

**Pierre Béhel**

**Cyber-games  
with friends**

*Novel*

## **Cyber-games with friends**

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**<http://www.pierrebehel.com>**

## Cyber-games with friends

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All the characters and all the situations presented in this novel are pure invention. Any resemblance to facts or persons existing or having existed is purely coincidental.

However, all presented hacking techniques are realistic. Real cases have often already been reported.

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### 1

They descended one after the other from the cable car. In this season, when autumn was well underway, there were significantly fewer tourists in San Francisco although, of course, the city was never the sole property of its permanent inhabitants. And then it was early, too early for the normal tourists who were still having their breakfast at best, too late for the night revelers who had already gone to bed.

She took the hand of the man she had just spent the night with. He smiled at her. They walked at the same pace towards the tram. They could have finished on foot, but because a tram was coming... They did not separate when they boarded. And the vehicle started off almost immediately.

Skyscrapers lined both sides of the avenue. As the capital of many alternative and protest movements, San Francisco remained a large American city and its center was thus populated by towers almost as tall as that of Babel. The inhabitants were no more surprised than the millions of Parisians passing next to the Eiffel Tower every day, the Chinese crossing the Tian'anmen Square by brushing the Forbidden City or the Londoners crossing the Tower Bridge.

Once they arrived at the Harbor Station, on

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the edge of the Bay, the woman and the man got off the tram and walked, still hand in hand, on the wide sidewalk that followed the “piers”, the pontoons where the huge ships take shelter in the Bay before crossing the pass under the Golden Gate to enter the Pacific Ocean.

Today, utility ships were becoming rare in this part of town. The real port was further away. There were mainly passenger boats, especially those intended for the visit of the old prison of Alcatraz, on the rock in the middle of the Bay.

And the old sheds, for the most part, had become souvenir shops or restaurants. The neighborhood of the ferry terminal, The Embarcadero, had become a trendy place, one where people came to party with friends but in a bourgeois way. Other types of parties had other dedicated quarters.

When the woman glanced enamored at the man, he was already looking at her, his gaze filled with desire. She liked that. Yes, she liked that. Perhaps, at last, she would have found the right one, the one who would be her husband, the father of her children. Even though she should not jump to conclusions too quickly.

Suddenly, black pigeons flew out onto the lawn, chased out of an abandoned pack of fast-food fries by the landing of a seagull four or five times their size. They passed right under the woman’s nose. By reflex, she pulled back, closing



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her eyes and letting out a small cry.

When she opened her eyes, she realized that she had taken refuge with the man, that he was covering her with his arms. He kissed her on the forehead. She laughed. She had been stupid to be afraid of a few pigeons.

They started walking again, just holding hands. The “piers” were fading away to their right, across the boulevard. The numbers followed one another and increased as the couple went north, towards the Golden Gate. But they didn’t go that far.

The man looked at the woman. Yes, he had had a good night. Accompanying her to the office, like this, in the morning, along the bay, brought a romantic conclusion to a torrid sequence of events. It had taken a long time to get her to agree to open her bed to him. Too much time. He had been this close to letting go and looking for someone else or another course of action. He smiled at her when she gave him her cat eyes. Good god is she stupid! A hot body and a decent fucker but stupid.

Her apartment, where they had spent the night after a dinner at the restaurant he had offered her, the last chance dinner, was small. She owned it, with a loan that would last for a number of years. But, of course, as soon as she got married, she would sell it. It was necessary to provide a small house, with at least three bedrooms, for the

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parents and children. Two children, a boy, a girl. And a dog. And a fireplace for knitting in front of it, during winter evenings. Not too far from a church, either, to be able to go there with the family, by foot, all holding hands. This was the life this woman dreamed of.

Sleeping with the boys who flirted with her always left her with a taste of regret. Amanda Zimmer was not yet thirty years old, but already she feared that she had missed her life. This one, who accompanied her this morning, she had slept with last night. He was a computer scientist. A promising choice hinting at a bright future..

They had gone out together. And then, one evening, she had agreed to be kissed and caressed on the porch of her building, while he was walking her home. She felt good in those arms. So last night, while he was still caressing her, with one hand venturing up her skirt, she had asked him to go upstairs. He had immediately agreed.

