

# SUMMARY

## GHOST IN THE WIRES

KEVIN MITNICK



# **Summary of “Ghost in the Wires” by Kevin Mitnick**

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Inside the mind of the world’s greatest hacker.

# Table of Contents

Introduction .....	5
Living For the Thrill .....	6
The Ghost in the Wires.....	9
Final Summary .....	12



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# Introduction

Are you familiar with the television show *Criminal Minds*? If so, then you're probably well acquainted with the character of Penelope Garcia. The team of behavioral analysts that comprise the cast of *Criminal Minds* know Penelope as the sweet, innocent one; she's fun and colorful and she cancels out all the darkness that surrounds the team on a daily basis as they track down twisted serial killers. She's also the one who stays behind at the team's headquarters, helping them with logistics and technological details while the FBI agents do their fieldwork. But in season three, viewers learn that Penelope isn't quite as innocent as we originally assumed.

In fact, prior to her criminal justice career with the Behavioral Analysis Unit, she was a computer hacker. And she was so good at it that she had been placed on the FBI's Most Wanted list! But what distinguished Penelope from many other hackers was the fact that she only used her skills for her good. As a matter of fact, the FBI found out about her because she had a penchant for infiltrating the websites of major corporations who were involved in unethical activity and exposing their secrets. From there, it was natural for her to use her skills within the context of the FBI, legally employing her talents for a good cause. This backstory is what makes us love Penelope as a character. Sure, we know that her past activities were illegal, but because she was doing it for the right reasons, we don't view her as a bad person. Instead, we see her as a digital vigilante, taking down the bad guys! And this story is about someone who is very much like Penelope Garcia-- someone who used his own superior hacking skills for good. And over the course of this summary, we're going to get to know him.



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# Living For the Thrill

Have you ever done something just for the thrill of it? Have you ever found yourself enraptured by the delight of imagination? If you're an adrenaline junkie who loves extreme sports or extra crazy roller coasters, you're probably very familiar with this feeling! And the same is true for Kevin Mitnick. Because, just like Penelope Garcia, Mitnick started hacking as a hobby for two reasons: to teach himself a new skill and to stay sane. You see, Mitnick never had a lot going for him in life. For starters, he was the only child of a single mother who struggled to find work and make ends meet. And because she was busy and struggling with her own unfortunate circumstances, young Kevin's mom, Shelly, rarely had time for him. She also frequently turned to a string of abusive, deadbeat boyfriends in a desperate grab for validation and fulfilment. To make matters worse, her boyfriends didn't just abuse Shelly-- they also beat Kevin.

So, as a kid who had little love, support, or stimulation, Kevin quickly learned that he would have to rely on himself for entertainment and escape. And that's exactly what he did. It all started when a neighbor showed him a magic trick. This is such a normal thing that any adult might do for a child without thinking and there's a good chance that the neighbor probably forgot about his act of kindness. But Kevin remembered it forever. Kevin loved how magic activated his imagination and invited him to explore the manipulation of reality. He soon developed an intense fascination with magic tricks, but it wasn't long before Kevin realized that other things could be manipulated too. After all, he reasoned, if magic tricks can make us believe that bunnies can appear out of hats and that quarters lurk behind our ears, can we manipulate other elements of reality?

These questions prompted him to delve into the world of social engineering. If you're not familiar with this term, social engineering is a scary and complex phenomenon that has generated a number of new concerns with the advent of modern technology. Many people might be acquainted with the internet security service Norton; Norton has been in business since 1991 and they

have positioned themselves as a leader in cybersecurity. So, when Norton is writing articles about how to protect yourself from social engineering, you know it's a pretty scary thing! Here's how Norton describes this phenomenon: "social engineering is the act of tricking someone into divulging information or taking action, usually through technology. The idea behind social engineering is to take advantage of a potential victim's natural tendencies and emotional reactions. To access a computer network, the typical hacker might look for a software vulnerability. A social engineer, though, could pose as a technical support person to trick an employee into divulging their login credentials. The fraudster is hoping to appeal to the employee's desire to help a colleague and, perhaps, act first and think later."

