

Chapter 3

Monday, 4:32 A.M.

The Technician was grumpy. He'd searched unsuccessfully for the tip of the needle until almost dawn. Who still had shag carpet? It was a blight on the otherwise modestly stylish house. The only consolation was it would be equally hard for anyone else to find it and they wouldn't be looking for it. He hated loose ends, but he had run out of time. Still, he accomplished his goal, and the rest of the job was in his wheelhouse.

The sun was making its imminent arrival known as he entered the garage where Reggie's Sunset Tech van was parked. After making sure Reggie's company tablet and ID were in the van, he started the engine, opened the garage door, and exited. Only after he was sure he was out of range of the cameras did he rearm Cerberus and turn off the cloned phone.

It was still early enough the only people out and about were sleepy dog walkers and joggers. They had no reason to pay attention to a van they'd probably seen before. Even though it was early, traffic into the City was heavy. Waiting at a light, he checked Reggie's tablet for the day's work schedule. He had plenty of time. Inching along, he gave himself a shave with an electric razor from his satchel. The sleepless night was apparent on his face, but that wouldn't be unusual for Reggie. He popped some speed to keep himself alert.

Once he was in Manhattan, he pulled over to the side of the road long enough to disable the van's GPS tracker. Sunset Tech would notice, but by the time they looked into it, he would be long gone. He parked in a garage near Reggie's second appointment. He slipped into the back of the van and taped his photo over Reggie's on his ID with clear packing tape, trimming the edges

so they weren't noticeable. It wouldn't pass a rigorous inspection, but he didn't expect it to have to.

Taking Reggie's tablet and ID, he exited the van. After glancing around to make sure he was alone, he stripped off his disposable coveralls, gloves and shoe covers and stuffed them into a trash bag. Then he sprayed deodorant and donned a Sunset Tech shirt one of his regular vendors made for him. Out on the street, he stuffed the trash bag deep into an overflowing garbage can. Someone would eventually find Reggie and the van, but it would take them a week, maybe two, and that's all he needed.

Two short walks and a subway ride later, he stood outside the Cerberus building. Fifty stories of slickly modern steel and glass. It was nice if you liked that sort of thing. He took a moment to appreciate the moment. The hard part was over, and if his source on the inside did their job, he would soon be a wealthy man. His only qualm about the plan was that it was so heavily dependent on other people. He normally wouldn't consider it. But he had no choice. He was venturing into the lion's den.

Most of the first floor was visible through large windows. He studied the security guard at his desk. Gus. The beefy man looked like an ex-marine. Gray crew cut, square jaw, icy blue eyes. By the book Gus. No friendly banter with this one, but no curiosity either. And his shift was nearly over. Perfect!

The Technician lowered the brim of the cap he would use to shield his face from security cameras, pasted his stranger-in-the-crowd smile on his face and entered the lobby. Just a man trying to get through his busy day. Neither friendly nor unfriendly. Unremarkable, forgettable. Gus barely glanced at the ID card The Technician flashed and slid through the reader. He was

through the gate and in the elevator in less than a minute. One barrier passed. But the real test waited on the tenth floor.

He exited the elevator and glanced around the reception area. As he hoped, it was deserted at six in the morning.

“May I help you?”

He looked toward the voice. The usual receptionist, who would have recognized Reggie, was somewhere on a beach in the Caribbean, a vacation she conveniently won at the company’s holiday party. This woman was a temp. Adopting his disarming-a-rube grin, he approached the desk. “Good morning.”

“Why, good morning to you. Can I help you?”

He held up Reggie’s ID and said, “Reggie Spenser from Sunset Tech. I’m here to install some servers. I should be expected.”

“One moment.” She tapped on her keyboard. “You are indeed.” She logged his arrival, then retrieved a lanyard with a visitor’s badge from below the desk and handed it to him. “Make sure you wear it while you’re in the building.”

“I will.”

“I’ll call someone to escort you. You can wait over there.”

“Thank you,” he said cheerily. He took a seat and studied Nik Atherton’s smug grin in the middle of three portraits on the wall behind the receptionist’s desk. It would be just like that arrogant prick to plaster his face on the wall. He let his gaze drift across the room. How impressed would his competitors be that he was here? In the lair of their boogeyman. He would have to find a way to let the story slip out once he was safe.

Five minutes later, a woman who looked as if she could be in high school appeared. A little over five feet of athletic spunkiness, blond, freckled, a wide, guileless Midwest-nice smile. Young, fresh-faced, and clueless. Just as promised. He rose and offered his hand. “Reggie Spenser.”

