

# Plutonium's Revenge

*Where Death, Deception,  
And Corporate Espionage Meet!*

By

Jonathon Waterman

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## **Plutonium's Revenge**

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## DEDICATIONS

**Plutonium's Revenge** is dedicated to my belated mother.

*Thanks Mom – for all your love and support. I'll never forget you.*

*You were the true "Ellen Pontiac" in my life.*

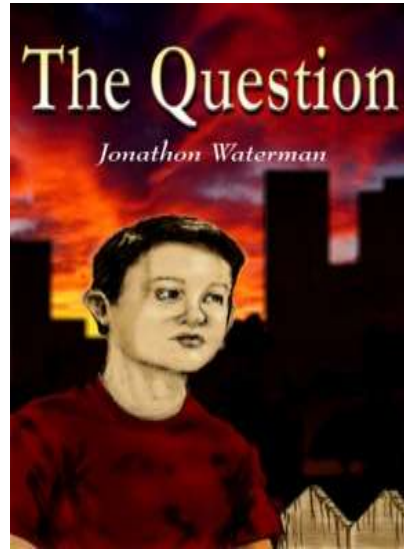
*J.W.*

# THE QUESTION SERIES

Book 1 – **The Question**

Book 2 – **Plutonium's Revenge**

The Question



# Plutonium's Revenge



# MAIN CHARACTER LIST

## **The Pontiacs**

Paul Michael Pontiac - 14 years old. Co-developer of the best selling PC game, Clash of the BattleStar & President of Gibsonville School Computer Club.

Nathan Pontiac - Paul's 8 year old, handicapped half brother.

Ellen Pontiac - Paul's mother. She is also the Guidance Counselor at Gibsonville School.

John Pontiac - Paul's deceased father. Nathan's natural father. He died in an auto accident shortly after the previous Thanksgiving.

## **The Heglers**

Timothy (Tim) James Hegler - Paul's best friend. Co-developer of the best selling PC game, Clash of the BattleStar. Also a Gibsonville School Freshman.

Joe Hegler - Tim's father. President of Titan Industries Software Division.

## **Some of Paul's Friends**

Cathy Skinner - Paul's girlfriend, Daughter of Gibsonville School's Principal. Member of the Gibsonville School Computer Club.

Daniel E. Whitehouse the Third - An 11 yr. old computer genius. I.Q. of 195. Also a Gibsonville School Freshman. Vice President of the Gibsonville School Computer Club.



**Gibsonville School Staff**

Raymond Skinner - Principal

Mr. Little - Asst. Principal

Carl Thompson - Office Skills Instructor & Computer Club Adviser

**Gibsonville School Gang**

Butch Edward McGuire - Gang Leader

Stan Ramirez - Second in command

**Guilford County Sheriff's Department**

Bill Majors - Sheriff

Mr. Lee - Deputy

Mr. Stevens – Deputy

**Legal Personnel**

John McKinney - Defense Attorney

Charles Greenfield - Prosecutor

Sandra Atkins - Judge

**Medical Personnel at Duke Medical Center**

Craig Matthews - Cardiologist

Nancy Higgins - Nurse

James Taylor - Pathologist

Mary Gilbert - Nurse

**Krypton Software**

Allen Sharp - CEO

Tom Steel - Company President

George Witherspoon - V.P. of Marketing

Mike Furrow - Software Development Chief

Ray Sizemore - Head of Corporate Security

Phillip Cuttingham - Security Employee and Company Spy

Charles - Security Employee

# You've Got To Be Kidding

## Chapter One

Monday morning – the first Monday of the year. And today was not only the beginning of a new week; it was also Day One of the Spring semester. With eight-year-old Nathan still in the kitchen actively consuming a bowl of Sugar Pops, Paul Pontiac, dropped his bowl and spoon in the sink, before trudging toward his bedroom at the same pace one would slither through a gator-filled swamp. Bus 39 was due to pull into their driveway in about twenty minutes. However, this morning it was doubtful that would be sufficient time for him to get ready.

“Paul,” Nathan said, guiding his wheelchair through the doorway of his older brother’s bedroom several minutes later. “Are you about ready to ...?” Then instantly, his mouth gaped open, and his voice froze. “No. This can’t be.”

“What do you think?” Paul asked, twisting his slender fourteen-year-old torso 180 degrees, so he could catch a glimpse of his backside in the full-length mirror attached to his closet door. “It’s the latest style.”

“Well, I.”

