

The House Always Wins

FIRST FOUR CHAPTERS

Murder and spying in London and Berlin

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CHAPTER ONE

The Funeral

28th July, 2015. Brompton Road, London.

It was the day that Ethan Harris had been dreading since the murder of his wife, Rachel, nearly a week earlier. The forensics team had finally finished their work and released the body for burial. He could not bear to think of her lying on that cold slab where the autopsy had been carried out.

He was so full of grief that he had not been able to make the arrangements and so his mother-in-law, Julia, had organised it all. She had also been taking care of Katy, his two-year-old daughter, as he was in no condition to mind her. He knew that Julia had never liked him, that she had always felt her daughter was too good for him. Now she was in control, looking after her granddaughter and making the final arrangements for her daughter's burial. Every time he looked at her, he felt the

disgust in her eyes – as though she had stepped in something nasty. He tried to ignore it, but all he could see in his mind was her tightly pursed lips and the cold stare of contempt.

Right now though, she could not make him feel any worse than he already did. He had been like a zombie over the previous few days, barely surviving them. Now he had to meet everyone and be sociable when all he felt like doing was to let everything slip by, crawl into some dark corner with a bottle of brandy and numb the pain.

It was to be a Christian funeral. He was not religious, but Rachel's family was, and he was okay just to go along with it. Julia had made the arrangements – contacting the vicar and a funeral director who had looked after everything.

On the evening before the funeral service, Rachel was laid out in an open coffin, in the funeral home. She had been embalmed and looked like a sleeping wax model of herself. Julia had wanted an open casket and so there it was. It disgusted him. But he had deferred all the decisions to Julia, so it was her call. He had just wanted to remember Rachel's smiling face from when she was alive, not a waxy death-mask, especially knowing that the mortician had had to work extremely hard to make it look like she had quietly passed away in her sleep.

A wave of sadness and emotion swept over him as he looked down at her lifeless body and his hand trembled as he touched her cheek and stroked her hair for the last

time, knowing that he'd never hold her in his arms again or see her smiling face.

Some friends and family came to pay their respects that evening, but the majority waited until the next day for the funeral service and the burial. When he left the funeral home, it seemed like a darkness descended and enveloped him until the next morning.

The next morning, Ethan was exhausted, as he had hardly slept at all, haunted by memories and regrets. He walked alone from his house on Onslow Square, round by Kensington South Station, past the Victoria and Albert Museum, to Holy Trinity Church on Brompton Road, about ten minutes away. He was still in a daze from what had happened that week. As he entered the church he saw his father, Tom and his older brother, James, standing at the top, beside the altar. He stood with them for a while.

Tom hugged him and tried to comfort him, but to Ethan, he felt like a stranger. They had had little contact ever since Ethan left home to go to university. He had never returned home after that, and only called Tom on the phone once a year to see how he was getting on. The family had been irreversibly fractured after Ethan's mother had left when he was 12 years old; despite Tom's efforts, Ethan and his brother had had a difficult childhood. James had also left as soon as he could, but his life had taken a vastly different path to Ethan's. He had spent several years in prison during his early twenties, setting him on course for a life that was constantly on

the borderline of drugs and crime. Ethan knew that James had been in prison a second time, much more recently, but there was so little contact between them that it did not feel right to bring it up.

So the three of them stood in awkward silence, broken by occasional failed attempts at conversation. Eventually, Ethan walked to the front door of the church to greet others who were arriving.

It was a small funeral with a scattering of people in the pews closest to the altar. The rest of the church was an empty, cavernous void, full of echoes and shadows mirroring the darkness he felt inside. He hardly knew anyone because most of them were Julia's old friends and neighbours who had travelled up from Kent to pay their last respects.

The casket was now closed and lying on a trolley at the top of the church, in front of the altar, surrounded by bouquets of flowers. Ethan turned away, briefly glimpsing David Powell as he slipped in quietly at the back of the church. David was Rachel's father, and his marriage had ended so badly that in a sense he was *persona non grata*, even if it was his own daughter's funeral. Especially since Rachel had seldom spoken to him since she was a teenager, as though she had divorced him as a father long before her mother had divorced him as a husband. Ethan had rarely heard Rachel talk about him, though she had once shown him some photos of the man. He had not even attended their wedding. It was almost as though he did not exist, except there he was,

anonymously attending his daughter's funeral. As far as Ethan knew, Powell was a shadowy character who worked for GCHQ.