As you can see from this definition, social engineering is a pretty alarming scam! Obviously, it's scary because people can trick you into divulging all manner of personal information which they could use to steal your identity, rob you blind, or otherwise ruin your life. But as weird as this might sound, Kevin Mitnick didn't get into social engineering because he wanted to hurt people! In fact, he didn't want to hurt anybody at all. Instead, he viewed social engineering as an advanced, grown-up form of magic. Just as he convinced other kids that he had made something disappear, social engineering was his way of seeing what else he could get people to believe. Even this sounds pretty insidious, but the truth is that he didn't even really want to manipulate people. He was just a very smart and very bored kid who wanted to hone his talents. And he quickly found that he was very good at it!

A 1994 article from the New York Times later documented his adolescent exploits by affirming that "as a teen-ager he used a computer and a modem to break into a North American Air Defense Command computer, foreshadowing the 1983 movie "War Games." He gained control of three telephone-company central offices in Manhattan and all the phone switching centers in California, giving him the ability to listen in on calls and pull pranks like reprogramming the home phone of someone he did not like so that each time the phone was picked up, a recording asked for a deposit of 25 cents.

...Mr. Mitnick got in trouble at his high school for tapping into the Los Angeles School District's computers. He began spending time with a loosely knit group of "phone phreaks," young people whose hobby was illegally mastering the inner workings of the telephone switching system. His first brush with the law came in 1981, when, as a 17-year-old, he was arrested for stealing computer manuals from Pacific Bell's switching center in Los Angeles. He was prosecuted as a juvenile and sentenced to probation." For the purpose of this article, *The New York Times* also interviewed the therapists who worked with Mitnick during his incarceration at a facility for juvenile delinquents, and they obtained the following quote: "he is an overweight computer nerd, but when he is behind a keyboard he feels omnipotent," said Harriet Rossetto, a counselor at the Beit T'Shuvah treatment center in Los Angeles, where Mr. Mitnick was treated in 1989, under the order of a Federal judge, for his "addictive" attraction to computer hacking."

These are a lot of freaky escapades to cram into one chapter, but the adventure is only just getting started! Because this chapter is simply our introduction to Kevin and the circumstances that lead to his notorious career as a hacker. So, if this is what he got up to as a high-school student, imagine the trouble he could cause as an adult!



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# The Ghost in the Wires

As you've probably imagined, this book acquired its title because Mitnick was like a digital phantom. And although his counselor's words might have sounded a bit harsh, the truth is that she was right. Behind a computer screen, Kevin finally felt alive. He finally felt like he was worth something. The only time he felt interesting or powerful was when he was hacking. So, he became a ghost, immersing himself in computer systems so seamlessly that he was free to cause mischief without ever being caught. Well... almost. As you've already guessed from the *New York Times* article referenced in the previous chapter, Mitnick did get caught eventually. But it was only after some pretty spectacular shenanigans! As the *New York Times* article put it, "By masquerading as a company executive in a telephone call, he frequently talks an unsuspecting company employee into giving him passwords and other information that makes it possible for him to gain entry to computers illegally. Using a personal computer and a modem, he then connects to a company's computer and, with his knowledge of how operating systems work, commands it to copy software illegally, display confidential electronic messages or alter a telephone switch so he can silently monitor a call."

And this was only one of Mitnick's many forays into social engineering! He also posed as a DMV representative and gained fraudulent access to the driving records of every registered driver who lived in California! And when his hacking exploits caught the attention of the FBI, he didn't angle for a job offer like Penelope Garcia did. Instead, he figured out that a mysterious new hacker friend wasn't a fellow hacker at all, but an undercover FBI agent trying to trap him! And once he was on to their game, Mitnick decided to sit on the information for a while. He could have let them know that he had discovered the truth. He could have tried to pursue hacking for as long as he could while waiting for them to catch them. But instead, Mitnick decided to have some fun. And so he hacked the FBI. Yes, you really read that right-- he hacked the FBI! By infiltrating both their phone systems and computer networks, he was able to listen in on their every phone call. And that meant he was also able to stay one step ahead of their investigation at all times!