Paul displayed a large grin. “I know. This outfit looks so good; it literally takes your breath away. Doesn't it?”

“W-e-l-l ... I.”

Totally ignoring his brother's shocked expression, “You know, Nathan,” Paul continued. “The kids at school are bound to like me now.”

Nathan snorted in reply. “Paul. Your friends at school already like you.”

“I know. But I'd like to have some outside of the computer club. Don't you think this outfit should do the trick?”

Nathan shook his head in disbelief.

Paul frowned. Even though his half-brother was a few years younger, he respected the boy's opinion. Ever since joining the Pontiac family just shortly before Christmas, Nathan had shown an incredible understanding of people – especially for someone his age.

“Tell me, Nathan,” he said, plopping across the side of the bed. “Which shoes do you think I should I wear with this ensemble – my tennis shoes, or the matching boots I bought? They both look good. But I'm not sure my Converse would add the coup de maître I'm looking for.”

Nathan opened his mouth to answer, but was soon interrupted by a bell-like sound coming from his older brother's desktop. Apparently, Paul's multi-core system had detected an incoming video message, and its screen was currently displaying a flashing user-id - Tim Hegler's - their neighbor next-door.

"I'm going to have to get back to you," Paul stated, dismissing his younger brother before diverting his attention to the monitor and clicking his wireless Microsoft optical mouse.

Tim's face quickly came into view, while a creaking sound from the room's wooden tongue-and-groove floor reverberated. Evidently, Nathan had decided to leave the room.

"Tim," Paul yelled into the computer's microphone, even though there wasn't a need to. "What's up, Bro? You usually don't call this early."

"I wanted to see if you had heard about the ..." Tim abruptly stopped mid-sentence, and his eyes bulged outward. "Surely you're not going to be wearing that to school! Are you?"

"Don't you just love it?" Paul did a turn-around in front of his monitor. "It's the 'IN' thing this year."

Tim looked at his friend and began to shake his head. "Paul," he said, before briefly pausing. "That outfit is so hideous; I'm surprised it didn't shatter your video cam into a billion microscopic-size pieces."

Paul immediately scowled. "Hey! It's not that bad."

"Oh yes, it is! Your mom didn't buy you that for Christmas, did she?"

"No." Paul replied, shrugging his shoulders. "We stopped by the Salvation Army yesterday in hopes of finding an antique record player, and I found this on a nearby clothes rack. The overalls were on sale for just a dollar, and I got this matching flannel shirt for fifty cents."

"I can easily understand why they were so cheap," Tim stated, giving his friend an intelligent nod. "They both look like something a farmer in the early 1950s might wear."

"Really? That's fantastic!" Paul shouted as an exuberant grin raced across his face. "That's exactly the look I was aiming for."

Tim's eyes rolled upward, and he briefly gazed toward the ceiling above.

"Paul. Do me a favor and ditch the outfit. You know today is going to be my first day at Gibsonville. And believe me, the last thing I need is for my best friend to be looking like a circus clown."

"Tim. It's really not all that b..." Paul began to say, when unexpectedly his friend suddenly looked away from his video cam.

“I’ve got to go,” Tim said. “Mom’s calling. ... I’ll catch you a little later on the bus. ... And don’t let me forget to tell you what happened at our school over Christmas, OK?”

“OK,” Paul answered, though he wondered what Tim could be referring to.

Just as their Skype communication ended, a bright flicker unexpectedly flashed across Paul’s twenty-four-inch flat screen monitor and the front of it instantly turned black. Then after remaining that way for several seconds, it unpredictably returned to life, with its animated 3-D screensaver already in progress.

*I really do need to see what’s causing my video card to do that,* Paul thought, taking a seat on his bed, so he could stick his feet inside the maroon-colored cowboy boots he had purchased to complete his ensemble.

A moment later, he was out the front door.

# The First Day Of School

## Chapter Two

“I still can’t believe you’re wearing that!” Tim exclaimed as Bus 39 came to a jerking halt next to Gibsonville School’s gymnasium. “Just look at yourself. That outfit is absolutely hideous. Faded farmer Brown overalls. A red and white flannel shirt. Maroon-colored boots. And a bright green John Deere baseball cap? ... Paul, are you out of your mind? No one would ever wear anything like that – especially to school!”

“Yes, they would,” Paul nonchalantly replied as the two of them moseyed into the center aisle. “When you see him, take a look at what Butch McGuire is wearing. It’s the retro look that makes him and his gang so popular.”