Bill Taylor, a colleague and one of Ethan's few friends, arrived. He shook his hand and then hugged him.

"I'm so sorry Ethan, we were all shocked at the bank. Harvey Waterman sends his condolences and his apologies that he couldn't attend."

"Thanks, Bill, I appreciate you coming and all your help in the last week."

Bill smiled and moved up into the church.

The service was mercifully fast and the vicar, who had no doubt been briefed by Julia, gave a short eulogy on Rachel's life.

A small crowd was gathered outside the church. Among them was Amy Knight, an investigative journalist unknown to Ethan or anyone in his family. Neither had she known Rachel. And, a little distance from the crowd, stood Detective Chief Inspector Scott and Detective Inspector Jones. They approached Ethan, shook his hand, offered their condolences, and then walked away.

The church bells were ringing mournfully as the funeral director slid the coffin into the hearse, placed the wreaths around it, and drove away, towards the cemetery, followed by two mourning cars – one for Ethan's family, the other for Rachel's family. Behind them, a

small train of cars followed, to the final resting place in the graveyard about a mile away.

In the distance, David Powell slipped away, unknown to anyone there.

CHAPTER TWO

Hacked

4th July, 2015. Crystal Palace, London.

03:00

Dev Kumar, a professional hacker, finally succeeded in accessing MitaSimi Bank's computer systems in Canary Wharf, for the first time at 03:00 in the morning. He was working from his apartment at Crystal Palace but his digital location was well hidden as all his internet traffic was routed through the TOR anonymous network and browser. It wasn't a typical hacker's attack, which the bank's security staff were well used to fighting off using firewalls, long passwords and restrictions on access. No, he was in a different league completely and had gained access using an administrator's password.

In his earlier research he had discovered that only four people had administration privileges on the bank's servers. Two of them, he learned, played online poker on

their home PCs. When a new version of the poker application was being installed, he hijacked it, replacing it with an alternative version which had ‘Trojan Horse’ software embedded in it. He had written this software specifically for this attack, so there was no way it would be picked up by anti-virus protection on the PC. Once it was installed, it activated a key-logger – a type of surveillance software that recorded everything typed on the keyboard, information that was then periodically sent back through anonymous servers in the dark web, to the hacker.

It was only a matter of time before the admin username and password for the bank’s server was picked up by the key-logger and sent as an encrypted message to Dev.

Now he was all set. Armed with the administrator credentials, he was able to access the bank’s servers without arousing any suspicion.

Once inside, his first job was to hide his tracks so no one would know he had been there. Tonight was the first night of a few week’s work, and he would need to be able to come and go in the middle of the night, making some small, but crucial changes to the bank’s clients’ portfolios. If he went too fast and made significant changes in one go, then it would be spotted right away. But, by patiently making small updates, night after night, he would be able to slowly built up a significant change to the trading systems databases, one of the most crucial financial areas in the bank. Before he left each night, he

would have to remove details about his access to the system, thus minimising the possibility of anyone knowing he had been there.

When Dev had finished his first session on the servers at MitaSimi Bank, that night, he moved on to his second target – Ethan Harris’s home PC, where he had already installed the ‘Trojan horse’ software. He logged in and left a thinly disguised electronic trail from Ethan’s PC to a number of websites, for others to eventually find. He then installed the TOR network and other software to make it look like Harris had been using the dark web. He also left a trail making it look like Ethan had accessed his wife’s bank accounts, including her special savings account containing £500,000. From another one of her accounts, he transferred £10,000 to Ethan’s account, which he subsequently transferred to a Swiss bank account.

CHAPTER THREE

Day One

23rd July, 2015. Onslow Square, Kensington.

00:01

It was midnight and Ethan had just finished yet another online poker session. He was sitting back in his comfortable leather chair in his home office on the first floor of his house on Onslow Square, Kensington, London. Once again, his gambling account was empty, but he was hopelessly addicted, having fallen off the wagon yet again. This was an early night for him; normally it would be well into the small hours of the morning before he was ready for bed, pretending to work late to his wife Rachel who had gone to bed two hours before him, exhausted by work and looking after Katy.

What prompted him to finish early was that while searching for a credit card, a new one that he had secretly ordered, he had come across a photo, in the drawer of

his desk. It had been taken more than thirty years earlier, when Ethan was 12 years old. A small, old print with a crease across it, it brought him back to another place and time with a flood of memories.

