Excerpt from *Lost and Found: A Madison Lockhart Mystery*

The night was dragging on while Dante Morris was still stuck in his tiny cubicle, his fingers flying across the keyboard of his computer. He'd been working at Synthitech for three years, yet somehow, he was still the only programmer forced to stay late and finish up his team's work. They were in crunch time since the company was about to launch a major new app that was set to revolutionize the world. At least that's what Marcus Winfield, Synthitech's CEO, had been telling everyone.

Dante wasn't as confident that it would be the rousing success the board of directors believed it would. They were calling it "EMRGE," using capital letters and a deliberate misspelling that lacked the middle "E." The marketing team insisted this would be in line with current trends in the tech market. He found it to be terribly cliche and outdated, but the board loved it. They'd done extensive market research and focus group testing, which resulted in the current branding scheme.

At the age of twenty-five, Dante was a relatively handsome young man. He had a full head of black hair that came halfway down his neck, and behind a pair of rimless rectangular glasses were two dark brown eyes darted from side to side as they followed the code being entered on the computer screen. His vaguely Italian features included what his mother Anita always called a Roman nose. Dante's olive skin had been darker in his youth, but being cooped up in an office and rarely exposed to natural sunlight for several years had caused it to lighten.

The long hours at the office were starting to get to him, and he was considering looking for something new or just quitting altogether. Coding had been a passion for him once, but it had lost its luster after becoming a corporate drone. He thought that maybe it was time for him to let go of the safety of a steady paycheck so he could strike out on his own. Freelancing was a risk financially, but it couldn't be much worse than the meager salary he was currently getting. At least he'd be able to pursue projects he actually wanted to do.

Letting out a frustrated sigh, the young man leaned back in his chair, stretching out his arms and hearing his spine crack. He could feel the tension in his shoulders. Glancing at the clock in the corner of his screen, he saw it was half past eleven. Thirty more minutes until it became the next day. Dante was so tired that his eyes could barely make out the letters and numbers he'd typed. Rubbing them, he felt a sting from exhaustion. Remembering that there was some code he'd already written for security protocols in an earlier portion of the project, he decided to simply copy and paste it into the new section and change a few variables around to bring it in line with the new section.

After bringing up the previous string of code, something peculiar caught his eye. It looked like parts of it had been altered, but he assumed he'd read it wrong due to being

so tired. However, when he read it over again slowly and carefully, his senses sharpened as a bit of adrenaline was released through his system. It was different from the code he'd inputted earlier. In fact, after looking it over one more time, it became clear that the code had been deliberately changed to create a specific security vulnerability in the app. There was even a backdoor to allow anyone who had the right information to get complete access to the data collection portion of the app.

This was a huge deal, and it was one Dante couldn't afford to brush off. He needed to find his supervisor now and alert him about the matter. If one of the other team members was secretly and purposely causing the very complicated security code to be susceptible to an outside party, it meant they were either sabotaging the project or working for someone else to install it for their benefactor to gain access to the sensitive data collected by the app. Whatever the reason, it needed to be addressed and the culprit smoked out before they caused any further damage to the project.

Getting up from his desk, Dante exited his cubicle and peered around the office for any sign of Ted Finley, his immediate superior. Ted was supposedly staying late as well, but Dante didn't see any indication that he was around. He checked Ted's office, but his boss wasn't there, either. Wandering around and checking every other office, he came up empty. The only other possibility was that he'd gone down the hall to the executive suite to meet with one of the bigwigs. Strolling through the sterile hallway with neutral tones and a bland navy blue and gray color scheme, he turned to peer out the windows that looked out over the city. They were on the sixth floor of the building, and on the streets down below, only a handful of cars were navigating the roads of Emerson City.

Dante reached the executive suite to continue his search. Unlike the area where the cubicles were located, this part of the office was ornately decorated, probably to project an air of financial success that would impress potential clients and investors. Each of the company's executives had their own spacious office, complete with a large window that offered plenty of sunlight and private bathrooms. Most of them were dark, indicating that the higher-ups had all gone home for the day, if they'd even bothered to come in at all. However, he could see a light farther down and headed in that direction. It appeared that the light was coming from the office of Bob Lederman, Synthitech's COO.

Getting closer, he could hear Bob's voice as the man was talking to someone. He had it on speakerphone, and after hearing the second voice, Dante recognized it as Marcus Winfield's. When he was about two offices away, he suddenly stopped, curious to eavesdrop on the conversation so he could figure out what they were discussing.

"That's good to hear," Marcus said, sounding somewhat garbled by the poor connection or cheap speakers of the landline phone. "Have you talked to Roger about it yet?"

"No, not yet," Lederman replied. "I'm still waiting to hear back from Serena and Kevin first. I didn't want to deal with him flying off the handle if it's not gonna be a problem."

"Don't worry about Roger," Marcus stated. "Everyone on the board knows he's got a hair-trigger temper, so they don't take him seriously. If he gets upset and tries to get anyone to vote against the proposal, they'll just brush him off. Go ahead and let him know about the change in plans."

As Dante stood there and continued listening to their conversation, something they said made his pulse quicken. It sent chills down his spine, and he suddenly felt very vulnerable being so close to Lederman's office. His mind was reeling as he tried to process the implications of their words, and he was so engrossed in his thoughts that he didn't hear the footsteps behind him. When a hand suddenly came down on his shoulder, he gasped in alarm and whirled around, pushing the hand away as he did.

"Easy, Dante—it's just me."

