

CHAPTER 1

“Ready, buddy?” Max spoke to a mini-keyboard/monitor labeled Lil’ Max that was attached to his left arm. With that, he gave it a two-finger good-luck double tap, their own secret handshake. It didn’t matter to him that it was just a computer. A friend was a friend.

He pulled his left sleeve down to conceal Lil’ Max and studied the campus of Berkeley University with some fondness. Just two years ago he had been a student here, having graduated when he was seventeen. Of course, he started when he was only fourteen. He always enjoyed coming back, though, even on a day like today when he was trying to track down the scurrilous villain who had released a brand new computer virus. Max loved computers more than anything in the world, except maybe for pudding, and so when some cyber criminal tried to harm them with evil viruses, he’d stop at nothing to save these innocent machines that hadn’t harmed anyone.

He focused on Wheeler Hall, a three-story dormitory. He wore a faded green backpack and a California Golden Bears baseball cap over slightly wavy black hair. He smoothed down a fake bushy mustache as he walked inside. He liked the thought that his disguises made him look older. It also made sleuthing easier.

He looked left and right to make sure no one was watching, then quickly pulled up his sleeve and tapped some keys into Lil’ Max, which brought the name “Brandy Culpepper” up on his monitor. He tapped more keys and brought up “Wheeler Hall, room 319.”

Max moved down the third floor hallway, taking careful notice of the surroundings. Dorm rooms lined each side, and some doors were open. There was a party in one room, a group of guys X-Boxing in another, and several people hanging about. Most were regular students, but not all. There was a janitor cleaning a floor, a Cub Scout selling candy door to door and a pizza delivery guy.

Max made no eye contact with anyone before arriving at room 319. He knocked. The door opened, revealing a nineteen-year-old girl wearing sweats, her hair up in a ponytail.

“You Brandy Culpepper?” Max asked with a cocked eyebrow.

“Uh, yeah,” Brandy responded. “Who wants to know?”

Max flashed a cheap badge, the kind you’d find in a Toys R’ Us clearance bin. “Max Mooth—Cyber Sleuth,” he told her. “A crime is in the process of being perpetrated.”

“What kind of crime?” she asked.

Max pulled up his right sleeve and said, “Does this look familiar?” All Brandy saw was his arm. Max had pulled up the wrong sleeve. He realized it and pulled up the proper sleeve. Lil’ Max’s mini-monitor displayed an e-mail, labeled, `windex@home.com`.

“I don’t know,” Brandy responded. “I get lots of e-mails. Are you a cop or something?”

“Cops do the peoples’ business,” Max replied. “I do the computers’ business. I need to take a look at your system.”

“Why?” she asked.

“Exactly,” Max responded. “Why would *anyone* harm a computer?”

Brandy glanced down the hall, as if checking to see if someone was playing a prank. However, Max knew this was no joke. He continued.

“Isn’t it true your hard drive’s got a case of the ‘Now you see me, now you don’t’?”

Brandy appeared clueless. “I don’t really know computer-speak,” she said.

Max pressed on. “Dead like Fred. Gone like Juan. Sittin’ pretty in Hard Drive Heaven.”

“Are you hitting on me?” Brandy asked.

“Your computer won’t work,” Max responded.

Brandy finally seemed to understand something he said. “Yeah, how’d you know?” She let him in the room. Max turned on her Dell, but only a blank screen with a blinking cursor appeared.

He said, “Because you’ve been hit with—*the Brandy Virus.*”

“Someone named a virus after me?” she asked.

Max nodded and plugged an extension from her computer into Lil’ Max, who’s faceplate lit up with an e-mail page. Max scrolled to find `windex@home.com`.

“And there be our little infected menace,” he said. He shook his head, disgusted, and in his best Daffy Duck voice spouted, “Dithhhh-picable!” He examined her face for a reaction.

“You spit on my screen,” she said.

Unfazed, Max spoke into his Toys R’ Us badge: “Mr. Z, it’s Max. Rendezvous with me at 319.”

Brandy looked curious.

“My partner,” Max informed her. “He’s been working the dorm under cover to get some 411 on escape routes.”

Brandy then examined her sprayed computer as if she suddenly recognized the infected e-mail. “Hey, that was something Elvin sent me,” she blurted. “He’s got a little crush on me.” After a moment she seemed to figure it out. “Wow, he named his virus after me. That’s kind of romantic.”