“Butch McGuire?” A puzzled expression flashed across Tim’s face. “Who’s he?”

“Oh, believe me, Tim,” Paul said, amidst a brief chuckle. “You’ll soon find out. He and his gang worked overtime last semester to make my life as difficult as possible, and they nearly succeeded. They love to pick on anyone they consider to be an outsider, especially if they can be labeled a computer geek.”

“Why? About all the programmers I know aren't much different from anyone else.”

“I agree. And it’s the same with the ones I’ve run across,” Paul replied, stepping onto the gravel parking lot. “But just try to convince Butch and his gang of that.”

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“W-e-l-l. Good morning, handsome,” an attractive, blonde, female freshman said using an over-cheerful tone as she flashed a someday-you-are-going-to-be-mine smile toward Paul the instant he and Tim approached the school’s rear entranceway.

Then suddenly – a shocked expression emerged.

“What in the devil is that you’re wearing, Paul? It looks horrific!”

“What? This outfit?” Paul gazed down the front of himself. “It’s a little something I picked up at the Salvation Army over the holidays. Since the retro look seems to work so well for Butch and his gang, I thought I’d give it a try.”

“You’ve got to be kidding.” Cathy said, rolling her eyes as she shook her head. “You look downright ridiculous. This is the twenty-first century, Paul, not the 1940s.”

Tim suppressed a small chortle. “That’s exactly what I’ve been trying to tell him all morning. The problem is, he refuses to listen.”

“He does?” Cathy stared at her boyfriend and pursed her lips. “Oh, well. At least, you tried. ... By the way, who are you? I don’t believe we met.”

“Me?” Tim pointed his forefinger toward his chest and gave Cathy his infamous knight-in-shinning-armor smile. “I’m Tim Hegler. This is my first day here.”

“Tim Hegler? Hmm, I’ve heard that name before.” Cathy frowned and proceeded to glance at the ceiling.

After a few seconds had passed, “Oh, my gosh! You’re not THE Tim Hegler?” she loudly exclaimed. “The one who co-developed Clash of the BattleStars. Are you?”

“That’s me,” Tim acknowledged with a slight bow.

“Oh, my gawd! I can’t believe you’re here – in Gibsonville, I mean. My dad told me during Christmas break that a new freshman would be joining our class. But I had no idea it was going to be you! I just can’t wait until Daniel finds out. The kid’s going to freak.”

“Daniel?” Tim raised his right eyebrow.

“Daniel E. Whitehouse – the Third,” Paul informed him. “He’s the eleven-year-old genius I told you about over the holidays. He’s very emotional.”

“Oh. Him.”

“Well. It’s been really great to meet you, Tim. And I would like to get to know you a little bit better,” Cathy said, grabbing his hand and giving it a quick shake. “But if you don’t mind, at the moment I’ve got to be going. I just can’t wait to tell Daniel you’re here. ... You will be joining our Computer Club, won’t you?”

Tim wanted to say, yes, but before he could, Cathy had already vanished.

“Wow!” Tim replied, looking a tad bewildered as he turned to face his friend. “Are all your friends like that?”

Paul replied with a sheepish grin.

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A few minutes later when Tim and Paul entered Ms. Bass homeroom class, Paul immediately cruised toward his assigned desk like a ship with its auto-navigation system turned on. Tim took an empty one behind him, and soon afterwards, the tardy bell clanged.



“Well. Well. Well,” Butch McGuire proclaimed, twisting around so he could address the unexpected scene before him. “Look who’s back. My favorite computer geek. And I see you brought a friend.”

Paul involuntarily gulped. This certainly wasn’t the way he wanted to start the spring semester.

“Just leave us alone, Butch. OK?”

Butch looked at him and displayed a medieval smile.

“Gee. What’s wrong, Paul?” he then asked, using a tone as if he was speaking to a young adolescent. “Is the big bad bully disturbing the little computer geek? Maybe the little nerd needs to run down the hallway and report it to his mommy, the school’s Guidance Counselor. She might even be able to change his soiled diaper.”

“Shut up, Butch!” Paul growled, tightening his fingers around the edge of his desk.

“You dare to tell me to shut up, Paul?” Butch snatched a wooden ruler from inside his backpack and forcefully slapped it across his bare palm. “You must be one of the dumbest geeks around here. How would you like me to smack this across your forehead, you moron? It might knock some sense into you.”

Tim instantly jumped onto his feet, raised his fists and got ready to knock a couple of Butch’s teeth loose.

