So this is why you could buy off Pete after you broke up, huh?"

"You know," Gail said abruptly, "I didn't bring you up here so we could talk about Pete." She reached for my hand, and when I gave it to her, she led me to another wide, curving stairway, and we started upstairs. "You're a smart guy, Mike," she said as we climbed. "You could go places around here. I know people in the industry that can always use premier tech talent. And besides that, there are plenty of others that can use a bit of help now and then, but can't afford what the absolutely criminal tech firms in this town charge."

"Are they really that bad?" I asked.

"Don't forget," Gail pointed out, "San Diego is a navy town. Lots of government contractors... you know all about Beltway Bandits, being close to Washington. Here, you get the same thing... only this is a small town, so less non-government businesses around here. So the bandit contractors get to shill the locals on the side. You could make a killing as an independent IT guy in San Diego. And you could do other things as well."

“Like what?”

Gail stopped walking, and I realized we had come to the end of the stairs, and reached a landing, beside a set of double-doors. Gail pushed the doors open, and revealed a bedroom that the porn star aforementioned in this story would actually have appreciated. Maybe not swooned over, but appreciated.

Gail said, “You can give me a good reason not to regret staying in San Diego near your chucklehead brother.” Then she pulled me inside, not bothering to close the door.



## 12: Publication Day

A day later, we were on our way back to Pete's place, where we'd all agreed to meet up for the big event, scheduled at 4 pm.

Why 4 pm?

One thing the best web guys always seem to know is what time it is in Greenwich Mean Time, or GMT. Computers, and everything related to them, are ultimately all sync'd up to GMT, so everybody who should know when things were happening everywhere in the world. I knew San Diego was eight hours removed from GMT, which meant that when it was midnight GMT, it was 7 pm in Baltimore, 3 am in Moscow, 9 am in Tokyo, and 4 pm in San Diego.

We'd decided that, to be as nerdy as possible, we would officially release the e-book at midnight GMT... 4 pm our time.

When we reached Pete's place, we were surprised when someone other than Pete or Fritz opened the door. A diminutive blonde in a sun dress and sandals opened the door, took one look at me, and said, "You must be Mike."

"And you must be?" I asked.

"The one who filled your espresso order yesterday morning," she said sweetly.

At that moment, the door opened further, and Pete looked us over and smiled back. "Come on in, guys." He noted our notation of the barista, and said, "This is Reilly. Reilly, Mike you guessed, and you remember Gail." There was a strange moment, as Gail and Reilly exchanged glances, then Reilly looked over Gail and me, then back to Pete. Pete, aware of everyone staring at him, said cleverly, "Anyone want a beer?" and exited into the kitchen.

I just headed for the dining room and unlimbered my bag, which I had kept with me since yesterday, for safe keeping. (Actually, it had never left a table in the foyer where I'd placed it once I arrived at Gail's place. But honestly, I didn't miss it. In fact, I barely thought about it. Gail was giving me much more to think about.) I placed it on the table and booted it up, and once it was ready, started calling up the ISP control panels that would allow me to monitor the sites as things unfolded, as well as the Paypal site to monitor sales. Pete brought me my beer, and I got into the control panels to see how well my plan had worked.

Sure enough, there were a massive number of hits that corresponded to the cover art page, and quite a few fans who had simply downloaded a fresh full-res copy of the art right from there. And as I suspected, most of them had found and clicked on the links to the real site, as well as re-bookmarked it as planned, guaranteeing they would be back at the real site the next day... today.

There was also a huge buzz about the site (and especially about the art) on other e-book related sites, like TeleRead and MobileRead, in sites dedicated to other reading devices, and on one or two others whose names I've already forgotten. The link to the real site was everywhere, and as it looked exactly like the link to the bogus site, I was sure the sharks wouldn't have even noticed had they thought to look.

In fact, I was able to do a quick search of IP addresses that had accessed both sites, through the stats programs available on each ISP's site. You don't always know exactly who an IP address belongs to, but using the stats, you could sometimes narrow things down. For instance, there were only seven IP addresses that had visited the bogus site, but not the real site. One of them was surely the sharks... maybe even more than one, depending on how their IT guy worked. Of those, three had gone on to the purchase page, which did not have its purchase links up live yet, and the stats indicated the purchase pages had been bookmarked. The sharks wouldn't have done that, because they didn't need to hit the purchase page specifically... a DOS attack to the root directory would take down the entire site. So that left four addresses. I was able to narrow down two of them to local ISPs. Beyond that, it was all guesswork, and not particularly useful for our purposes, but still worth recording for future reference.