This morning, while walking, she held his hand. She was smiling. But she hesitated. She did not feel ready to love this man. Something held her back, a feminine instinct of protection. She had adored when they had made love. He had wanted to put a little variety in the positions, but she preferred the classic things. He complied with her request without complaining.

No matter how much she examined the

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information at her disposal, she could only tell herself that this man was the right one. He had a good job. He was kind, caring. She had never been to his house. Maybe that was what she missed to know him well. He had never offered. No doubt, like many single men, his home was a bit messy and not spotlessly clean. After all, he was just a man. But even a man has his pride. It would be necessary to suggest to him, this next weekend, that he take her to his home. That would leave him a few days to get the place ready.

Amanda Zimmer pulled her chestnut hair out from under her collar. She suddenly felt liberated. Her smile grew sharper as her hair, instead of falling nicely over her shoulders as usual, blew in the wind gushing in from San Francisco Bay.

It was the first time they had slept together. And so it was the first time that they were together in the morning and that he accompanied her to work. They were a little early. No doubt he then had to go further, to his own work. Suddenly, Amanda realized she didn't know what company he worked for.

He was a computer scientist, yes. But where? He always walked around with at least one laptop. He had repaired his own computer which had a problem accessing the Internet. But the fact remained that he had never told her... She would have to ask him directly to avoid any dodging.

They were arriving at the Blue Tower, across

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from the restaurants on Pier 23. Too late for questions. And no way colleagues should see her with a man holding her hand. It would lead to gossip.

“Wait, Igor, leave me here”, she told him.

“Whatever you want.”

He took her in his arms, plunging his face into her hair before kissing her briefly on the lips in an almost chaste manner. She smiled at him. He released her from his arms and she started to walk away saying, “see you later”.

Suddenly, he blocked her by putting a hand on her shoulder.

“Oh, excuse me, I almost forgot...”

“Yes?”

“Could you do me a little favor? My printer is broken and I need to have some resumes on paper. Could you get me a dozen copies from your office and give them to me tonight when I take you out to dinner?”

This was a good opportunity to learn more about him. It was almost too good to be true.

“Yes, of course”, she said.

He reached into his pocket, pulled out a thumb drive, and handed it to Amanda. She took it.

“Thank you”, he said simply.

Then he watched her walk away from him. Amanda Zimmer strode briskly across the forecourt between the boulevard and the entrance to the Blue Tower. Everyone called it that way in

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San Francisco. She entered and went directly to her office, to Bioxem's accounting department. The name of the firm appeared at the top of the tower, in large blue letters.

The company had been called Bioxem for a few years. Even if everyone still only remembered its centuries-old activity, table salt. In San Francisco, on all the tables, there was Blue Ocean salt.

But Blue Ocean had diversified well. First, almost a century ago, there were bath salts, when it became fashionable. A less refined product than table salt, which was voluntarily polluted by crushing algae which, otherwise, had to be removed, and, above all, a product which was sold at a much higher price than table salt.

Then, during the era of great economic growth, Blue Ocean had diversified into nitrate and potash salts for agriculture and various industries. And then the current boss of this large family company had led the diversification in biochemistry and the recycling of agricultural or aquaculture waste. The name change had been imposed with the reorganization of the group and its listing on the stock exchange. Blue Ocean had become Bioxem, with only table salt retaining the historical name "Blue Ocean". The installation of the headquarters in the new tower, instead of the old buildings in Monterey, had followed. Located further south, towards Los Angeles, the old town

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of sardine fishermen and other seafarers was no more than a tourist city, not very practical for the headquarters of a growing society. And, San Francisco was considered to be one end of Silicon Valley.

The man stopped looking at the Blue Tower. His mistress had entered it. In a few moments, she would turn on her computer and slip the USB key into it. He was going to have to find another girl to warm him up at night. She had nice breasts but was kind of frozen in bed. Her reactions were very predictable. Luckily, she did not usually go to the same places he did. He had had to track her before surreptitiously approaching her, with the gentleness necessary to seduce this kind of girl.

Turning around, the man shoved his hands in his jacket pockets and headed for where he had parked his car, further north. He was smiling, lowering his eyes to avoid the wind. Igor Wlamywacz was a pretty twisted pseudonym. He himself had had trouble pronouncing it well and writing it flawlessly. He smiled inwardly. This girl hadn't even dared to ask him to repeat his name. She had probably written it with many mistakes.