“Measure twice, cut once.” That was the mantra that Tom, Ethan’s father, repeated as he worked on all the do-it-yourself jobs he did around the house where Ethan and his brother James grew up. Ethan hated that phrase because it reminded him of all the half-made furniture in nearly every room of the house.

It was a ramshackle, three-bedroom, semi-detached house in Norwood South London, full of bad DIY home projects, some half completed, some barely started, but all of them stamped with the characteristic signature of Tom Harris, an amateur do-it-yourself enthusiast and father of two boys.

The house was dirty; it had always been dirty as far as Ethan remembered, ever since he had been woken up by his brother James, telling him that his mother, Elizabeth, had left.

“What do you mean, left?” Ethan had asked innocently. “Left for work?”

“No, she’s gone, she’s left us, without a goodbye, or where she was going or anything,” replied James, half in anger, half in shock. “And he’s crying downstairs,” he added.

“No, he never cries, he’s our dad.” Ethan choked on the words as the realisation began to dawn on him. He ran downstairs.

“Where’s mum?”

Tom was in the living room and he did not reply. He did not even look at Ethan. He just blew his nose and walked into the kitchen.

Ethan ran back up to his parent’s room, two steps at a time. The wardrobes were open and mostly empty, with a few crooked wire hangers dangling from the rail, moving in the breeze that came through the open window. All of the drawers in the tall-boy were open; papers were blowing everywhere. A small brown suitcase with a broken handle was sitting on the edge of the bed with the top flipped back. It looked empty, but Ethan reached inside the case and slid his hand under a flap on the side, checking to see if anything was there. He pulled out a small photo of his mum, James and himself and looked at it briefly trying to remember when his dad had taken it. He put it in his pocket and looked up.

James was at the bedroom door.

“What happened?” said Ethan, feeling isolated and terrified.

James shrugged his shoulders and looked at the wall and then out the window, as though he would rather look anywhere but at his little brother.

“Is she coming back? Perhaps it was just a big row?” Ethan said. He was trying to choke back tears that were starting to flow.

James said nothing. He put his arm around Ethan’s shoulder.

Ethan shuddered back to the present. That was more than thirty years ago and still a painful and vivid memory, floating just below the surface, emerging every so often, accompanied by stabs of pain and regret. He did not know why he kept that photo; perhaps it was just to keep alive that vague hope that he might meet his mother again. He wondered where she was, and why she had left them. Was she still alive? She'd be older now, in her mid-sixties. After that day it had been as though a dark cloud had settled over his home. Nothing was ever the same. His childhood had ended, in one quick snip. All those earlier days of swings and friends and sweets and football were over forever. The shutters went down then and never came up again.

He looked in on Katy before he went to bed. She was fast asleep in her cot with her little hands stretched up. He adjusted the blanket and kissed her on the forehead. Then he crept into the darkened master bedroom without turning on the light, slipped into bed and curled into Rachel's back. She was sleeping so peacefully, with gentle little breaths. He moved his hand on her warm thigh and she murmured briefly, then continued those soft breaths. He drifted off beside her for a while.

06:00

At 06:00, as usual, Ethan woke without an alarm going off. He was just programmed to wake at this hour, even on a day off. Rachel was spooned into him like a warm limpet, her breath tickling the hairs on his shoulder and

her arm around his thigh with her hand cupped under his stomach and the warmth of her body radiating into his back. He had been enjoying the comfort of this along with the ever so subtle fragrance of her hair when his phone rang.

As he reached over to get it, he knocked a glass half-filled with water onto the polished wooden floor of their bedroom. It made a resounding crash, followed by an almost instant cry from Katy in the next bedroom. Rachel recoiled immediately, pulling away from his back. The combination of the sudden draught of cold air, the crash of the glass and the baby's crying yanked him fully back from that place between sleep and wakefulness, into the land of the living.

"Answer it," whispered Rachel, as she slid out of bed to see to little Katy.

"Yes?" growled Ethan into his phone.

"Ethan, it's Bill." Bill Taylor was Ethan's friend from work. "We've got major problems here, and most systems are down."

Ethan closed his eyes, and took a deep breath, but said nothing.

"Ethan, can you hear me?"

"Yes, yes, I heard you. Can't you fix it?" he said snappily. "I'm on a day off today, and it's six am," he added it a lower voice, trying not to disturb Katy again.

