

BEHIND THE SCREEN: HACKING HOLLYWOOD

By Mark Stone

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In Memory of Betty and Dave

Prologue

His hands fumbled about the buttons of her top. His tongue was in her ear now; he breathed heavily in hopes that his hot breath would melt her into submission. That point where the line between 'no' and 'yes' is crossed and there is no turning back.

Then again, what did he have to worry about? He was the hottest thing going. Who was this girl to say no to him? She was just like anyone else lately—unable to resist him. This should be easy.

This wasn't named Bad Boy Drive for nothing, he thought. Nicholson, Beatty and Brando knew what they were talking about. The lights of Los Angeles were brighter than a sunny day in the snow, and appeared to be as clear as ever. The Capitol Records building stood out prominently in front of the downtown skyline. He had experienced this view from Mulholland Drive several times, but never in the company of such a hot woman.

They had left the party arm in arm and seized a large blanket from the linen closet on the way out. He didn't even know who was throwing the party, and didn't really care. Right now all he cared about was getting it on with this sweet young thing who had been staring at him ever since he arrived at the house.

"I really don't think I can do this," she said, re-fastening a few buttons on her top so that her chest was no longer hanging out of it. "Don't get me wrong, I love being here with you, but I really want to talk a bit and get to know what you're really like!" She felt a few sharp blades of grass dig into her elbow as she rested her arms past the front of the blanket, admiring this unrivaled view of the city.

"I'm flattered, but seriously sweetie, look at this view. How often in life will you get the opportunity to be with a guy like me in a place like this?" He knew that those words came across as incredibly arrogant, though it didn't stop him from unbuttoning the buttons on her top again, then deftly moving his hands between her legs.

She moaned and allowed his hand to slip between her skin and the soft fabric of her underwear. She couldn't stand it anymore. She was here, with him, and he was right: How often would this opportunity present itself to a girl like her? May as well give in to the moment. And how could she turn down this guy who has the looks of a young Brad Pitt?

He had heard that kind of moan before. To him it was an unmistakable signal that all systems were go. He smiled at her and went in for the kill.

Chapter 1

The desert sun had a way of beating down on you with its powerful rays, holding on to you and never letting go. It is addictive. It is one of the main reasons why locals remain in Palm Springs, and why tourists keep coming back.

In the middle of December, it was shining brilliantly as Jonathan Davis arrived at work. John, thirty-four years old, is a recovering gambling addict. He has not gambled at all in over a year. His evenings as an overly active participant at the card tables of Morongo Casino in Cabazon are behind him. He is proud of himself, but is heavily in debt. He has somehow been able to conceal his past addiction from his colleagues at DesertFinancial.

As usual, John began his daily routine of checking the firewall and intrusion detection logs. If there were to be a cyber-attack from the outside world, the logs would be the best place to look.

“Ya know, I’m starting to wonder whether these logs are ever going to reveal anything fun!” John said.

“It’s not really about *fun* though—this is the way it is. Welcome to the life of a security analyst,” Dan pointed out.

Dan Thompson is John’s supervisor. Dan was instrumental in hiring John, seeking him out from a job bulletin posting for Certified Information System Security Professionals. Both were certified CISSP, each having suffered through the six-hour certification examination. They often commiserated over the experience that never failed to leave the exam participant feeling like he or she were just run over by an eighteen-wheeler. With spiked tires.

“I know, I know. I was just hoping that there’d be more to it than just reading logs. Do you know how hard it is on the eyes?”

“That’s why you’re the one doing this shit. See these glasses? My eyes don’t work the same as yours, Mr. Security Baby,” Dan said rather sarcastically, making reference for the tenth time this week that John, at thirty-four, was the youngest in the security department.

The security department was made up of four people: John and Dan, the technical guys, along with two administrative staff, Jill and Marilyn. In the two months that John had been working there, John, Dan and Jill formed a pretty strong bond. Marilyn was simply biding her time until retirement and didn’t socialize much.