“I’d like to see you try, you super-size pile of crap! There is no way in hell, I’m going to let you lay a hand on my friend.”

“Alright, you three!” Ms. Bass immediately shouted across the classroom. “That’s enough of that. Fighting’s not allowed in my classes. . . . Tim Hegler, and I presume that’s who you are since I haven’t seen you before, take a seat. Paul and Butch, chill it. This instant!”

The three of them continued to eye at each other for a brief moment. Then with steam still bellowing from each of their ears, they readily complied.

“Hey geek,” Butch began in a loud whisper the second Ms. Bass finished taking attendance.

“Yeah?”

“You know we’re not done yet. And before this day is over, I’m going to stomp that scrawny tail of yours so bad – they’ll be carrying your geeky corpse away from here on a stretcher.”

Paul's mouth rapidly dropped. "What's your problem, Butc...?" However, before he could finish his question, the first-period class bell proceeded to clang. And by the time it stopped, Paul's nemesis was nowhere to be found.

"What's with the overgrown imbecile?" Tim asked as the two of them exited their homeroom.

"Well, if you really must know," Paul said, before stopping and taking a deep breath. "He can't stand the fact I wasn't born around here. And two ..."

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While Paul continued to share with Tim the long list of reasons Butch and his gang didn't like him, a nearby squeal abruptly interrupted him.

"Oh my gosh! Cathy was right. It IS him! He's really here," Daniel yelled, dashing through the student-filled hallway like a four-foot-eleven half-crazed maniac.

Within milliseconds, not only had the eleven-year-old come to a screeching halt in front of them, Daniel had grabbed Tim's waist and was currently giving him a bear hug.

"Oh my gawd, Paul!" Tim replied, eyes wide open and displaying a dismayed expression. "Who is this?"

Paul laughed as Daniel gave Tim a quivering smile.

"Tim," Paul said with a cheek-to-cheek grin. "Meet ..."

"Daniel E. Whitehouse, the Third," the adolescent completed as he released his victim. "And you're Tim Hegler. Cathy told me you were here. Did Paul tell you that just like him, you're my hero?"

"I'm your hero?" Tim seemed puzzled while Daniel repeatedly nodded.

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"Well. Well. Well. Isn't this interesting?" Stan, one of Butch's gang members loudly exclaimed as he strolled up to where the three were standing – before Paul had an opportunity to explain to Tim, Daniel's bizarre behavior.

"What do you want, Stan?"

"I'd like to know why your boy was hugging this newbie in the middle of my hallway? Did the miniature faggot get tired of you, Paul?"

"Faggot?" Tim questioned.

“Just ignore him, Tim,” Paul said, turning to face his nemesis. “Stan, you already know that none of us are gay. So why do you keep...”

“Oh really?” Stan interrupted. “Then answer this. Why were your boy’s arms wrapped around the new kid’s waist? ... Disgusting acts like that shouldn’t be done where people can see them.”

“I don’t care what you saw,” Daniel forcibly replied as a tear formed in one of his eyes. “I’m not gay, and you and the rest of Butch’s gang know that. I just happen to love Tim and Paul ‘cause they’re my heroes ... which is something, mostly likely, you never have.”

“Your heroes, huh,” Stan said, shifting his hands to the side of his hips in a pseudo modern James Dean style. “What have these two ever done to be considered heroes?”

“Are you familiar with the game, Clash Of The BattleStars?” Daniel asked in a slightly clearer voice. “It’s been a best seller for the past two months.”

“Yeah. I know all about it. I bought it just before Christmas.”

“Okay. ... Well, if that’s so. ... Did you ever bother to read its back cover?”

“No, I can’t say I have,” Stan said, glancing toward his feet. “Why should I?”

“To see who developed it.”

“That sure sounds dumb,” Stan said with a smirch. “Why should I care about who developed it? ... You don’t buy a game so you can sit and read the box it came in. You buy it so you play it.”

“I care about who created the games I play,” Daniel inserted. “And I think you should too, Stan.”

“Why?”

“Because if you had taken a second to see who co-developed Clash Of The BattleStars, you’d have seen Paul’s and Tim’s name.”

Stan slid backwards a couple of feet and momentarily hesitated. “Is that right, Paul?”

“Daniel’s right,” Tim answered for him. “It’s written on the printed insert inside of the CD case.”

“I still think the three of you are a bunch of faggots.”

“Oh. Really?” Paul said, glancing in Tim’s direction and giving him a wink. “If that’s true, you must be one, too.”