"I know, and I'm sorry to call you today, and so early, but this is serious. Nothing's working and as you

know, today is D-day for the new systems and those ultra-important board reports.”

“Can’t I ever take a day off?”

Bill said nothing.

Ethan leaned back in bed with anger building up inside. He clenched his left fist, thumping the bed lightly.

“It looks like hackers have attacked the bank’s systems, but I don’t know how,” said Bill.

It was like a bolt of lightning. Ethan sat straight up in the bed and was fully awake now. Bill had pressed the panic button in his brain.

“Hacked? How do you know? What’s happened?”

Bill took a deep breath, a large gulp of air like he was swallowing a bitter pill. “It’s got all the signs of it. There was some unauthorised access to the system files on the central server, but there was nothing in the logs. I had the feeling that someone had changed something, but I couldn’t put my finger on it until I started to look at the dates of certain critical files. Someone has changed the security permissions and then tried to hide it.”

“But can you trace where they went on the server? And do you know what files they opened? Has anything been downloaded, uploaded, corrupted, or tampered with?”

“Hold on, this is overload, I’ve only just started to investigate, but nothing’s sure yet.”

“Okay, but we’re going to need a bit of digital forensics here, and with your background in that, you should

be able to find something left behind by these guys, even if they were trying to hide their activity.”

They were both on the verge of panic now.

“I’m not entirely sure yet,” continued Bill. “But I have done some initial work and uncovered the trail they left while accessing the database servers, where the most sensitive accounting and treasury information is held. I can see that data has been accessed and probably downloaded. But worse, a considerable number of updates were made over the last two weeks.”

“So they’ve been in our systems for at least two weeks, changing stuff and watching what we do, and we had no idea of it until now,” said Ethan. He was disgusted with himself that this could have happened.

“We’re in for the chop,” Bill replied.

“Who else knows this?”

“Just you and me so far, but as you know, those damn regulations say we should report this kind of event to board-level management right away.”

“I know, I know, but we need to get a good handle on it before we say anything. I’m coming in right away.”

“Okay.”

“Don’t say anything about this to anyone else until I get in, and we decide on a strategy. Continue tracking and checking and keep me up to date as you go. I’ll be there in forty-five minutes,” said Ethan.

“Fine, see you in a while, and I’ll have investigated further by the time you get in.”

Ethan put his iPhone down and stretched. “Fuck,” he said under his breath. Rachel, who was back in bed having settled Katy, turned over to look at him.

“What’s up? I hope you don’t have to go in; you were working so late last night.”

“The usual, they can’t survive a day without me.”

“But what about our trip?”

“This is serious, ultra dangerous for the bank and me.”

Rachel sat up, rubbed her eyes and looked at him, with a worried look.

“How bad?”

His face felt hot. “It looks like the security at the bank has been compromised. We’ve been hacked, and I don’t know how bad it is. Right now I’ve got to go in and stem the flow of information, and then assess the damage.”

“Could you get fired?” Rachel cut to the chase.

“I don’t know. External security is not my primary area, but everything inside the bank is. So I need to check the extent of the intrusion and exactly what’s been accessed and changed. That will give me a good idea where the blame will land.”

Rachel reached over, rubbed his shoulders and hugged him. He felt like a child being comforted by his mother. He knew she understood how serious this was, and now she was showing that she was behind him, giving him comfort and support. They kissed for a moment and then he pulled away.

“I’ll try to get back as soon as possible. You have a lie in while you can, Katy is back asleep.”

He groaned. Then he kissed her and rolled out of bed.

In the shower, the steaming water soon brought him back to life and ready for the trials ahead. Downstairs he looked around for his keys and wallet and stashed them with his iPhone and laptop in his backpack.

CHAPTER FOUR

Theft on the Train

23rd July, 2015. South Kensington Station.

06:40

Ethan walked out of his house and into the drizzling rain. On his way to the tube station, the rain grew heavier. He looked up at the dark, brooding clouds as the increasingly heavy deluge fell unrelentingly, turning the streets into rushing streams. As he walked, it seeped into his jacket, his shoes and his hair. It ran down his face and dripped off his chin. He pulled his collar up and quickened his pace.

Already the city was full of life; delivery vans were being unloaded outside shops, people were making their way to work, police sirens were going off and the smells of fresh bread and fried bacon came from the small shops and cafés he passed.