John’s two-month tenure of professional boredom ended abruptly with an email from Barbara Stevens.

From: Stevens, Barbara

To: Davis, John

Subject: confidential

Hey John,

I was wondering if I could meet with you sometime. There is a serious issue here that I hope you can help me with. I work in the insurance department on the 3rd floor, and I got your name from a co-worker. I trust what I tell you will be kept confidential.

Barb

John was ecstatic. After months of reading logs, it seemed like he was finally going to get the chance to do something *interesting*! Secretly, he wondered what this Barb looked like. Before he even had the chance to reply, a shadow appeared over his computer screen and there was a woman lurking over his shoulder.

“Are you John?” the woman said.

“That would be me. May I help you?” John replied.

“Yeah, I’m Barb, I just sent you an email.”

“Wow, you’re fast! This must be pretty important. How did you find me by the way? And how did you get into this area?” John asked. Non-IT staff was not supposed to have access to the Information Technology area.

“I have my ways. Let’s just say I know a lot of people here in IT,” Barb bragged.

“Well, we’ll save that discussion for later, but what can I help you with? That email sounded pretty serious. Tell me all about your problems,” John said, in his best Sigmund Freud imitation.

“Come with me,” Barb blurted out quickly, as she dragged John by the arm and led him down the hall.

Dan looked at the two of them leaving the security area with a quizzical look. John couldn’t help noting that Dan likely felt partially rejected, wondering why Barb didn’t come to *him* first. Dan knew of Barb and her reputation, but never really had the chance to personally substantiate any of the rumors.

Barb led John to an empty meeting room. John sat down in one of the mega-comfy chairs and Barb quickly shut the door, then joined him across the meeting table.

John’s adrenaline was surging through his body. Who is this woman and why is she so bold? The curiosity was killing him.

“So, you dragged me in here, it must be really important!” John started.

“It is. We’re being spied on. Our manager’s a bitch and hates us all,” Barb snarled.

John was now noticing that Barb was actually an attractive woman, in a cougarish sort of way. He was trying to peg her age—probably about forty-two, he thought.

“Start from the beginning. Why do you say your manager is a bitch and what makes you think she is spying on you?” John asserted, in the most professional tone he could muster.

Barb explained how her manager, Paula, was an untrusting person who liked to micromanage every aspect of their department’s work. Paula was under intense pressure from the department’s VP to make sure things got done at any cost. This particular VP did not care about his employees. Barb, along with three of her friends that worked with her, was under intense scrutiny from Paula because, according to Barb, Paula was jealous that the *Four Musketeers* were prettier than she was.

“She’s just a fat, jealous, micromanaging cow!” Barb exclaimed.

“You sure aren’t one to mince words,” John said.

“I call ‘em as I see ‘em. Anyway, John, the main thing I wanted to get out of this meeting is to find out if Paula has the ability, or even the authority, to go into our emails.”

“Well, our information security policy states that a manager does not have the right to go into their employees email accounts without the consent of either Human

Resources, or us in Information Security,” John stated in his most professional security-sounding voice. “What makes you think she’s read one of your emails?”

Barb paused briefly. Her eyes lingered around the room as if she was contemplating how to best answer the question. John looked her up and down.

“Tara sent me an email yesterday bitching about Paula’s attitude lately, and how she was thinking of asking for a transfer out of the department. This morning Paula called me into her office and asked if I knew anything about Tara wanting to leave us. I found it way more than a coincidence.”

“It certainly sounds fishy. I’m still not sure what I can do to help you from this point. I’ve told you what the rules are, and if in fact she read Tara’s email then she would be in violation of our policy. I don’t think we would be able to tell you whether she did or not though,” John said, clearly feeling like the consummate professional now.

“I just wanted to make you aware of it. If there’s anything you can do at all or anything you find out, please let me know, John,” Barb said, again emphasizing John’s name, in a very soft, feminine voice.

John assured Barb he would do so.