Igor continued to walk north. The pier numbers continued to grow. He had to continue around the hill. The girl lived in an old red brick building on Russian Hill. To get there, he had parked his car at the bottom of the hill, near Fort Mason. He had nothing better to do than walk

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while the process started. So he walked along the bay. He glanced from time to time towards the “piers”. The first tourists began to invade them.

Departures to Alcatraz were about to begin. Igor Wlamywacz paused for a moment, a smile on the corner of his lips. He could see in the distance, long past the end of the pier he was standing in front of, the sinister rock, with its buildings that would make even the most hardened of gangsters shudder. For decades now, the place had only welcomed tourists. Too expensive for a prison. And, ultimately, not so secure since three inmates had finally managed to escape. They had never been found. Perhaps they had drowned in the bay. This was the official version of the story.

The man shrugged. It really didn't matter.

If these three guys had pulled it off, good for them. Otherwise, their fate was preferable to rotting in the small cells until the end of their miserable days. The pier numbers resumed their growth as the man walked. Moving away from the quay, Igor Wlamywacz entered Beach Street. His ordinary car was parked there, a few hundred meters away. In fact, after a few minutes, he found it. He got behind the wheel and then took out his smartphone. Amanda had been quick. The virus had sent him an email to warn him that it was installed on the accountant's computer.

The man dialed a number. There was only one ring before the caller picked up.

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“It’s Igor. The thing is done.”

“I got the technical message too. Please proceed as agreed and we will meet in two hours at the scheduled location.”

Communication was cut off. Igor texted Amanda and drove off, satisfied. It was sunny. The day started well. Yes, the man could be satisfied. His mission would be quickly completed and he hoped to cash in on a nice bundle of dough. It was a beautiful fall day. And, if there was anything certain, it was that Igor Wlamywacz would never go to Alcatraz other than as a tourist.



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### 2

Fortunately, Amanda Zimmer almost had a desk, being in a corner of the open space, not far from the printer. As she was the first to arrive, she had decided that it would be better to avoid questions by printing out Igor's resume right away.

It was still a funny name, Igor Wlamywacz. When she added him to her email address book, she copied and pasted the sender address from one of his messages. Otherwise, she would have made at least three or four mistakes.

Her computer barely turned on, she had inserted the USB key. The contents of the medium were immediately displayed on the screen. But there were no office files she could have printed. There were only videos. And the filenames started with "preteen" followed by a number that looked like a child's age, because of the "years" right after it. Finally, there was a sort of four-digit increment number. Sometimes a foreign first name.

Amanda Zimmer wondered what those videos were. She hesitated. It was weird. Igor had said that she had to print a resume saved on the USB key. Finally, she double-clicked on one of the videos.

Fortunately, at this hour, she was alone in the office. Amanda Zimmer screamed in horror as she pressed her hand forcefully over her mouth. Then

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she cried. She couldn't stop staring at these horrors. There was at least a minute of horrible, revolting images.

Then she finally had the strength to close the video player. Then to disconnect the key. She tossed it angrily into the trash can. She was nauseous.

Staggering, she got up and headed for the bathroom. She wanted to dispense cold water on her face. But, upon arriving, she rushed into a cabin and vomited. She had slept with the guy who had a flash drive with... She threw up again.

She rinsed her mouth, splashed cool water on her face, and went to the coffee machine.

When she returned to her office, a colleague greeted her.

“Hey, you are already here?”

“Yes, since about ten minutes. I slept badly and went to get myself a coffee.”

“Indeed, you look pale. Are you sure you're not sick?”

“No, no, it's OK.”

Amanda forced herself back to her seat, opening the usual software she was working on. The numbers appeared. But Amanda didn't know what to do anymore. She couldn't understand what was on the screen.

Obsessed with the horror visions, she forced herself to look for the USB key in the trash. She put it back in her bag. She had to give him up to

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the police. But give up who? She didn't know anything about him. His name, his mobile phone number, his email address. It was very little. And she had slept with him. Amanda Zimmer felt dirty, dirty inside. No, she would throw the key away from the office. The cleaning teams should not be given the surprise of finding a USB key in a trash can. And she had to forget. Amanda Zimmer was at this stage in her thinking process when her cell phone beeped. She took it and saw that Igor had texted her.

“Please, don't use what I gave you. I got the wrong key.”