Max whip-turned toward her. He couldn’t have been more disappointed.

“Wrongo, Sluggo,” he began. “Do you find puppy kickers romantic? If a guy says, ‘I’m gonna go kick the livin’ crap out of that poodle to show you my feelings,’ does that turn you on? Huh? Huh?”

“Max, get hold of yourself!” said a stern voice from the entrance. It was the eight-year-old kid in the Cub Scout uniform who was selling candy door-to-door. He had short-cropped, tidy blond hair and wore glasses. Brandy asked Max, “That’s your partner? He’s a kid?”

“No foolin’ you, huh, Missy?” Mr. Z retorted. “Let me guess— pre-med?”

“Mr. Z’s quite capable,” Max told her. Then he turned to Mr. Z and asked, “What do we know about the rooms?”

Mr. Z read from a sheet of paper. “They’re all essentially the same. Nineteen by fifteen feet. Rectangular in appearance. Windows are three feet off the floor and open with a slide latch. Four electrical outlets: two on one wall, one on another, and one in the bathroom. The temperatures range from sixty-seven to seventy-four degrees. Barometric pressure is slightly below normal. And they’re all equipped with polyurethane carpeting. Good for absorption.”

“Excellent, Z,” Max responded.

Mr. Z turned to a dazed Brandy and said, “I pride myself on my thoroughness.” She appeared to be grappling with this bizarre encounter, when Max asked, “Can you tell us where this cyber scum, Elvin, lives?”

“Two-thirteen,” she replied.

Mr. Z checked his clipboard and nodded. “Two-thirteen is here. He wouldn’t buy any candy, though. Told me to get lost. Quite rude.”

Max took a little computer sweater from his backpack and wrapped it around Brandy’s computer. He spoke to it as if it was a child with a fever. “There, there, all will be well soon. Your Windows operating system will be up and running in no time. Your memory module connectors will be as functional as when you were born. And your two hundred and sixty-six megahertz will be running at optimum internal clock speed as if it was never slowed one little iota.” Then he gave the computer a comforting hug, which made Mr. Z roll his eyes.

However, Brandy seemed charmed. “You really like computers, don’t you?” she asked.

“Yes,” Max replied, and then with a far-away, poetic expression, said:

*“Don’t you wish when life is tough
And things just don’t feel right,
That all one really had to do
Was believe in the megabyte?”*

Brandy was impressed. Mr. Z looked nauseated. Max continued:

*“Things would all turn out okay,
Life could be so swell,
If we all had those special friends,
IBM, Macintosh and Dell.”*

“That was beautiful,” Brandy said, a tear in her eye.

“Yes, it was,” Max responded.

“And not at all a waste of time,” Mr. Z added.

Max whipped out a refrigerator magnet bearing the words, Max Mooth—Cyber Sleuth, and handed it to her. “Now I gotta jet, Diskette. Got me an appointment with a cyber criminal.” He and Mr. Z left.

CHAPTER 2

Max and Mr. Z walked down a set of stairs, headed for the second floor. “Head back to the van and call the FBI,” Max told Mr. Z.

“You sure you can handle this alone?” Mr. Z asked.

“Like a five-year-old illegally downloading gangsta rap,” Max responded.

Mr. Z rolled his eyes. “I hope you’re not going to subdue him with more poetry.”

“Hey, I’ve been published,” Max said.

“Writing in your diary doesn’t count.”

“You read my diary?”

“Regrettably. I was depressed for weeks afterward,” Mr. Z said as he left.

Max opened the door to the second floor. He looked about and smelled the air, learning nothing from doing so. Then he strode down the hall to Room 213. The abode of Elvin, the cyber scum. “Point, click and time to kick some booty,” Max told himself.

He knocked. From inside, a gruff, angry voice yelled, “What?”

“Free hard drives,” Max answered.

The door sprung open. Standing in a very untidy room was Elvin, a stubble-faced loner. Max gave him a quick once-over, finding it unclear whether he had ever been introduced to shampoo. He also decided that he wasn’t big enough to be dangerous.

“My hard drive,” Elvin demanded with attitude.

Max shot him a confident glare. “I’m Max Mooth—Cyber Sleuth,” and then in his best tough-guy voice, “Feeling downloadable, punk?” Max pulled out handcuffs.

Panicking, Elvin threw a chair. Max ducked. Elvin took the opportunity to run past him and down the hallway. He was surprisingly fast, Max thought, as he shouted after him, “I hate runners!”