John returned to his desk. As soon as he got back to the security area, Dan was itching to find out what the meeting was all about. John gave Dan the recap and asked if this was a normal thing. Dan explained that Barb has somewhat of a reputation as being a troublemaker, but has also heard that Paula could not really be trusted. John wondered whether DesertFinancial was really no different than any other company in that there’s always going to be issues like this. His first few months had him believe that maybe this job was the exception to the rule.

“So what should we do, Dan?”

“Let’s go for a walk and we’ll talk about it.”

John and Dan went for a stroll down Tahquitz. Winter was only a week away, but the desert was in the middle of a warm spell. Contrary to what some believe, the Coachella Valley can get quite chilly in December and January. John recalls once in 1990 eating dinner at the Seven Lakes Country Club with his family around this same time of year, when several people jumped up and cheered at the sight of snowflakes. Many at the dining room that evening had never even seen snow before.

John grew up with snow though, as the first fifteen years of his life were spent in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada. Winnipeg was one of the coldest large cities (of 700,000+ population) in North America. Nice summers, but brutal winters. John will never miss the winters there, but in the summer when the desert is one hundred and ten degrees everyday he sometimes wishes he were back there.

“So is there anything we can do for Barb?” John asked.

“I think we’re going to have to rely on our superior judgment here, John. With a situation like this, it doesn’t hurt to take a look inside Paula’s email and see if we find any evidence of her knowing. We can’t do it without HR’s permission though, so when we get back to work I’ll call Laura and give her the lowdown. She’s well aware of Paula’s reputation.”

John was somewhat taken aback by Dan’s response. What about employee privacy? Aren’t we supposed to be protecting it, and not violating it? John thought to himself. He was excited about the opportunity to read someone’s email but still felt rather uncomfortable.

“Cool. Working here has sure become interesting. I can’t thank you enough for hiring me. Nice to finally have a manager that sees me as both an employee and a friend,” John gushed slightly; worrying he came across as too touchy-feely for this man-to-man walk they were on.

“No problem, John. Don’t get too far ahead of yourself though. Can’t forget who’s the boss... ahahahaha.”

Dan laughed his hearty laugh. There was seriousness to his tone, but enough of a friendly vibe that told John that Dan was a good guy. They continued to walk up Tahquitz to Highway 111 and then turned back.

John couldn’t believe how Palm Springs had changed since moving here almost twenty years ago. Back in the 80’s, the place seemed like more of a large town than an actual city. Sometime in the late 90’s John could sense a shift in the area’s overall essence. Many people are unaware that Palm Springs, along with the eight surrounding cities, is one of the fastest growing areas in the country. In each decade since the 80’s, population has essentially doubled. Living in the Coachella Valley for some reason seemed more hip now than ever before. It was difficult to describe to an outsider, but many younger residents could discern the same thing. Bring on more *young* people, most thought.

Dan stopped at the corner store for some cigarettes and lit up. John had never smoked a day in his life and wondered what the deal was with smoking. Since starting with the company, he would joke with Dan about being a lifetime smoker, and Dan would just shrug it off.

As soon as they entered their area, Jill told them that Dan’s presence was requested in Patrick’s office—*stat*. Patrick was the *Grand Fromage* of IT, the Big Cheese, the Head Honcho, the *Boss*. It was a running joke that each time Patrick came looking for Dan, Dan would be off on a coffee or lunch break. John chuckled to himself—this never seems to get old.

Patrick Bowman was the one who ultimately hired John, in a twilight zone-like interview where Patrick did all the talking and John barely got to utter a single word. John was surprised when he got the job.

Dan didn’t return until the end of the day so John would have to wait for his first attempt at espionage.

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John got in bright and early the next day. Traffic was really light as many were taking time off for Christmas. This was his eighteenth Christmas in the desert, yet he still couldn’t believe that green was so predominant here, as opposed to the white that blanketed most of the country. Somehow Palm Springs was able to maintain its lush green landscape year round, despite experiencing such low amounts of rainfall. John never quite understood that logic.