“Good morning, Mr. Spenser,” she said, taking his hand. “I’m Catherine with a C Munson, but my friends call me Kate. I’ll escort you to the server room.”

Large companies like Cerberus routinely outsourced functions that weren’t part of their core competencies. Sunset Tech had installed all the hardware — servers, air conditioners, network equipment, and the like — when Cerberus built their data center. And since Sunset and their technicians were already vetted, Cerberus continued to use them for hardware maintenance.

Ten minutes later, deep in the maze of the tenth floor, they approached the security desk that guarded the entrance to the inner bastion. The last barrier and the most dangerous. As promised, the regular receptionist was absent, and Kate was obviously a new hire. He’d met no one so far who knew Reggie. This guard was supposed to be new, but The Technician’s source had less control over the guards because security was another service Cerberus outsourced.

Happy no one could see the sweat tickling his ribs, The Technician adopted his bland-patience face and offered Reggie’s ID to the guard. The man showed no recognition as he visually scanned the card before swiping it in a reader. He barely glanced at the output on his monitor before handing the card back and saying, “You’re good, Reggie.”

Kate returned The Technician’s smile, a genuine one this time, as she swiped her ID in the electronic lock of the data center. She pulled the door open, releasing a blast of chilled air and the whirl of air conditioner blowers, then stood back to let him enter. Once they were both inside, she led him past rows of racked equipment toward the back of the room. It was an impressive

setup. Top of the line enterprise servers, their combined worth in the tens of millions of dollars. But the secrets buried in the storage systems was the real treasure. Worth far more than the equipment to the right people. This room contained the company's development systems. All the code he and his kind would lose sleep over for years to come was here.

Kate pointed to six boxes stacked in a corner on the back wall. "These are them." She pointed to a rack enclosure with empty bays and said, "They go there. The cables are in the back."

"Thank you, Kate," Reggie said and set his satchel down. "I can take it from here."

A small frown wrinkled her brow. "I'll have to stay. No one can be in this room alone."

"Right." Worth a try. "Forgot about that." He set to unboxing the first server.

"Can I help?"

"Not much to do, really." Noticing her disappointed frown, he said, "You can help me rack them. They're small, but they're heavy."

An hour later, the servers were installed and powered up. Reggie set his laptop on a retractable shelf and connected it to the top server.

"What are you doing?" Kate asked.

It was only the latest in an endless stream of questions that were wearing on his sleep-deprived nerves. But crabbiness would cement him in her memory, so he bit back his irritation and asked, "How long have you worked here?"

"Two weeks. I'm just a summer intern."

"Oh, yeah? Where do you go to school?"

"Kansas State University. That's in Manhattan, too. Manhattan, Kansas." She gave him a silly grin.

He forced a laugh. “Manhattan and Manhattan. That’s funny. Your major?”

“Computer science. I’ll be a senior in the fall.”

Older than she looked. “Well, Kate. I have to make sure all the servers are healthy.” He spun the laptop so she could see the screen, then tapped the top server with his finger. “This is the management server. You can manage all the others from this one. See? They’re all listed here.”

She nodded.

Resisting the urge to roll his eyes, he said, “Any chance you can grab me a cup of coffee? Pretty chilly in here.”

“Oh, no. I can’t leave while you’re in here. Plus, they get really mad if you bring food or drink in.” The blush beneath the sprinkle of freckles on her cheeks suggested she was speaking from personal experience.

“Right, right. You’re doing a good job.” Moving so fast, he was sure she wouldn’t follow what he was doing. He killed the servers’ logging software to prevent them recording what he did next. Then, giving her his winning smile and letting a little of the wolf into it, he withdrew a flash drive from his pocket and slipped it into a port on the management server.

“What’s that?” she asked.

Curiosity killed the cat, Kate. “Latest software updates. Got to get everything ready before I hand them over to your techs.”

“Can’t you just download everything?”

“Well, someone will have to open the firewall for these before I can do that. They can’t connect to the Internet.”

“Oh, right.”

Ten minutes later, he reactivated the logs and restarted the servers. Kate watched all this with earnest, uncomprehending eyes.

“All set!” he said after ensuring his package was delivered. He held up the Sunset Tech tablet and showed her where to sign. The confirmation would be transmitted to Sunset, so even though Reggie would go missing, this job would be recorded as completed. Nothing to see here, so just move along.

