

Hacker For Hire

By

Pendelton C. Wallace

Chapter 1

Justin McCormack pulled his long brown hair back into a pony tail, curled it on top of his head and secured it with hair pins. He gently lifted the blonde wig from a Styrofoam form and fitted it to his head. He fussed and fretted with the wig for a moment, then reached for a jar of spirit gum. After slathering a layer on his upper lip with the applicator under the jar's lid, he pasted a blonde Fu Manchu mustache into place. Finally, he spirit gummed his chin and added the goatee.

He felt a tingling in the pit of his stomach. Nerves or excitement? It didn't matter. The adrenaline would kick in any minute.

He stopped and took a breath, then looked around his bathroom. He had worked hard to afford this expensive condo overlooking Seattle's Pike Place Market. He arranged his bathroom like the rest of his life, everything in its place. Thick white towels hung from brass racks, the few medications and cosmetics neatly stored away in drawers and cabinets alongside protein powder and vitamin supplements.

He washed the spirit gum off of his hands and gazed into the brass-rimmed mirror that matched the art deco theme of the building. He removed his bathrobe and liked what he saw. His muscles bulged, his six-pack abs gave him a little thrill. He had worked as hard for this body as he had for his profession.

Stepping back, Justin admired his handiwork. *Not perfect, not good enough yet.* Although he hoped that no one knew what he looked like, he had been on enough TV shows and magazines that he couldn't take the chance.

He leaned close into the mirror and inserted blue contact lenses to cover his brown eyes. *That should do it.*

This job could be a life changer. He already had all the money he needed, but if he pulled this off, he'd be famous. No, not if he pulled it off, *when* he pulled it off.

Justin stepped into his bedroom where blue coveralls laid neatly on his king-sized bed. A pair of shiny, black work shoes rested on the floor.

Justin reached for the coveralls. *Damn that Bear.* The coveralls were a size "L." Could he squeeze into them? The legs weren't a problem. A little tight, but not too short. The top was another story. The fabric strained against the buttons. His chest and shoulders were just too massive for this outfit. He would be lucky if he didn't pop the buttons loose when he breathed. *I'll kill the little bastard for this. After seven years he knows damn good and well I'm an XL!*

He sat on the bed, carefully bent over and pulled on the shoes.

If this is the worst thing that happens today, I'll be lucky.

Butterflies fluttered in his stomach while he waited for the elevator. At the front steps of his building, a white van with a Rainer Office Supply sign painted on the side pulled up to the curb, exactly on time. A short stocky man with a reddish-blond beard and unruly hair got out of

the driver's seat.

“Coffee?” The man handed Justin a Starbucks cup.

“Get in, Bear.” Justin took the cup and slipped behind the wheel.

Justin glanced back over his shoulder. “Good morning, Irena,” he said. A tattoo-covered blonde woman with a crew cut, wearing a baggy blue jump suit sat in the back seat.

Their eyes met and without answering him she covered her head with a New York Yankees baseball cap. They drove the few blocks to the Millennium Towers in nervous silence.

Are we out of our minds? One of the largest computer companies in the world, Millennium Systems security was world class. *And that, my friend, is the challenge.*

Justin steered the van into the underground garage and parked in a reserved stall, his hands sweaty on the wheel. He climbed out of the van, took a deep breath and wiped his palms on the seat of his pants. His heart pounded wildly. Using the old actor's trick, he tensed every muscle in his body, then slowly released the tension, bit by bit. First his toes, then his feet, then his calves, then thighs and up his body. He breathed deeply several more times, letting his diaphragm do the work.

This was it: Showtime!

“Hey, hero.” The husky, gray-bearded bus driver turned and shouted over his shoulder.

“Your stop's coming up.”

“Thanks, Garry.” Ted Higuera folded his newspaper and stood up.

“Good luck, hero.” The bus driver held his hand out, palm up.

I wish he'd stop calling me that. Ted slapped his hand. "*Gracias.*"

Stepping down from the green and yellow Metro bus, Ted landed in Pioneer Square. He turned his jacket collar up against the light mist. In East LA, where he grew up, they would call this rain. In Seattle, the natives hardly even noticed it.

The Square was full of families and late-season tourists milling about. Business people hustled back and forth. Tonight, after the yuppie crowd took over, Pioneer Square would become Party Central.

Caramba! Ted thought, not for the first time, that he'd rather be heading to one of the Square's famous night spots. It was his first day at his first job out of college. He should be excited, but something held him back.

"Mom, look!" A small boy, maybe nine or ten years old, pointed at Ted. "It's him. The man from TV who saved that cruise ship."

"Charlie," his hatchet-faced mother admonished. "You know it's not polite to point."

"Hell, Shelly, Charlie's right." The father, a short, round, bald man in a leather jacket, reached his hand out to Ted. "I want to shake your hand."

Ted hated all the attention he was getting. Too polite to refuse, he took the man's hand.

The man pulled him close and clapped him on the back. "It's about time somebody stood up to them damn terrorists."