The young man began to calm down as he fixed his gaze on Ted's visage. The supervisor was about fifty-five years old and had thinning brown hair that became gray around his temples. Like Dante, he wore glasses, but they were thick-rimmed, rounded, and black. His two dark blue eyes seemed to be studying Dante from behind the thick lenses. He had a bit of a paunch that was more noticeable due to the way his button-up shirts jutted out and became tighter around his belly. Ted was wearing the same bland dark gray business suit that nearly everyone in the office favored. Dante usually wore dark blue or lighter gray suits to differentiate himself from the others.

"Sorry, Ted. You scared me," Dante said, pressing his hand to his chest to feel his heart pounding. "I guess I wasn't paying enough attention."

"What're you doing over here?" the supervisor asked suspiciously.

"Looking for you, actually. When I didn't see you in your office or anywhere around the cubicles, I thought maybe you'd gone to talk to one of the execs."

"I had to run down to the third floor to borrow some toner for the printer," Ted explained. "Marilyn forgot to restock it again. Why were you looking for me?"

After what he'd overheard Marcus and Lederman talking about, Dante wasn't too keen to mention the problem with the app he'd uncovered. He tried to hide his nervousness when he answered, "Oh, nothing important. I just had a question about the variables in the scripts we were using for the Bluetooth integration functions. It can wait till tomorrow, though. I was just about to head out."

Ted studied him for a moment before saying, "Yeah, it's pretty late. I'll probably head out myself in a few. If you wanna wait, we can head down together and discuss it."

"Nah, that's okay," Dante told him. "I'm too tired to go through the whole thing right now. We can do it tomorrow."

"You sure?"

"Yeah, it's nothing major. I'll see you tomorrow, Ted."

Dante hurried away from his supervisor, feeling Ted's eyes drilling a hole in the back of his head. He was anxious to get out of the building and away from anyone associated with Synthitech right now. Moving as quickly as he could without being too obvious that he was trying to rush out of there, he stopped by his cubicle to grab his suit jacket and satchel before leaving. At the last minute, he decided to get some evidence about the security vulnerability and saved it on a flash drive. Once he'd finished, he shut down his computer and stuffed the flash drive into his jacket pocket. Making sure no one was around, he raced to the elevator. Every few moments, he glanced over his shoulder, half expecting to find someone following him, but the office remained empty.

Once he'd exited the building, Dante breathed a bit easier. He went to retrieve his car from the garage and made his way across town to his apartment complex. When he was finally within the safety of his home, he hid the flash drive and settled in to play some video games. He was too wired to sleep now, so he used the games as a means of keeping his mind off of what he'd learned. An hour passed before he felt the exhaustion creep back in. Just as he was shutting everything down so he could go to bed, there was a knock on his apartment door. Careful not to make noise, he hurried to the door to check the peephole. It was just Paul Davidson, one of the other programmers on his team.

Opening the door, Dante greeted him. "Hey, Paul. What're you doing here so late?"

"Ted sent me," Paul told him. "He's worried about you, man. Did you freak out at work or something?"

"No, everything's fine," Dante insisted. "There's nothing to worry about."

"Are you sure? Ted seemed to think something was wrong. Did something happen at the office that made you want to rush home?"

This immediately triggered Dante's suspicion. It felt like Paul was fishing for information. "No, nothing happened. I promise you, everything's fine. I'm about to go get some sleep, though. I'll talk to you tomorrow."

He closed the door before Paul could protest or try to weasel his way inside. Dante remained at the door for a while, constantly checking the peephole to make sure Paul was gone and didn't try to come back. When he was finally satisfied that Paul had departed for good, Dante started to get ready for bed again. Less than five minutes later, there was another knock at the door. He stormed over to answer it, ready to give Paul a

verbal thrashing, but when he looked through the peephole, the person standing there wasn't Paul. He opened the door and said, "Hurry up inside. I don't want anyone to see you…"

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An hour had passed since Paul's visit, and Dante's guest finally departed. He was now even more convinced that his company was up to no good. Fifteen minutes went by as he paced around the apartment, trying to figure out what to do. When someone knocked at his door for the third time that night, he halted in place. Holding his breath, he crept toward it and peered through the peephole. He immediately recognized the person standing there and went into panic mode. Making sure the door was securely locked, he dashed toward his couch and pushed it across the room until it was flush against the front door. That wouldn't be enough to keep them out. He needed more.

Dante rushed around his apartment, grabbing any large piece of furniture he could find to help barricade the door. There was no way anyone could get inside. Even if they did, the furniture should slow them down long enough for him to escape. He ran into his bedroom and slammed the door behind him. Using all his strength, he upended his bed and used it to wedge the bedroom door shut. Sweat was pouring down his face and stinging his eyes, but he wiped it away and ignored it. He didn't have much time. If he wanted to get out of there alive, he needed to move quickly.

After grabbing a duffel bag from his closet, Dante tore open the drawers on his dresser and started filling the bag with clothes. He collected the rest of the necessities and packed them, too. While he was in the middle of stuffing his toothbrush and anti-anxiety medication into the duffel bag, there was a loud crash that caused his blood to freeze. Someone had broken the window out in the living room. Dante cursed himself for not barricading it as well. That was where the fire escape was located. He should've known they weren't going to let a blocked door stop them from getting to him.

A heavy thud against his bedroom door made Dante yelp. His unwanted visitor had come in through the window and was trying to break down the door. The bed frame wedged against it rattled as the intruder slammed into the door again and again. After the next loud thud, he heard the sound of creaking wood. The door was about to break. He whipped his head around the bedroom, searching for a way out. There was only one window in there and it couldn't be opened. Even if he broke it, his apartment was too high up to jump. Dante knew he was trapped with no way out.