He followed Kate back to the reception area, forcing himself not to urge her to hurry. He was minutes away from the biggest payday of his career. Enough that he could retire somewhere warm and expensive should he choose. If he decided to get out of the game. He let himself enjoy the sway of Kate’s walk, her ponytail swishing from side to side. *Positively Perky Kate*. Too bad he had a strict rule about mixing work with pleasure.

They entered the reception area, and he stopped, letting Kate approach the receptionist’s desk alone. Two men were deep in conversation on the opposite side of the room. Two of the triumvirate who founded the company. The taller man with the million-dollar smile, thousand-dollar suit and five hundred dollar haircut looked as if stepped off the cover of GQ. That would be Joel Walton. The CEO and the face of the company to the media and the public. The Technician and his peers knew he was just an expensive empty suit.

But the other man was another matter. Nik Atherton, Cerberus’s Chief Technology Officer. The Technician’s careful control failed him for a moment, allowing hatred to ripple through his expression before he clamped down on it. The great man looked like a goof, with his artfully mussed blond hair, faded jeans, loafers, untucked t-shirt. But that was just pretentious posturing. The man was as much a snob as the man standing next to him. That only a handful of

the very best could realistically claim they had successfully cracked his systems didn't change that fact.

The Technician licked his lips and took a slow breath. He needed to be careful here. Joel wouldn't recognize Reggie, but Nik would. Atherton was supposed to be across town, meeting with a customer. He glanced at the exit to the stairwell. That would be foolish. If he left without signing out, it would raise alarms. Catching Kate's confused frown, he smiled and said, "Thought I forgot something."

"Oh," she said. "I'll go see if it's in the data center."

The Technician let her slip past him, then dipping his head, he approached the receptionist's desk and handed over his visitor's badge.

"One moment while I sign you out," she said.

Please don't say my name.

"Okay, you are good to go," she said with a wide smile. "Have a nice day."

He had made it. "Thank you!"

"Mr. Atherton, there was a delivery for you," the receptionist called.

The Technician turned toward the elevators and came face to face with his nemesis. They locked eyes. On top of everything else, the man had impossibly gorgeous hazel-green eyes. Bastard! Nik glanced down at the logo on The Technician's shirt. The Technician stood frozen like a rabbit while the fox reached past him to retrieve a thick FedEx envelope.

Nik started to turn away, paused, then turned back and asked, "Where is Reggie?"

The Technician had been methodical and thorough. He had planned for every eventuality. He had an answer for this question, but caught off guard, he hesitated. "Reggie's a little under the weather. They asked me to take his route today." That was the story he had written in his

notebook, but for some reason, he grinned and heard himself saying, “Was on my way to Amazon when I got the call.”

Nik studied his face. “I wasn’t aware Amazon used Sunset Tech.”

Shit! How in hell would Nik know that?! “It was a one-off subcontract. Filling in on an emergency basis.”

“An emergency,” Nik said, tipping his head to the side. When The Technician nodded, he said, “Well, I’m happy Sunset feels installing our servers is more important than an emergency at Amazon.”

The Technician couldn’t think of an answer to that, so he only shrugged and hitched his sheepish-doofofus grin onto his face. “I’m just a tech.”

“What’s your name?”

He lowered his voice, so the receptionist didn’t hear, and offered his hand. “Steve. Steve Linden.”

“Nik!”

Nik and The Technician looked at Joel who was holding an elevator open. “Come on! We’re an hour late already.”

Nik looked at The Technician and held his gaze for a moment, then he shook his hand and said, “Nice to meet you, Steve.”

Chapter 4

Monday, 8:31 A.M.

Half listening to Joel, Nik entered the elevator, expecting the vaguely familiar tech to join them. But as the elevator doors closed, he glimpsed the man entering the stairwell. Nik eyed the door open button, but before suspicion could override the momentum of leaving, the elevator began its descent.

Cerberus had used Sunset Tech for years. There were many companies in the New York area they could have used. Many of them would jump at the chance to get their business and would be cheaper. But Cerberus dealt in digital security, and trust was worth a premium. Nik only had a moment with the new tech, but he didn't trust him. His story about being diverted from a job at Amazon was unlikely, at best, and Sunset wouldn't have sent someone new without informing them.

Joel was talking about the customer they were going to meet. He had been engaged in the intricate sales dance with them for weeks and wanted to share. Nik wasn't normally involved in sales, but the customer asked to meet him. Not needing to know the details of Joel's courtship, Nik anxiously watched the floors tick by. Finally, the doors slid open on the ground floor.

