

Chapter One

The First E-mail

To: members@hackdoor.com

From: screenshot@heroscents.com

Subject: Extravagant retribution

Message:

At approximately 7 PM GMT today, Screenshot will present the first-ever, live Web execution. Click on the link below to view.

Pay attention. The broadcast time is approximate. The image will appear just moments before the event.

We're having some fun now.

<http://kills.torchsense.com/imageclick/CID=00000b7c79a99a5070>

Seth Mathias

The gunshot startled him. He hadn't been expecting that. But an appropriate start to a live execution, he realized.

The sound came from his computer speakers while he stared at the blank screen, expecting a visual alert before the show began. The noise was round and deep and over so fast he thought he might have imagined it. With almost no knowledge of guns, Seth guessed it was something big. It sounded like an impressive bullet.

His screen brightened from the center out, like one of those graphic conceptions of how the big bang must have looked if anyone could have been watching. A neutral image formed, a wide-frame shot of a streetscape, clearly urban, clearly impoverished. A few people moved in and out of view, passing in front of the typical city row house centered in the picture. The house was indistinguishable from its neighbors—rundown, dirty, some unintelligible graffiti on the foundation, three concrete steps leading up to the front door. Sunshine and jacketless pedestrians, all African-American, said the location could be almost any urban setting with a significant black population where the sun was shining on the mid-June day. Pretty much any city.

Seth watched, along with 7,382 others, according to the web site visitor statistics automatically recorded by the domain host, and displayed on the counter in the lower right corner of his screen. The camera seemed to be in a car across the street from the house, probably

an SUV from the shape and size of the window that it pointed through. A truck and two cars, older American models, passed by the camera so quickly that Seth couldn't identify them.

The image flickered and telescoped to the front door, narrowing the field of view, sweeping left and right across the house before returning to the door. A red laser sighting dot came on, centered on the door, and held still, like a stain on the fading paint. A whirring noise accompanied the camera movement as it panned left and right, in and out. A sturdy, solid sound, the kind that Seth associated with something made in Germany, over-designed and built to last.

The front door to the row house opened and a young black man came out, dressed in oversized Los Angeles Lakers gear, purple and gold, the satiny pants cinched at crotch level, the baseball hat reversed over a black skullcap. He stood there for a few moments and surveyed the scene, looking for something or someone. Or maybe nothing and no one, like a lookout.

After several seconds, he turned his head and said something to someone out of sight inside the house then started down the three steps. Another young black man followed him out the door. He stopped and raised his arms out like a dictator presenting himself to his subjects.

Without warning, everything exploded.

The speakers exploded with a staccato banging, like rapid hammering on a metal roof, each bang distinct.

The SUV window exploded in a mist of glass particles, momentarily fogging the view before falling out of sight.

His screen exploded with strobing flashes, one for each bang, irradiating the view and blinding the image.

The door to the house exploded; wood splinters and brick shards spinning and whirling through the air in every direction.

And the man exploded, disintegrating into a bright mass of meat that fragmented and bounced and splashed in every direction.

"Shit," Seth yelled to no one, almost toppling his desk chair as he convulsed away from his laptop, the carpeting holding the legs in place like Velcro.

He pulled himself back in, leaning toward the screen like that would help him see through the smoke from what he would soon learn was twenty .50 caliber bullets. He could still hear the reverberations of the automatic weapon; sounds not real, but not an echo either. More of a memory as his eardrums stopped vibrating. He stared at the scene as the image cleared. The same scene, but now with a front door and some remains that looked like the results of a successful suicide bomber.

Seth picked up his cell phone, pressed the voice dial button and said, "Wes school." Keypad tones beeped through the earpiece, and after several rings, Seth's son answered. He was in his senior year as a computer science major at Cornell.

"What was that all about?" Seth asked him.

"What?"

"That killing on the Internet you told me to watch. You're not watching it?"

"Dad, I just finished class and I'm on my way to the café to meet some friends. I haven't been watching anything."

"Then why did you want me to watch it?"

There was a momentary silence and then Wes answered, "Watch what? I didn't tell you to watch anything that I can remember."

"I got an e-mail from you this morning forwarding some other e-mail notification about a first-ever live execution on the web. You said I should watch. You don't remember?"

"I remember fine. I didn't send anything. I never heard of this execution. You sure it was from me? Check the header and tell me what it says."

"The original was sent to a mail list by someone calling himself Screenshot. It says it was forwarded to me by wes.mathias@cornell.edu. That's your e-mail, right?"

"Damn. I gotta go. Somebody's zombied my computer and they're using it to spam."

After hanging up, Seth continued to watch the scene unfold on his monitor and thought about that. This wasn't spam. And it wasn't sent to just anybody. It was sent from his son to him, giving it absolute credibility, assuring that he would watch.

Who would want him to witness a murder? And why?