Her nausea turned to rage.

“You won't see your shitty key again. And neither will you see me, you bastard. Don't call me anymore. Don't come near me. I never want to hear from you again. Get out of my life or I'll call the police.”

She sent her message and felt better. There was no response. He knew she had already unlocked his key. And he knew what she had seen there. She forced herself to return to her work. Her colleagues arrived one after the other. No one should know what had happened. She took a sip of coffee. All of a sudden, she realized that her network access was cut off. Her software crashed and closed. There was an alert popping up in a window with a red background.

“Quarantined infected computer. Please take

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it to IT immediately.”

She thought to herself that she really couldn't catch herself a break. She turned off her computer, unplugged the external screen and keyboard, then took her computer – a handy laptop for going to meetings – as requested. She greeted her colleagues by grumbling against these pesky computer scientists incapable of protecting the computers effectively.

“Shit!”, yelled the man in his car.

Everything had gone well, though. The virus had quietly infected the accountant's computer. But something had blocked its progress towards the servers using the line-of-business software connections. Now he couldn't access Bioxem's machines, not even Amanda's workstation.

And with the official breakup with her, it was impossible to get a second chance. He had just lost a month of work. What was he going to tell his boss?

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### 3

The ordinary car parked in the designated place, in a remote area of the port. Igor, pale, came out. He headed for the black van parked a little further, in an abandoned shed, probably destined for demolition. The warehouse doors were all open or missing. All the windows were broken. There was glass on the floor, on the concrete floor so old that it was cracked.

The van just passed under a series of beams, which were all that remained of a kind of mezzanine where offices must once have been, in a corner of the shed. The nose of the vehicle was turned towards the main door, ready to leave quickly.

The closer Igor approached the vehicle with the smoked windows, the more it slowed down. He felt nausea overwhelm him. He had failed. He was going to have to admit it. He hesitated. Shouldn't he rather turn around and only come back with good news? Or give up? He had a bad feeling about this, when he thought about it, even if a lot of money was at stake.

But a tall, very athletic guy, like a boxing and bodybuilding champion, with a face streaked with scars, got out of the van. He was the driver. He had on black pants, made up of a sort of twine . And a hoodie of the same color. The long sleeves

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of the sweatshirt concealed the arms but its tight fit to the body revealed some strong muscles. No doubt the arms were also covered with scars. Or mysterious tattoos. Or both. The hood was undone, resting casually on the man's back, revealing blond hair cropped so short against very white skin that, from a distance, the driver appeared bald.

He had an unreadable, neutral expression. Did he have the ability to think? Did he have a soul? Or was he just a robot? Something about him was frightening. Perhaps the lack of emotion.

He looked at Igor as he walked around the van. Then he came to stand next to the sliding rear door. He looked Igor in the eye and waited.

If Igor turned around, this guy would have caught him in seconds. The hacker was not athletic. He no longer had a choice. He had to go make his report and admit his failure.

He walked like a condemned man going to his ordeal. When Igor was less than two meters from the van, the driver slid the rear door without taking his eyes off Igor. He simply said, "Mr. Leprechaun is waiting for you." The voice was neutral, expressionless, serious, almost mechanical, even if it hinted at a suppressed Slavic accent. This guy was not human.

Igor entered the van and sat down on the seat just behind the door, a sort of folding seat. It was facing rearward, opposite the direction of the vehicle's travel, and its backrest was right against

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the front seats. The driver gently closed the sliding door but firmly enough that the click of its automatic lock was clearly heard.

Facing him, Igor found, sitting on the very comfortable back seat, Martin Leprechaun. He smiled in a fatherly manner. His apparent kindness seemed hypocritical. Igor knew it. A guy who used the services of people like this driver or even Igor couldn't be a saint anyway. Sixty years old, strong, close-cropped white hair, Martin Leprechaun looked like an old retired commando officer.

"Hello, Igor", Martin Leprechaun said simply, without putting any excessive warmth into his greeting but without animosity either.

"Hello Sir."

Behind him, Igor heard the driver settle back into his seat and wait silently.

"First of all, Igor, I wanted to give you a present. You are part of the family now."

Martin Leprechaun handed him a package, a simple plastic bag whose soft contents bent under the effect of the weight. Igor took it without hiding his surprise.

"Thank you sir."