"Nik —" Joel started as Nik fought his way through the crowd waiting for the elevators. "What's wrong?!"

Ignoring him, Nik raced across the lobby, threw the door to the stairwell open, and listened.

"Nik," Joel said behind him.

Nik held up his hand. He couldn't hear anyone on the metal stairs. Pushing past Joel, who was peering past him to see what had Nik so tense, he hurried to the security desk and asked the guard, "Ted, did you see someone from Sunset Tech come past here a few minutes ago?"

"Yes, sir. He just left. Couple of minutes ago."

"Did you see which direction he went?"

"No, sir."

Nik ran to the exit and stepped out onto the busy sidewalk. He searched the crowd, but he couldn't see the tech. Reentering the building, he passed an exasperated Joel on his way to the security desk.

"Nik," Joel called after him. "Tell me what is going on."

"A moment," Nik said, then focused on the security guard.

"Can you pull up the entry log for this morning?"

"Sure. What time?"

"Between five and seven."

"You looking for someone from Sunset?"

"Yes."

After a moment, Ted said, "Reggie Spenser arrived just before six."

Nik stared at him. "No one else from Sunset?"

"No."

"Thank you, Ted." Nik turned away from the security desk to find Joel waiting, the flush of his cheeks at odds with his carefully controlled expression.

"Nik," Joel said. "Tell me what's going on. We're already late and we have to get downtown."

Nik tucked the FedEx envelope under his arm, fished his phone out of his pocket, dialed and put the phone to his ear. “That tech we saw on our floor wasn’t Reggie,” he said to Joel. “But apparently someone pretending to be Reggie arrived this morning.”

“Reggie?”

“Sunset Tech knows we always use the same people. They wouldn’t send someone new without telling —” He turned away from Joel as Singh, their network administrator, answered the phone.

“What’s up boss?” Singh asked.

“Those servers, the new ones the tech installed this morning?”

“Yeah. Was just about to check them out.”

“Don’t open the firewall to them yet.”

“You think there’s a problem?”

“I’m not sure. Don’t do anything with them. Get... get Jamie to dig into them.”

“Jamie?” Singh asked. “You sure? That boy’s got a lot on his plate already.”

“Yeah, I’m sure.”

“Okay. Anyone squawks, I assume I can refer them to you.”

“No problem.”

“Any idea what he’s looking for?”

“No, but the tech from Sunset who installed them wasn’t Reggie.”

“It wasn’t someone you recognized?”

“Never seen him. Said his name was Steve Linden. Can you call Sunset?”

“Right away, and I’ll get Jamie on it,” Singh said and clicked off.

Nik returned his phone to his pocket, feeling as if he averted disaster. When he saw Joel's frown, he asked, "What?"

"You bellyached for a month about getting those servers online," he said, finally losing his temper. "Said you needed them now, now, now. Insisted it get done *today*, so you'd be ready for a big announcement at the SecureTech trade show."

"I did, didn't I?"

When Nik didn't continue, Joel looked to the side. The security guard was staring frankly at them. He pulled Nik to the side of the lobby and lowered his voice. "What do you expect Jamie to find on them?"

Nik let a grin grow on his face. Cerberus's CEO could weave half-understood acronyms and marketing buzzwords into a tapestry of bullshit so tight no one but the most technically savvy could unravel it. It was a talent. He'd explained to Nik it wasn't exactly lying because everyone knew the game. Nik readily admitted how much of their success they owed to Joel's silver tongue. But Joel had long since given up trying to understand what Nik and his technical team actually did. Besides, Nik had no idea what he expected Jamie to find.

He clapped Joel on the shoulder and urged him toward the exit. "Aren't we going to be late?"

"Fine! You don't want to explain." He glared at Nik, who was holding the door open. "And, by the way, we're *already* late."

Monday, 8:35 A.M.

The Technician entered the taxi, gave the driver his destination, then looked out the rear window as the cab pulled into traffic. He didn't think he'd been followed. He faced forward, let

his gaze rest on the cabby's identification placard, and considered the disaster that had just engulfed his plan.

Forcing himself to be analytical, he replayed his conversation with Nik Atherton. When he was done, he sagged and gazed out the window at the office buildings on 10th Avenue. His improvisation about the job at Amazon was undoubtedly stupid, but it made no difference. Nik would be suspicious no matter what he said. He would follow up with Sunset Tech and discover he was an impostor. He doubted even Nik Atherton could find the package he installed on the servers. But even if they couldn't figure out what he did, they would quarantine or scrap the servers.