Philip Hurst

From his leather chair, Philip released the joystick and closed the weapon's control link, erasing any electronic trail between the gun and his trigger. The camera automatically zoomed out to its default original shot, and he sat back to enjoy the rest of the show in the quiet comfort of his luxurious home office. Alone in the exclusive condo where he lived, he could give it his full attention. Attention it deserved.

At first, he saw only the clearing smoke as it rose out of view, on its way to join the rest of LA's pervasive summer smog. He could only imagine the thick smell, trapped in the confines of the SUV, made by almost 900 grams of detonated WC860 propellant, 45 grams for each of the twenty bullets.

Someone screamed, and then someone else joined in, until it sounded like a rock concert filled with crazed teenage girls. A man entered the picture from the left and tiptoed toward the corpse, looking around in rapid, jerky motions, ready to dive for cover. Philip tapped the Print Screen key on his keyboard and took a different kind of shot, a screenshot, a single still frame of his computer monitor image, saving the file as Act1Pic1.jpg. By the end of the day, he would be at number eighty-seven.

As the witness got closer, he stopped. Stopped his tiptoeing, stopped his nervous glances, and possibly stopped breathing as he stared

at the carcass that was, moments earlier, Redoucelle Washington, regional drug kingpin for a four-block territory in Los Angeles' south-central district, and the recent beneficiary of legal technicalities that allowed him to escape his third murder rap. The first two dismissals resulted from the disappearance of certain witnesses, and sudden neurological disorders with others, causing their memories to fail. Redo, as everyone knew him, was a celebrity in his neighborhood.

Several others, all men, all black, edged into the picture. One of them bent over the body of Redo's lookout and probed out of the camera's sight, then he popped up, hollering for someone to call 9-1-1. Collateral damage, Philip thought, not concerned that one of the minions had gotten in the way of Redo's requital.

The screams subsided and some women started to clear the edge of the frame and come into view, aghast with maternal horror at the murder of someone else's son. Sirens provided new background noise as they grew closer, and soon police, fire and emergency medical personnel swarmed over the area.

As the police organized the scene, the SUV became an object of interest, and they cautiously approached it. Guns drawn, the cops shouted commands to drop any weapons and put any hands where they could be seen. Philip chuckled and thought, not gonna happen, but raised his hands in mock surrender anyway. When the police could see inside and verify the SUV was unoccupied, they holstered their sidearms and

peered through the still intact windows, avoiding the gun barrel and careful not to disturb anything.

Philip's straight ahead view from the gun's perspective limited his sight, and he couldn't see what they were doing around the other sides of the SUV. He wished he could have seen their faces when they had found the label stenciled on the crate that concealed the weapon everywhere except the gun slit. The name had been an ironic thought that had flitted through his mind as he'd made his plans many months earlier. The thought brought a chuckle, and most things that got a chuckle from Phillip got acted upon. So his trademark, his brand, was born. Or rather, plagiarized.

“ACME DRUG REHABINATOR. Patent Pending,” the stencil read, in bright red block letters.

Philip continued to watch the investigation of the crime scene for another twenty minutes while the police strung yellow tape everywhere and examined the interior of the SUV. A uniformed policeman approached the plainclothes detective who seemed to be in charge, and told him something, pointing at the weapon. The detective didn't seem to understand, and more discussion ensued before they both walked directly toward the barrel-mounted camera and bent down to stare, faces slightly scrunched as they studied the device.

The detective keyed his shoulder mike and Philip could hear him ask the listener to describe what they were seeing. Philip couldn't make

out the reply, but he knew what it was. Philip was seeing the same thing. Along with 23,019 others, according to the web site traffic counter, with viewership increasing as the word spread through the Internet community. The detective climbed into the front seat, moving out of sight. The image shook momentarily, confirming that the authorities were onto the Internet broadcast, and they were stopping it.

Almost twenty-five minutes, Philip thought. Let's see what's on the other channels.

He tapped some keys and the screen went blank momentarily, then opened a new image of the same scene from a different perspective. This one looked down from an elevated location and showed a broader view of emergency vehicles and personnel, curious crowds and news teams.

The new view gave more panorama, and showed two men standing near the SUV, one of them using a shoulder mike. He raised his arm and pointed up, aimed to the right of Philip's vantage point, and swung his arm slowly toward the camera. When he passed it, he stopped and, still talking into the mike, reversed his arc until Philip was looking directly at the tip of his right index finger. He figured that they knew about the new view.

When the new image wobbled and went off, Philip checked his computer clock again. Thirty-six minutes had elapsed, and by then the counter showed 461,594 current viewers. This is viral, he thought, spreading like Ebola through the Net community. He estimated that if

viewership continued to grow this fast, the servers would become overloaded and a denial-of-service interruption couldn't be far off.