"Oh, my." A heavy gray-haired woman saw Ted. She stood eye-to-eye with him and probably outweighed him by forty pounds.

Her eyes immediately teared up. She threw her arms around him and pulled him into her ample bosom. "Thank you, thank you, thank you."

Ted wanted to break away, to run.

“My grandchildren were on that boat. You saved their lives.”

“I really didn’t do anything,” Ted said. *Yeah*, he fought back tears of his own, *except get my friends shot up*. He managed to extricate himself from the death hug.

A crowd gathered around him, a phenomenon that happened more and more these days. Well-wishers patted him on the back and introduced their children. Smart phones were shoved in his face as pretty girls posed for a selfie with him. This was the full rock-star treatment.

I gotta get outta here. He broke free. “Thank you, everybody. I gotta go. I’m late for work.”

Breaking away from the crowd, his steps echoed across the cobbled square as he passed under the iron pergola. He picked up his pace. His admirers fell behind.

Crossing Yesler Street, he made his way to the restored nineteenth-century brick building that housed YTS Digital Security, his new employer.

What the hell, I’m about to join the workforce. Isn’t this what the last four years had been all about? Graduate, get a job, get ahead. It was the American dream.

What every kid from the *barrio* wanted, right? So why did he feel so damned disjointed?

Showtime!

Justin and his two helpers pushed wooden carts stacked with cubicle components through the service entrance. They took the service elevator to the thirty-second floor. Bear’s fingers drummed on the cart handle.

“Schtop it!” Irena spoke for the first time. Her voice was just below a shriek.

The elevator doors opened unto an immense sea of cubicles. Justin knew that surveillance cameras in the ceiling watched his every move. He timed their visit for mid-morning. The day had begun. An army of drones moved about busily, with purpose, a hive of orchestrated activity.

Justin could feel his pulse in his ears. After a brief surveillance, he found what he was looking for. He pushed his cart towards an empty office along the wall. He looked around again. No one seemed to notice them. Bear sullenly pushed his cart behind Justin, trailed by Irena.

Irena entered the office first. Justin held his breath. She looked around then gave a slight nod. He entered, followed by Bear.

Irena and Bear pushed their carts in front of the office windows and began piling boxes on top of the carts, screening off the view from the outside. Justin sat down behind the empty desk. He looked around nervously even though no one outside the office could see him.

It took only a moment for Justin to orient himself to the strange desk. He cracked his knuckles, reached down and turned on the computer. While it booted up, he found the number for Millennium System's help desk taped to the computer monitor. It really didn't matter. Justin already had it memorized.

Last week, when his team cased the building, they learned all they needed to know. Bear discovered the company's login ID convention was first initial, middle initial and the first four characters of the last name. Irena found out the department's manager, John Potter, would be on vacation in Hawaii this week.

That tidbit of information led Justin to do a Google search on John Potter, middle name Allan.

On the screen, Justin typed in "JAPOTT" and hit the "enter" key. As expected, an "incorrect password" message appeared. He tried the login twice more. The screen said:

**Access denied. Your account has been locked.
Please contact the system administrator.**

Justin took a deep breath, forced a smile onto his face, picked up the phone and called the help desk number.

“You have reached the Millennium Systems Help Desk,” the recorded voice said in perfect English. “We have added several new menu options to improve our service. Please listen to this entire message before making your selection. For password resets, press one. . .” Justin pushed “one.”

“Millennium Systems Help Desk, this is Hamsa, how may I help you?” Her accent was thick, but understandable.

This is it. The most critical part of the job. He had to sound casual, at ease.

“Good morning, Hamsa, this is John Potter in Seattle.” Justin knew that a help desk agent in Bangalore had never heard of John Potter. “I just got back from vacation and I don’t remember what I set my password to before I left. Can you help me?”

“Of course, John. I need first to ask you a security question through.”

Justin forced a smile. He had learned long ago that his voice was more likeable when he smiled. “Sure, go ahead.”

Irena had attended the International Help Desk Institute’s seminar in Seattle last month. In a long blonde wig, short skirt and tight sweater, it was child’s play for her to learn about Millennium Systems’ security questions from their Help Desk manager.

“I guess a week on the Big Island is worth a little hassle, huh?” Acting friendly with the help desk agent was a big part of social engineering. Justin had to put her at ease so she was less likely to question his identity.

“John, what is the name of your wife?” the voice on the phone asked in its heavy Indian accent.

“It’s Sandra.”

In his Google search Justin found all sorts of interesting information about John Potter. He thought back to a picture of Mr. Potter and his wife at a fundraiser with the caption “John and Sandra Potter dance the night away at the Black and White Ball.”

“OK, John. I’m resetting your password to ‘Wednesday’ with a capital ‘W,’ you will need to reset it as soon as you log on.”

“Thanks, Hamsa.”

That was it. He was in. He had the keys to the kingdom.

From John Potter’s account, it was child’s play for Justin to shell into the operating system. He had spent a lifetime stalking Windows vulnerabilities. In five minutes he set up a system administrator account for himself. Now, as far as Millennium Systems was concerned, he was God.