Every time they thought they had him, Mitnick evaded capture by using his insider information.

Their inability to catch him meant that the FBI's investigation dragged on for several years. And over the course of those long years, Mitnick moved multiple times, flitting from California to Nevada to Colorado to Washington to North Carolina. Each time he moved, he changed his identity as well, adopting a new name and social security number. (He had, of course, obtained every aspect of his new identities through hacking). That's quite a lot of moving and quite a few new names to keep up with! But as exhausting and confusing as it was, Mitnick's adventures kept him afloat (and out of jail!) for years until the spring of 1995, when he was finally caught. The saddest part was that he was apprehended while trying to seek honest employment.

Unfortunately, Mitnick's hobbies had made it incredibly difficult for him to find a job. Because no matter how many times he changed his identity, something about his past always raised a few red flags. (It didn't help that his arrest as a teenager and his time in a juvenile detention facility had been widely publicized in Los Angeles!) And because his skills were pretty exclusively suited for electronic employment opportunities, it made matters even worse. After all, no tech company is excited to hire a hacker! But despite his streak of bad luck on the job front, Mitnick kept trying to get a real job. For him, hacking was simply a hobby; it had provided him with a source of entertainment and validation as a kid, but it was never the only thing he had intended to do with his life. Yet, time and time again, he found himself failing background checks, losing jobs, and facing unemployment again.

It was when he changed his identity once again and found a job in Seattle that it all finally caught up with him. When his new company became suspicious of Mitnick's electronic activities, they called the police and asked them to launch an investigation. From there, it was a quick downhill slide once the Seattle police uncovered the truth about Mitnick's identity (and the many identities he had stolen!) And once the truth came out, the FBI quickly swooped in. If you're wondering why the FBI was so invested in tracking him

down, it's because they thought Mitnick was a serious threat to national security! Even though Mitnick had no interest in robbing anyone or using the information he had gained, the FBI couldn't understand that. Because Mitnick had committed some serious privacy violations in multiple states, they believed that he must have had evil intentions for stealing so much personal information. And because he could have done serious damage with that information if he wanted to, the FBI felt he had to be punished.

To that end, the FBI pursued the maximum sentence for every charge. And Mitnick found himself facing multiple life sentences that amounted to 460 years in jail! But fortunately, Mitnick found hope when his story reached the public and awakened sympathy. People were shocked by the severity of the charges that had been leveled against him and they felt sorry for a talented nerd who simply took information as a hobby without intending to harm others. So, his sympathizers launched a "Free Kevin" campaign and petitioned for his release. And after serving only 5 of his 460 years in jail, Kevin Mitnick was finally released! In addition to securing his release, the wave of public sympathy also opened up some new doors for him. Just like the Criminal Minds team recognized the benefit of having Penelope Garcia as an ally, many corporations realized that Mitnick's skills could be used for good. He received multiple job offers inviting him to serve as a private cybersecurity consultant and he jumped at the opportunity. So, today, he continues to do what he loves-- only this time, it's legal and he's helping people.



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## Final Summary

We think of computer hackers as insidious thieves who are out to steal our identities. But Kevin Mitnick might be one of the few “good” computer hackers in existence! His penchant for hacking originated when he was a lonely kid searching for an imaginative escape. Just as he enjoyed magic tricks as a kid, he evolved to master the art of manipulating computer systems and stealing information. But unlike most hackers, Mitnick never sought to profit from his hacking or harm anyone with the information he obtained. Through the years, he has been hunted, hated, and misunderstood, but thanks to the “Free Kevin” campaign, he has found peace and profitable employment that allows him to use his skills to help people.



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