"How soon are we going to get started?" Fritz asked. He had been chatting up the barista in the corner, unnoticed by Pete, who seemed to be watching me, watching Gail, and watching how close Gail was to me. This little vaca was getting more interesting by the day.

“The e-books are in place,” I told him, “and the on-sale pages are ready to be uploaded at the stroke of four.” I consulted my watch. “I’ll upload the sale pages at one minute to four, and we’ll just watch the rest. Oh, and speaking of watching: Pete, go get your binoculars, willya?” Pete gave me a funny look, then went to fetch his specs.

We had ten minutes. While we waited, I looked at Gail and Pete, and thought about this weird relationship that I’d stumbled into. There was something between them that I was missing, and I had no idea what. Obviously, they knew... and they had apparently gotten so good at hiding it under their ‘carefree swingers’ façade, that for someone on the outside there was no telling what either of them was really thinking. Of course, if they were playing some elaborate tennis game between each other—with me as the ball—I could just play along... I mean, it really doesn’t matter if the ball knows the rules, and besides, I was getting laid.

Maybe Gail had actually dumped Pete, and was now setting her sights on the other Schitzeiss brother. Even though Pete didn’t seem to mind, it seemed like a lousy thing to do to him, for whatever reason. Of course, he could have dumped her—oh, *right*. And Pabst might win next year’s international beer competitions. I couldn’t imagine any red-blooded American man dumping that girl, not even for Angelina Jolie with all of her money (and none of the kids).

So she dumped him... but over a boat? That was pretty far out there, even for Pete. One thing every web guy knows is that there’s more to a website than the flaming logos on the home page. Somewhere in the middle of friendly exes, boats, mansions and sex tapes was a truth just screaming to get out. I had a funny feeling that I’d never rest until I found that truth... and when I did, I was willing to bet I wouldn’t be able to stick around. But that, again, was another task for another day.

### 13: DOS Revenge

Finally, a minute to four rolled around. I made a show of floating my finger about in the air, before bringing it down on the “enter” key. Only Pete seemed to appreciate the theatrics. Gail looked at me and said, “I hope this works.” Fritz looked at me and bit his lower lip. I just smiled, and inwardly, hoped nothing would go wrong.

Of course, it was possible that their IT guy was as good as me, and may have figured out everything I was planning. He could be carpet-bombing the real site already, and truth to tell, I was a bit nervous about opening up a command prompt and checking it out. Finally, a minute after four, I opened the command prompt window and did a ping on the bogus site. As I suspected, I was getting no response from it. So I opened up the ISP control panel... or rather, I tried to. The ISP was not responding.

“They’ve started their DOS attack on the bogus site,” I announced. “So far, so good.”

“What about the other one?” Fritz asked.

“Let’s find out,” I said, trying to sound confident. I started by pinging the real site, and got a response right away. Then I went to the site’s ISP, accessed the control panel, and got right in. I started checking the site traffic, and after a moment, I grinned. “Well, for a sci-fi e-book, it seems like it’s selling pretty quickly,” I said. “Take a look.”

Everyone crowded around, and as they watched, the site registered a constantly-growing volume of purchases... in the first two minutes, it had already registered over a hundred purchases and climbing. Gail gave out a whoop of joy and hugged Fritz in congratulations, then hugged me from behind my back, while Pete pumped a fist in the air and shouted, “Look at it go, boy!”

“You did it! It worked!” Fritz looked like he was ready to hug me too, and he finally settled for pounding me on the back in glee. Then he went sober for a moment, and said, “And what about the sharks? What’s keeping them from catching on?”

“Well,” I said, handing Pete’s binoculars to him, “do you think you can find your neighborhood from here?”

Fritz took the binoculars and examined them, then me. “Uh, I think so...”

“Give it a try,” I urged. When he went to the window and scanned the horizon, trying to figure out the approximate direction of his house, I said, “I’ll give you a hint: Look for low-flying helicopters.”

“Low fly—?” he started, just before we all saw him stop, focus on something out there, and begin to work the specs to get a better look. “Hey, I do see helicopters! What’s going on out there?”

“Panic. The result of going to the first website, without visiting the second one,” I explained. “In exchange, I gave them something else to worry about. The script on the bogus site was set to create a zipped file of everything in its files, and e-mail that to the local branch of the FBI, along with any info as to the owner’s identity and contact info that was stored on the computer. Then it would display a pop-up, telling the owner exactly what it had done. Most people store everything on their PCs, with minimal security, or maybe a good password... but those can usually be bypassed. All it would take would be a good child-porn picture or two to send at least a carful of feds out there after them. Judging by the helicopters...”

I trailed off, in order to let Fritz, whose eyes were still glued to the binoculars, exclaim, “I count five of them!”