As soon as he sat down at his desk Dan filled him in on the update from Laura in HR. “Laura’s given us the green light. Yee-hah. Time to do some diggin’. Seems that there have been several official complaints about Paula, and HR is concerned. Let’s sit at my desk and we’ll fire up her email.”

John couldn't contain his excitement. He didn't know Paula, but the thought of being able to read someone else's email was pretty damn cool to him. Still, he was able to maintain his professionalism and was ready to partake. Dan fired up his Outlook and chose File, Open, Other... and typed in Paula's name. Exchange Administrators with special rights were able to open anyone's mailbox. John knew that this special 'Exchange Admins' group on the network was a very powerful thing: only he, Dan and Jill had that access. John felt a sense of power he hadn't experienced in some time. It didn't beat the thrill of pulling a full house from the river card, but it was pretty damn close.

"What do we got here, Johnny... do you see a smoking gun?" Dan asked.

John took control of the mouse and scrolled down the email messages in the Inbox folder and quickly glanced through all the subject headings. All business related, with nothing jumping out at him as being overly suspicious. He clicked beside the plus sign beside the Inbox to reveal several other folders, most notable of which was one titled "stuff". John opened the "stuff" folder, and then he and Dan looked through the subject headings. Most of these emails appeared to be from her husband, and as they glanced through the subjects, the titles became increasingly hostile. It was obvious that whatever was in those emails, it wasn't good. Paula's marriage was in trouble.

"I think we've seen enough," Dan said. "It's obvious she's having issues at home but there's nothing I can see that points to what we were looking for."

"Too bad," John replied with a bit of a laugh. He instantly regretted making light of things, but was relieved by Dan's friendly smile when his gaze met John's.

"What should we do now?" John wanted to know.

"Not really a whole hell of a lot we *can* do. Either Barb's just trying to cause more trouble or I dunno what the—really, we did our part so I'll just tell Laura in HR that we couldn't find anything."

"Alright. Sounds good, Dan. So quick question though: Do we tell Laura anything about what we saw, as in Paula's home life?" John wondered.

"We *could*, but there's really no point. Just leave it," Dan asserted.

John returned to his desk. The rest of the day couldn't really live up to the way it began. Lots of password resets, assigning network rights, recovering deleted files. Pretty routine stuff. His boredom was relieved just after three thirty when he received another email from Barb.

From: Stevens, Barb

To: Davis, John

Subject: Well...?

Hey John,

What did ya find out? This is really important to us in our group. Tara is having a really hard time. She was crying earlier today and she is sure that Paula is up to something. Let me know if there's anything you came up with. Hey Paula: if you're reading this, STOP SNOOPING.

John quickly replied and told Barb that there was nothing they could find, and expressed his sympathy for Tara and that he wished he was able to help them.

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The next day he returned to work and upon opening his Outlook, yet another new email from Barb:

From: Stevens, Barb

To: Davis, John

Subject: re: Well...?

Thanks for your reply. Really sucks that you didn't find anything. Pardon my Bulgarian but Paula is a fucking bitch. Seriously John. I was wondering if we could chat a bit more about this What are you doing for coffee this afternoon?

John read and reread the email. He was curious. Instinctively he asked himself whether Barb was trying to get to 'know him better' or whether her motives were strictly professional. Plus, he would have to have a chat with her with regards to her use of language in a corporate email. It was also apparent that Barb didn't really care about being spied on if she's willing to email her suspicions to him. In his view, Barb was likely just grasping at straws with the spying thing; there was probably a much more logical explanation.

He looked over his shoulder to make sure nobody from his group could see his computer screen. He decided that she may in fact be slightly interested in him, but her intentions were likely a mix of personal and professional. Either way, he would suggest that they meet at the coffee shop across the street. In an attempt to not appear at all desperate, he waited an hour before sending the reply.

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They both arrived at the coffee shop at the same time and each took a seat at an undersized table. John's heart was beating fast, and he was feeling inexplicably uncomfortable.