Instead of taking immediate chase, Max opened Elvin’s mini-fridge and found several packs of chocolate pudding. They looked delicious. He popped one open and devoured it. With his taste buds soothed, he opened Elvin’s window, and seeing a nearby tree, jumped onto it, landing uncomfortably. He recovered and climbed down, seeing he was now about fifty feet from the Wheeler Hall entrance. After mulling his options, Max ran toward a bicycle rack while fumbling in his backpack for something. He pulled out a homemade screwdriver, made of paper clips. As he reached the bike rack, he used the screwdriver to pick one of the locks. He was quite adept at it, and the lock came right off.

Just then, Elvin came scampering out of the dorm. Max hopped on the bike and pedaled, but flew head-first over the handlebars. Unfortunately, he had got on a bike that was still locked. Elvin saw Max and darted the other way. Max got on the right bike and gained. Elvin huffed and puffed. Max closed and leaped off the bike, and if he hadn’t missed completely, he would’ve made a textbook tackle. To make it worse, he saw Mr. Z shake his head at him from inside a van while mouthing the words, “Pa-thetic.”

However, Elvin was starting to tire as Max resumed the chase, now on foot. Then, redeeming his sleuthin’ pride, Max managed to make that textbook tackle. They rolled for several feet before Max gained the upper hand and cuffed him. Both were breathing hard. Not exactly poster-boys for fitness.

A voice yelled, “Mooth!”

Max turned to see two FBI men, Agent Stone and Agent Wood, getting out of a black Lincoln Town Car. Agent Stone, a former star quarterback, regarded Max as a jock regards a chess player.

“How many times do I have to tell you, Mooth? Cyber enforcement is FBI jurisdiction,” Stone said. “If you want to play computer cop, I’m sure there’s a keyboard with a missing L that you could *track* down.”

Stone laughed at his own joke. Wood cracked a tiny smile. Mr. Z joined the scene and took pictures of Elvin with a Canon A80 digital camera.

Max got off of Elvin, with a sneer. “Well, well, Agent Stone-Come-Lately, so glad you could arrive for the hard part of *putting him in your car.*”

Stone sneered back.

“Don’t worry, Agent Stone,” Mr. Z said, “I’ll talk to him.”

“Thank you, Z. As always, your professionalism is stellar.” Stone shot a final scowl at Max, then put Elvin in his car and drove off. Max and Mr. Z walked, with Max silently mimicking Mr. Z’s butt kissing.

“Stop pouting, Max,” Mr. Z said. “It’s not my fault he doesn’t like you. You shouldn’t have embarrassed him in that newspaper article.”

“All I said was he and the FBI should be grateful a concerned citizen like me was on their side.”

“I believe your exact words were, he’s lucky you’re around to get the job done.”

“And he took that the wrong way?”

“Hard to believe, huh?”

They arrived at Max’s van, which displayed a big magnetic Domino’s Pizza decal. Max peeled it off, revealing a picture of himself with the caption, Mooth Det. Agency—We Squash Cyber Scum.

They got in. The inside looked like Circuit City meets Hair Club for Men. There were monitors, computers, VCRs, DVDs and recording equipment. There was also a station for wigs: wavy, straight and crunchy perm. Next to that was an area for mustaches: bushy, thin and gas station attendant oily. And finally, an area for moles: tiny, meaty, and large and hairy. The only place to sit in the rear was a hollowed- out bench.

Max lowered his visor to reveal a monitor. He opened a slide panel on the dashboard to expose a keyboard and pulled the ashtray out to reveal a mouse on a mouse pad. Mr. Z opened the glove compartment to expose a mainframe. He took the SmartMedia card out of the camera and put it into a reader and downloaded photos of Elvin and e-mailed them. “Cyber criminal exposed to the world,” Mr. Z said. “You did good, Max.”

“Well I am the iMac Daddy.” Max pulled off the mustache and tossed it in back.

“Glad you can stay so humble,” Mr. Z shot back.

“Swell like Dell. Boss like DOS. Hip like a microchip.”

“Any chance you have any sayings that aren’t dated beyond reason?”

“Classics never die.”

“I’d settle for a coma.”

Max drove off, noticing in his rearview mirror that a security camera on a lamppost had been trained on him. He decided it wasn’t a big deal. He had done nothing wrong.