“I’d say they had a bit more than child-porn pics on their computer,” I finished. “So, they’re too busy trying to climb over fences and under cars, evading those guys, than trying to find your real site. You should have no problem selling your book without interference.”

I smiled to myself. I had put all of my eggs into the basket labeled “panic.” Fortunately, when it came to people operating against the law and trying to lay low, panic was usually a very effective tool... outside of television, most people weren’t sharp enough to keep their wits in an emergency that might involve entities like the FBI. When they bark... most people *run*, without bothering to look behind them.

At that moment, two hands reached out and turned my head around. Gail was at the other end of those hands, and she smiled at me. “You are brilliant,” she said, and kissed me in such a way as to make me believe it. Or at least, to make me believe she believed it.

She stopped kissing me, and immediately afterward, her lips still sweet on my tongue, something cold and hard clunked against the back of my head. I turned the other way, to see Pete hovering over me, a strange light in his eye, and a cold one in his hand. “Have a beer, bro.”

Being grateful that he hadn’t just given me a concussion, I took it.

## 14: The Future Looks Bright

I was still amazed by the popularity of Fritz's sci-fi masterpiece. Two days after he had posted it online, he had made four grand! Enough to pay off the loan sharks, though we all had doubts he'd need to, now.

I'd asked him what story could be so compelling to his audience. He told me it was a modern treatment on an old story called "Metropolis." I vaguely remembered a movie called that... I thought Adam Ant was in it... and everyone knows Superman lives there, but that was my extent of knowledge, which I was dumb enough to reveal to Fritz. He then tried to explain to me how the original story was heavily metaphorical, overlaid with superficial imagery and tellingly provincial in its worldview, and how he had found a modern and realistic way to present the same themes with modern elements and realistic memes... but I'd lost him by the second beer. And before the end of the third, Gail was pulling me out of my chair, and into the guestroom while Fritz tried to explain Germanic Proto-expressionist literature to Pete.

No question who was in the better situation at that moment.

Somewhere in the evening, as night finally began to fall, we came up for air, and lay panting giddily on the floor, sitting with our backs to the bed (don't ask... we might actually tell you). The whole "sweat drying and cooling on the silken sheets" thing can be nice, but at that moment, neither of us had the energy to crawl back up there, so we decided it would have to dry and cool out on the carpet.

While I sat there, I reflected on the chain of events that had driven me here, and especially, the one link that had set it all off. Not for the first time, I thought about the fact that being blackballed out of Baltimore wouldn't exactly look stellar on my resume. I really needed to figure out what had happened, and find a way to correct it, or at least to document my lack of fault, if I ever hoped to work in a serious web job again.

On the other hand, I supposed there was something to be said for less-than-serious jobs, as the cash Gail had handed me for my services to Fritz had demonstrated. It had been good money, especially since I had a free place to stay (I knew a few guys in Baltimore, in the moving business, that I could pay to pack up and ship my stuff at a moment's notice)... if I decided to stay, that is.

In the dining room, we could still hear Fritz and Pete talking, and judging by the sound of both voices, I guessed they had moved on beyond proto-expressionism to subjects they both had in common (like girls, beer, beaches, beer with girls on beaches, etc.). Gail could hear the conversation too, and I think the most important corollary of that was that if we could hear them out there, they certainly could have heard us in here.

I looked at Gail at that moment, and I think she could tell what I was thinking, and why it was important. She leaned into me significantly, and said, "It would be great if you stayed here. Think of all the good things you could do."

"For who?" I asked.

"Whom," she said.

"Don't change the subject. Do you want me here for you, or for the overall welfare of San Diego?"

"Well, for me, of course," she said without hesitation. "And if you can help out the rest of the citizens of this great city, that would be nice, too."

"And what about Pete? How am I helping him?"

Gail shrugged, and looked at me. "Your brother is a good man, Mike. But he isn't very responsible. I think your staying here would be a good example for him, to help ground him a bit."

"Ground him," I repeated. "And is that why you left him—and are now sleeping with his brother under his very nose—to help *ground* him?"

"May I remind you," Gail said, "that you're new to this relationship—" She blinked, and caught herself. "—this *former* relationship. Pete and I are history, and we are both fine with that. And in the meantime, you have someone who wants you madly. How could you possibly have a problem with that?"

One thing I know, as a web guy, as a businessperson, and as a human being: You don't just tell someone they're lying to your face, unless there is nothing they have that you want. So I didn't answer her question. Instead, I stood up and headed for the guest bathroom, saying, "I'm ready for a drink."

Gail continued to sit there, staring at the closed curtains on the wall, and said, barely loud enough for me to hear: "Aren't we all?"

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