He was thoroughly soaked when he arrived at South Kensington station. Inside, he paused for a moment, to try and shake off some of the rain from his coat. It was busy in the station too – on the escalator he could hear an early morning busker playing a saxophone in the distance, barely audible over the hustle and bustle of people, and the arriving and departing subway trains, rumbling and screeching as they squeezed into the platforms, belching out their carriages of passengers before sucking up a new load and continuing their way.

He took the Piccadilly line to Green Park, then the Jubilee Line to Canary Wharf station. It usually took about thirty minutes, if everything was running on time, for him to reach MitaSimi Bank, where he was the IT director. MitaSimi was a small investment bank noted for punching well above its weight in the financial world. Like many other investment banks, it was also noted for exacting more than its pound of flesh from employees, piling on the pressure to achieve impossible targets.

It was electric at the office for 18 hours a day. Even in the quieter hours of the very early morning, some heavyweights and newbie ladder climbers had been spotted at all hours on the phone or working feverishly on some deal with global customers in a market that never sleeps. Since he and Rachel got married, Ethan had tried to reduce his regular twelve hour days back to ten hour days, but mostly with little success. They wanted him there, they needed him there. When he was not at the

office, his voicemail and email box filled up, that is if they hadn't reached him on his iPhone. It was manic and in some ways he loved it. But he had started to hate the fact that it was squeezing every last ounce of life from him, leaving just a used-up, empty husk for everything else.

Rachel, he knew, hated this too. But he also knew that she enjoyed the financial benefits and the social climbing. Lately she had been fairly preoccupied with Katy and her job, and as her demands on Ethan's time had lessened, they had settled into a routine where each operated nearly independently of each other, except for the occasional day off when they tried to be a family for once.

So the prospect of losing one of those precious family days was a major annoyance to Ethan. However, he knew the seriousness of a hacking incident, and this mostly occupied his thoughts as he waited for the next train to arrive.

As he was changing train at Green Park, he noticed an old woman in front of him struggling to get onto the train on her own. No one paid any attention to her, or helped her, but she managed to get on the train despite her slowness and frailty, just as the doors were closing.

Ethan sat back and started to think about the problems that would face him at the office. How bad was it? What systems and who had been affected by the hackers? What would his damage limitation strategy be? Would it affect his bonus? Worse, would it affect his

job? Rachel had thought of that almost instantly while he had been still trying to think about the impact on the bank. She had that knack of quickly finding what was paramount in any situation, and cutting to the chase.

At Bermondsey station, two stops before his destination, he was distracted again by the old woman. She struggled to get up while the train was still moving, so she would be ready to get off when it stopped, then tried to steady herself and get her two bags to the train door. He guessed she was in her mid-eighties and looked as though she felt every minute of it as she struggled to balance herself with the motion of the train until it was braking and she was pushed forward, so that she fell between her bags.

Instinctively Ethan jumped up to help her off the ground, leaving his backpack by the side of a seat, so that he could pick up her two bags. Once the train had stopped, he stepped through the open door and the glass platform doors and put them on the ground, then reached back to help her out.

The woman, who looked Indian, thanked him using broken English and by gesticulating with her hands. While she was doing that her purse slipped and fell on the platform, scattering a jumble of notes and mostly coins all around. Ethan bent down to help her pick everything up, but just as he did so the warning signal sounded and the doors began to close. He quickly pushed the handful of coins into her outstretched hands, and wildly grabbed for the door. But it was too late. Al-

ready they were firmly closed. The train started to move off.

He banged the glass platform door, but the train moved on. Through the glass partition he could see his backpack with all his valuable items, leaning against the seat in the train. Then he noticed someone else was looking at it too. The last thing he saw as the train moved off was a tall scrawny guy with long black hair, dirty jeans and a scuffed leather jacket bending down to look in his backpack.

“Stop, stop”, said Ethan. He banged on the glass again, hoping to draw attention to his bag and the potential thief, but it was pointless; the only response he got was from a teenage kid, who pressed his face up against the glass door, so that it was squashed and hideous looking.

And then the train was gone, and it was suddenly silent on the platform, except for a dragging noise in the distance as the old woman made her way laboriously up the broken escalator steps with her bags to the exit. She was completely unaware of the disaster she had caused for him, and the whole series of dominos that would be triggered by that single helping hand he had offered her.