"Well, open the package."

Igor complied. He ripped open the plastic wrapper and pulled out a hoodie that looked exactly like the driver's.

"It's kind of a uniform, if you will. I'd be happy if you put it on before we continue our

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conversation.”

Igor took off his jacket and put on the hoodie. It was the right size. He arranged the hood so that it fell well behind his back. He wondered what this unexpected and curious gift meant. Why make him look like his driver? Or like a skinny version of his driver, to be more precise.

Martin Leprechaun waited until the young man in front of him was well settled before speaking again.

“Well, let’s get to the important stuff now, my dear Igor. Anyway, now that you’re part of the family, I can probably call you Kevin. It is true that Kevin Bellig is a less glamorous name than your hacker nickname.”

Kevin shuddered. His boss knew his real name. Holy shit. He felt a bead of cold sweat running down his back. Yet Martin Leprechaun retained his calm, kind, fatherly tone.

“My dear Kevin, so this morning you managed to send your intermediary, an accountant from Bioxem, the charming Amanda Zimmer, a USB key which was to infect their information system and allow us to carry out the desired operations. The infection of her workstation has indeed taken place. But the stump of the virus was very standard and security kicked in. Your virus was neutralized in a few moments. In short, you failed. Absolutely speaking, it wouldn’t be such a big deal in itself. It was a first attempt and using a



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basic tool first could be reasonable. Where you have not been reasonable is that you have placed child pornography files on this key. Why did you make this choice?”

“My relationship with Amanda no longer had any reason to be. This allowed me to break up immediately.”

“So you burned your boats before you were sure you were successful. You have failed by immense levity and misplaced pride. You have disappointed me, my dear Kevin. Much disappointed me.”

“I’m sorry. It won’t happen again, sir. I’m going to reinitiate a penetration by...”

“You disappointed me, Kevin. When I recruited you, you bragged about successfully penetrating corporate systems to steal data or install ransomware for substantial ransoms. However, since then, I have become better informed. You’re just a... How do you say it again? Ah, yes, a script kiddy. A beginner, not an authentic professional. Your previous victims were small companies without any IT services, often less well protected than ordinary individuals. I won’t be mistaken again. Computer science is still a new field for me. But, all my life, I have tried to learn from my mistakes. So thank you for allowing me to make progress. But you will understand, my dear Kevin, that our relationship ends here and that, of course, you will not be paid.”

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Kevin was chilled by the neutral and cold tone used by his client. But he was relieved by the turn of events. He bit off more than he could chew, but that wouldn't have any consequences.

“I understand, sir. So I will leave you. And I want to renew my apologies.”

Martin Leprechaun did not answer Kevin and spoke directly to his driver.

“Sergei, do the necessary for Kevin.”

The so-called Igor suddenly felt his throat encircled by a metal cable. Instinctively, his fingers tried to grab hold of the binding that was strangling him, but they had no hold.

Neck compressed, Kevin Bellig felt the pain invade him. Then, deprived of oxygen, the brain plunged into a coma. The cable continued its work for long minutes.

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### 4

The sun was about to set soon. Luke Watford walked quickly out of San Francisco police headquarters. He was hungry, and when his shift was over, he wanted to get home quickly to eat.

“Good evening, Lieutenant”, the orderly smiled at him.

“Thank you, Jack. You too.”

Police Chief Luigi Confiti, whom everyone from thugs to police officers called Confetti, passed Luke Watford on the steps. He was going back up to his office. Short and chubby, with hair that was no longer black at all and was even beginning to forgo gray for white, the police chief remained nervous. Apart from elementary courtesies, he was rarely seen smiling.

“Sir, I wish you a good evening...”

“Good evening, Luke.”

Luigi Confiti had always been a cop. He wanted to appear jaded. He had seen all sorts of crimes, from basic villainy to things more heinous than ordinary mortals were prepared to believe. He had always been a cop and even a good cop. Cold, efficient, relentless. Many thugs owed him a long stay in the shadows. But he became a bureaucrat. In fact, rather than jaded, perhaps Confiti was simply bored now.

Luke was too young to be already jaded and

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too busy to be bored. The only thing he cared about was that his bosses were good cops. And, of course, he wanted to have a private life worthy of a young man who was clearly heterosexual and did not hesitate to come out about it.