Philip hummed while he did some more tapping. Almost immediately another view opened, aimed from a point across the street, on the crime-scene side. It showed, among other things, two policemen on a row house roof, probably securing and investigating the camera that had just gone blank. This is perfect, he thought, and wondered which would run out first, the six cameras he had pre-positioned or the server capacity. After one more camera change, it turned out to be server capacity. When viewership passed the 900,000 mark, the image shut down, and he got the "page cannot be displayed" error message signaling server collapse after just forty-nine minutes. Philip started surfing.

He watched his work dissected through the afternoon as the 24/7 cable news channels covered the story with a diligence so pervasive and trivial that it threatened to exhaust public interest before bedtime. Every network and each station said the same things, interviewed the same people, and the individual reporter became the only way to differentiate. By dinner time, Redo Washington had no secrets left. Of course, he didn't need any.

When all the chaff was separated, the wheat was pretty sparse. Everyone agreed that Redo was an extreme sociopath, that he certainly deserved to at least be incarcerated forever, and execution was an

acceptable alternative for many. Someone had posted an accurate description of the weapon that Philip had built himself from a World War II vintage Browning Automatic Rifle, or BAR to the GIs who lugged them all over Europe and the Pacific by its folding handle, like some lethal luggage. The communications and Internet technology used were state-of-the-art. Beyond that, it appeared the police knew virtually nothing. That was good. They would know what he wanted them to know, when he wanted them to know it. His spokesman would see to that, Philip knew, confident that his unwitting spokesman had received his e-mail and watched the event.

The many eyewitnesses could only describe the event, not the perpetrator. Forensic evidence from the car would likely be useless, Philip knew. It had been stolen four days earlier from its registered owner—Redo's mother.

The intercom office buzzed, interrupting his amusement and alerting him that the caterer had arrived, and his guests would follow soon. He logged off each site with care, leaving no trace of his physical location, and minimal traces of his virtual one, his computer security configured for privacy. On his approval, the doorman let the caterer in, and their staff and supplies arrived at his suite by the time he locked the door to his office and set the intrusion alarm. No one except Philip entered that room. Not friends, not family, not guests, not cleaners, not girlfriends.

His three-bedroom home spanned two stories at the top of the secure Pacific Heights co-op building, looking out over the city and San Francisco Bay. He'd converted one of the bedrooms into the office, and there was also a den, living room, kitchen, dining room, loft, and two-and-a-half bathrooms.

While the caterer set up, Philip got himself ready. Casual elegance was the dress code for dinner, and he chose a blue silk Brooks Brothers blazer with a faint rose windowpane, medium grey linen slacks, and John Varvatos Venetian slip-ons. Informal enough to relax his guests, but exclusive enough to remind them of his taste and his resources.

There would be five guests, and the topic would be politics. The participants included the chairman of the state Democratic committee and his wife, there to keep Philip buying into the political process; Philip's business manager, with his wife, there to do the talking—the process held no interest for Philip, only the results; and Philip's current girlfriend, Laura Fascio, an ambitious young lawyer from a firm that did occasional work for him, and who would like to do more, invited for dinner, and providing the dessert.

"The Meet Your Representative rally is set for Tuesday, the eighteenth at the St. Francis. We should—"

"I can't make it," Philip interrupted the chairman.

"Oh?" he replied. "This is a very important event. There will be a lot of high-level contributors there, and your presence sets a strong example for them."

Elliot, the business manager, checked his PDA and said, "There's nothing on the calendar, Philip. Are you sure you have the right date?"

"Elliot, not everything I do is on your calendar."

Philip held up his hand, stopping Elliot before he could protest. "And, no, it is not something that I can re-schedule. You'll just have to get along without me this time. You can arrange a video message from me if you like. That's the best I can do."

After wrapping up the business, Philip poured a round of cognac, his signal for everyone to relax for a little while and then leave.

"Has the committee prepared a statement regarding the Screenshot events," Elliot asked the chairman. "Are you going to take some official position?"

Philip suppressed his excitement at someone finally raising the subject, keeping his reaction neutral.

"The killing? I haven't actually seen it," the chairman replied. "I'll have to view it tomorrow and poll the other members. I expect we will take a strong law and order stand, possibly even renew our calls for Internet regulation. What's your opinion, Philip?"

"I oppose any attempts to regulate the Internet. It is futile to even try. Look at the Chinese. Even they have only succeeded in driving it

underground, and they have to relent more each day. Google is there, for Christ's sake. There's no stopping it, Ben. If you want to take a symbolic stand, that's fine, but you can't win this one."

It was Philip's longest speech of the evening, by three sentences.

*

Laura lingered long after the other guests left, and well past her normal exit time. That time was always right after some unremarkable sex, usually consummated before the eleven o'clock news.

"Oh, wow," she thought. "What did you take?" Unaware that she asked this out loud, she started when he answered.

"Take? Nothing. Can you stay?"

"You keep that up and I'll move in." She apparently didn't intend the double entendre, but Philip caught it.

He smiled without answering and thought about the beneficial side effects of his Screenshot high,

"We'll have to do this more often," he agreed. *A lot more often*, he thought.

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