He sat down on the ground for a minute and clasped his head in his hands. What to do now? He still had his phone, but everything else was stashed in his backpack. Should he call the police? There was no signal, so that would have to wait. Another train would be along short-

ly. He would continue to the office and deal with it there.

At Canary Wharf station he realised that the Oyster Card was in the backpack as well as his wallet. He had to wait until there was a crowd of people pushing through the barriers, so he could tailgate one of them to get through.

07:55.

As the train sped away, Joe Morgan, the tall scrawny guy who had been sitting behind Ethan, smiled for a moment at his good luck. There was bound to be something valuable in that backpack, and it was his for the taking. He was so intent on stealing it that he failed to notice an old man sitting nearby who had seen everything: the old woman, the spilled purse, Ethan helping her, the backpack, and the interest taken in it by Joe.

At the next stop, Canada Water Station, when Joe slipped his hand down to scoop up the bag on his way towards the train door, the old man jumped up.

“Hey, stop thief! He’s stealing that bag,” he shouted, pointing at Joe.

Everyone in the carriage looked up, but no one reacted; most of them returned their gaze to their iPhone, iPad or newspaper. The doors closed, leaving Joe to walk freely to the station exit, as the train continued its journey, with the old man glaring at him through the train door window.

He smiled smugly at the old man as he made his way to the exit. Outside, he walked into a nearby café and opened the backpack. There were a few items of interest – a laptop, a wallet, a set of keys, some papers giving Ethan’s home address, and his ID card for the bank where he worked.

08:10

When he got out at Canary Wharf station, Ethan walked through the wet streets, thinking about how he was going to handle the hacking at the bank. The buck stopped with him if it was an internal failure that had allowed it to happen. That could cost him his job and might even cause some difficulty in getting another one right away. If it had been outside his control, perhaps some senior manager losing a phone or a laptop that had led to it, then he would be partially off the hook. There would still be some price to pay, but a smaller one, perhaps the loss of a bonus.

There was a shopping mall, not far from Canary Wharf station, and relatively close to his office. It was still early, but he was hungry and thirsty, and he hadn’t had breakfast, so he stopped into Pret-a-Manger to get a salt beef and gherkin sandwich and a can of ginger beer. This unlikely combination satisfied his hunger and was his favourite when he needed something tasty and fast.

He needed to compose himself so he did not look dishevelled arriving at the office. He always liked to display a particular image – a cool exterior, of a person

always in control, regardless of what going on inside, like a duck, calm on the surface and paddling furiously underneath.

Ten minutes after his impromptu breakfast he was at the office. With no ID card, he had to call Bill.

“Bill, it’s me.”

“Are you coming in?”

“I’m outside, but I’ve lost my ID card, can you come down to security to sign me in?”

While he was waiting, he called home, but there was no answer; it went to voicemail.

“Rachel, I’m at the office now, I guess you fell back asleep. I lost my backpack and laptop on the train. I’ll tell you about it later, and I won’t be too long.”

Bill arrived down to the reception, red-faced and stressed looking.

“My laptop and ID card were stolen on the tube. I don’t want this to be yet another security incident for the bank, so I’ll wait until later and call the Underground lost property, when they’re open, to see if they have it, before I report it to the bank.”

Bill nodded distractedly.

“So, how bad is it?” Ethan asked. He was barely managing to hide his rising sense of panic from seeing Bill in such a state.

“Let’s say I’m glad you’re here, Ethan,” said Bill with a slight warble.

“Does anyone else know about it yet?” Ethan asked in the lift, as they made their way to the tenth floor.

“No, but there have been a few questions because some of the systems are down. I fobbed them off saying that there was some planned downtime for maintenance for a few hours this morning. But unless we get things running again soon that won’t be enough to stop a more senior level enquiry into what’s happening.”

“I know, let’s go into a conference room for a few minutes and map out the sequence of events, the impact and the plan to fix things. Then we can decide how we’re going to reveal what’s happened. I don’t know the full extent of it myself yet, so you need to fill me in on the details.”

They sat down in the small conference room, which, like all the other conference rooms in the building, was a glass box; walls and doors only offered audio privacy, so anyone could see that they were in there, and could come in to ask what was going on. For that very reason, Ethan decided not to use the whiteboard to map out the plan. Instead, he drew it out on a bunch of A4 sheets he had grabbed from the printer on his way.

“Let’s start from the beginning.”