Skinny, short-haired, athletic, Luke considered himself more of a good-looking guy. He didn't need to push his luck when he went out to clubs. He got girls quite easily.

Despite everything, he liked to keep some girlfriends to spend a few more tender and less superficial evenings. These girls were both his mistresses and his confidantes. Some knew each other. The jealous and the possessive didn't fit into the harem, just passing through Luke's life as conquests for a night or two. The others, well, had good evenings with Luke from time to time. Sometimes more than two. Sometimes with good bottles and good food. It never hurts to have fun. One day, perhaps, he would agree to choose just one. Or not.

Luke started his car and, leaving the parking lot of the police station, he quickly took the expressway with his back to the Oakland Bay Bridge. He didn't live very far, in the Mission District neighborhood. He was home in minutes.

It was a building for the middle classes, with three levels, where employees and young executives were housed. Everyone dreamed of buying a house one day. Why not a dog or a cat, a

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fireplace? Luke wasn't thinking about that. A house, yes, but full of naked girls with heavy breasts and narrow hips. The rest was for old people.

Entering his apartment, Luke casually tossed his jacket on his couch. He took off his shoes and put on his slippers, his only concession to petty-bourgeois manners. He walked into the kitchen and opened the refrigerator. Was he supposed to go out tonight? Could he invite a girl? There was a little fish left over from the night before. No, it would be a quiet evening. There were zucchinis and tomatoes in the vegetable drawer. To accompany the fish, a small stir-fry...

Ring. Who could ring the doorbell like this? Luke closed the refrigerator. A little angry at having been disturbed, he went to open it.

"Hi, Luke."

Mary Hayward was one of the prettiest girls in the harem. But usually, she warned before coming. Maybe an imperious and unforeseen need to fuck tonight... Luke smiled at her and opened the door wide before stepping aside to let her in.

With her brown bowl cut and her bourgeois outfit of a well-educated wise little girl who had grown too quickly, making her look like uncooked asparagus, no one was suspicious of her. But Luke knew that this woman, as old as he was, even though she looked younger, was not only whimsical but a hell of a hit in bed. And their

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initial meeting was surprising, to say the least, since it was in police custody. She had been caught for a story of hacking into a computer of one of her former boyfriends. Bad luck for her, he was as much a computer scientist as she was. And he had spotted the spyware.

Officially, she was a videographer, special effects artist and editor in a communication agency. She also worked a little on her own to create small websites. But, in some circles, she was known by the pseudonym of Nikita. A nice hacker who sometimes gave Luke a little discreet and out-of-procedure helping hand. And who was paid in kind, like a good bottle and an evening of intensive sex. This saved the taxpayer money.

But Mary Hayward seemed nervous tonight. Or strange. Well, strangerer than usual. Luke Watford closed the door.

The young woman had just put her eternal rollerblades against the wall, next to the door. She did not own a car and generally used this only means of getting around. In an old backpack, she kept her sneakers, which she put on as soon as the rollerblades were no longer needed. Which was the case at that time.

While turning after having closed the door, Luke saw that Mary Hayward had not left immediately to slump on the couch as usual. There she was, standing, almost leaning against the white kitchen wall. She was looking at Luke with a

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strange expression.

She had even kept her jacket on. And she had both of her hands stuck in his pockets.

“Well, Mary, what’s going on? You are all strange. I’m glad to see you but you could have warned. What do you want to eat? I have tomatoes and zucchini to make a vegetable stir-fry. I have a little leftover fish already cooked but I have more in the freezer. I can also take out frozen duck. As dessert...”

Luke Watford had delivered his statement first in a quick and enthusiastic tone. And then slower and slower. And his last sentence remained unfinished.

Mary Hayward had simply turned her head from side to side several times. Silently. Her mouth was slightly open, her eyes staring into the distance, past Luke, as if the apartment door were a vast, enchanting landscape instead of blocking the view.

Suddenly she pointed a gun at Luke, the muzzle pointed between his eyes. She had taken it out of her jacket pocket.

“Tell me you loved me.”

Luke made the first move to disarm her. He was a policeman. He was trained to react in such cases, even if he was surprised.

She didn’t give him time to disarm her. She placed the barrel under her jaw, against his own throat. Luke’s hand only encountered emptiness.

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Boom.

The white wall turned red.

**END OF THE EXTRACT**

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