"Shit," he muttered. His client assured him Nik would be out of the building today. Walton said they were late for that meeting. A simple coincidence, a chance meeting and months of preparation were down the drain. He had been moments away. A minute here or there, and they would have passed through the reception area at different times.

Now, all he could do was manage the fallout. There was no question of completing the job. They would know someone of his caliber was involved, and they would be on high alert. His client wouldn't be happy, but he warned them it was a high-risk job with little chance of success. He wouldn't receive the balance of his fee. That was disappointing, but a far sight better than being in prison.

More importantly, what were the chances he left a trail that led to him? They couldn't identify him. Nik didn't seem to recognize him, and though Nik and others had seen him, he wasn't worried about that. He was assiduous about keeping his likeness off the Internet and all his business was conducted remotely through third parties. No one knew what The Technician looked like.

The only bit of evidence that might lead certain people back to him would be the package he installed on the server. Programming code of any complexity was as distinctive as a fingerprint. There were only a handful of people in the world who could identify the package as his, but they didn't work on the right side of the law. Besides, he was sure no one at Cerberus could isolate it. He licked his lips. Pretty sure. As long as they didn't have the flash drive he used to install the package.

He slipped his hand into his pocket where he'd put the drive after removing it from the server. His pocket was empty. It took a half a heartbeat before panic set in. He lifted off the seat and shoved his hands in all his pockets. They were all empty. "Don't panic," he murmured, his voice fluttering with his breath. Maybe he dislodged it from his pocket. He got on his knees and searched the seat. His skin crawled as he shoved his fingers between the cushions. Nothing.

"Hey!" the driver shouted. "You settle down, or you're out the door."

The Technician sat, unzipped his satchel and extracted its contents, methodically searching each item. "Gotta be in here. Somewhere."

But it wasn't. He stared into the empty satchel, turned it upside down and shook it, rechecked all the pockets, then threw it to the floor and sifted through everything he pulled out of it.

It wasn't here. He sat back and brought to mind the last time he saw it. He handed the tablet to Kate to sign with one hand, while he extracted the drive from the server and slipped it into his pocket with the other. Or he thought he did. Squeezing his eyes shut, he replayed the moment.

He'd kept up an amusing banter while showing her the tablet, even using a risqué pun when she hesitated. Could it be he'd been trying to distract her and ended up distracting himself?

And there was the moment when he caught her frowning at him in the reception area. He'd said, "Thought I forgot something." An odd thing to say. It just popped into his head. Maybe some part of him knew he really had left something behind. The flash drive.

The drive contained the package he installed on the server, but more importantly, it contained the scripts, which revealed how he hid the package. A company like Cerberus would have people who would be able to read that code like a book. Within days, his secrets would be listed in the Common Vulnerabilities and Exposures database, a public registry of known cybersecurity vulnerabilities. Every security professional in the world would have his secrets.

"Shit," he said loud enough to draw a disapproving frown from the driver. The Technician scowled at him but resisted a violent impulse. As he returned everything to his satchel, he performed a postmortem on the corpse of his plan, trying to decide what he might have done differently. Despite his problems with the gun, he'd finished the job at Reggie's. Reggie's character dying at exactly the wrong moment was just bad luck. The sleep he lost searching for the broken needle left his mind muddy, and speed could only do so much. There was also nothing he could have done to avoid running into Nik. More bad luck.

All that was left to do was to find out if Kate found the drive and what she did with it. That meant he had to grab her, question her, then dispose of her. And he had a ticket to *Hamilton* that evening. "Figures." Leaning forward, he got the driver's attention and gave him a new destination, then sat back. He had never actually abducted anyone, but he was prepared for the eventuality. He would make sure nothing went wrong this time.

Monday, 8:48 A.M.

It took twenty minutes for the security guard at the data center to find someone to escort Kate inside. She had to get down on her hands and knees to locate the flash drive on the floor

beneath the servers. She returned to the reception area with little hope, and, sure enough, Reggie had left.

She stood in front of the desk, the drive in her hand, wondering what she should do with it. According to Reggie, it didn't contain anything special. Just updates that could be downloaded from the manufacturer's website.

"Can I help you, dear?" the receptionist asked.

Kate considered, then approached her and held out the drive. "That man from Sunset Tech left this. I don't think it's important, but in case he comes back, can I leave it with you?"

"Sure. I'll hold on to it."

Kate handed it over. "Thank you!" Then she headed back to the cubicle she shared with other interns, eager to share her adventure.

Find out what happens next!



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