"So now that you have me outside of work, what's up? I can't imagine you being any more *frank* away from the building, but is there anything you haven't told me?" John asked.

"Nah, there's really nothing you don't know. I just thought we could chat. I think I could give you the whole story, from day one. At least you'll really know where we're coming from with Paula."

"So tell me about your group. There are four of you, right? I know there's you, Tara—"

"Andrea and Chloe. They're awesome!" Barb interrupted.

Barb told him all about their group and how Paula came to be jealous of them. John wanted to share what he knew about Paula's home life but swore to himself he would never, ever, in the course of his professional career, reveal anyone's personal secrets. He listened intently as Barb explained her group's work history. They eventually diverted their conversations towards movies, TV, music and ultimately, personal lives.

Barb revealed that she was divorced, and John shared his story about almost getting married but having his engagement break off at the last minute. He found Barb easy to talk to, but his instincts told him that there was something a little *off* about her.

John didn't get much time to reveal much about himself, other than a few subtle hints at the fact that he used to be a big-time poker player. Barb seemed to be too wrapped up in herself to allow him more than few words in edgewise.

Half an hour had passed awful quickly. Employees at DesertFinancial were allowed two fifteen-minute coffee breaks, and an hour at lunch. John wondered whether Dan would be upset with his extra long coffee break. He also neglected to inform Dan whom he was meeting. Not that it was any of Dan's business, but for some reason he still felt guilty.

John returned to his desk and tried to avoid eye contact with Dan. He sat there, reading his email, checking service requests, and all the while worrying about whether Dan would chew him out about the supersized coffee break. Nada.

Awesome, John thought, maybe he didn't notice.

Later that day before it was time to leave, John approached Jill and asked her about the unofficial word on coffee breaks there.

"So hey, Jeeeel, can I ask you somethin'? What's the deal with coffee breaks here? Does anybody care if you take a long break? Does Dan care?" John asked, referring to Jill as Jeeeel, stretching the 'ee' sound, mimicking the way their co-worker Marilyn pronounces Jill's name.

"Dan? We're talking about *our* Dan here, right? Are you kidding? Dan couldn't care less how long you take for your break. Have you ever timed some of *his* breaks? Better yet, have you ever timed the technical support group's breaks? Watch for them next time. You'd be amazed what people get away with here. Don't worry about it. As long as you get your work done Dan won't say anything. I think we're pretty good about it here in our group, but other departments definitely have their abusers," Jill explained.

"Whew, that's a relief and a half. I kind of thought that the support boys sure took their sweet time at coffee; maybe like they were in a group meeting or something. I dunno," John said, peering over Jill's cubicle wall to ensure nobody from the tech support group was within earshot.

"Group meeting, my ass. Hey, they get their work done, and they're all good guys, but c'mon... it's pretty bad when the whole company can't reach anyone there during their extended coffee time. But what can you do, right?" Jill said, shrugging her shoulders.

John spent the next twenty minutes at Jill's desk getting more of the low-down on office politics. He really respected Jill; thought of her like a big sister. Jill was forty-six, and had been with the company for fifteen years. She knew the ins and outs of the corporate culture, and served as John's primary source of information about who's who and who does what, even who's doing what to whom. He enjoyed his late afternoon chats with Jill.

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That evening, John thought about his coffee break with Barb. He was somewhat intrigued about her, but there was something just, well, 'off' about this woman. There was definitely a slight attraction there, but he wasn't completely feeling it. He tried to imagine what it would be like to sleep with her. He pretty much went through this process with all women that he found attractive. And what guy didn't? John figured. He

thought she was probably wild as hell, perhaps an eight out of ten on his potential-sex-o-meter. Still, he was sure that after the eight-rating sex, there was the distinct possibility that she could rate a nine out of ten on his psycho-meter. He reminded himself that any woman that scores higher on his psycho-meter than she does on the potential-sex-o-meter is definitely not worth the trouble. He decided he would rely on this line of thinking in future dealings with her.