“No way!” Stan exclaimed, taking a bold step forward. “I’m a true woman’s man.”

“Is that so? ... Hmm. Interesting. ... Then explain to me how come you’ve never been out on a date – with a real woman? ... I know for a fact that the only person anyone has ever seen you with, has been Butch.”

Stan impetuously snorted in reply. “I ain’t got time for this kind of nonsense, Paul. I’ve got to go to class.”

Paul chuckled, and soon afterwards, the three of them headed toward their Algebra class, as well.

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“So what happened during Christmas?” he asked Tim, a few hours later while tossing his empty tray into the dishwashing slot at the end of their lunch period. “With all the fun we’ve had this morning, you never got around to telling me.”

“I think it would be easier to show you,” Tim answered, and they began to head toward the cafeteria’s exit. “It’ll only take a minute.”

Moments later, instead of turning right as they normally would in order to return to their classrooms, the boys continued going straight. Then after turning into the hallway that led to the Administration building’s front entrance, Tim motioned for the two of them to stop.

“So why are we here?” Paul asked, viewing the four by six-foot glass case in front of them. “I’ve seen the school’s trophy case at least half-dozen times.”

“I’m sure you have,” Tim said, tapping on the corner of its aluminum-trimmed frame. “But carefully examine it out now. I’m sure you’ll see something’s different.”

Paul took a second look.

“Are you sure something’s different?” he asked, repeatedly examining each of the three shelves in front of him.

“According to what my Dad told me, there is. Didn’t the Yellow Jackets win the football regionals last Fall?”

“They sure did.” Paul said with a nod, before taking an additional look.

“Hey! The trophy’s not here!”

# Corporate Espionage

## Chapter Three

As Paul Pontiac sat, bored, and half-listening to his fourth period Office Skills instructor's lecture on How to Develop Good Computer Skills ... little did he suspect that three hundred and seventy miles away in a remote mountain town called Hidden Valley, the video game the Gibsonville's Computer Club was developing for Titan Industries' Software Contest was the primary topic of an ultra-secretive, executive-level meeting.

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"Is everyone present?" George Witherspoon, the V.P. of Marketing at Krypton Software asked, cautiously eyeing both Ray Sizemore – who was in charge of Corporate Security, and Mike Furrow – the Software Development chief as he sat his cup of coffee in front of himself.

"Almost." A stern expression flashed across Mike's face, and he turned to gaze toward the partially opened doorway. "We're still waiting for Tom. He should be here shortly. ... Allen might be holding him up."

George looked toward Mike and frowned. "Has the CEO found out about what we're planning?"

"Are you kidding?" Mike chuckled. "We're about to discuss what some might consider corporate espionage. There's no way we can let Allen find out. He'd fire us all."

He then took a sip of his mint-delight, primo latte.

"No matter what we are going to need to do, it's imperative we keep our 'beloved' CEO in the dark until we're successful. By then, not only will he be thanking us for the millions Krypton is suddenly raking in, we'll be set for life."

"Yeah. Smelling like roses," Ray added, displaying a wide ear-to-ear grin like a proverbial Cheshire cat.

George gazed at his fellow coworkers and shook his head. He obviously wasn't happy about where the conversation was going.

"I just don't know," he said, before pausing. "Is stealing a PC game from a bunch of teenagers actually going to be worth it? After all, if anyone ever found out, we could end up in one of Tennessee's state prisons."

“That’s true,” Mike replied, unconsciously tapping his forefinger. “But if we take the time to methodically plan each step that needs to be taken, the odds of it occurring are next to nothing.”

“Thus, there’s nothing for you to worry about, George.” Ray added, clicking the icon that would fire up his PowerPoint presentation. “God’s Judgment Day will occur long before Titan Industries ever finds out how this happened.”

Mike nodded in agreement.

“And let’s not forget why we’re doing this. ... Thanks to the game Paul and Tim recently created for Titan Industries – their fourth-quarter earnings shot higher than what Krypton Software’s has ever been, even if you combine our last five years total earnings.”

“Which, my friends, is the exact reason I initiated this project,” Tom Steel (the company’s president) stated as he stoutly stepped inside the company’s ultra-secure conference room. “There’s no way we cannot afford to take an additional financial beating. If we do, it could drive us out of business.”

Tom then briefly paused to let his words slowly sink in.

“So, let’s now get started. ... With Titan Industries requiring all high school contest entries to be submitted by May 1st, I believe it would be more than reasonable to assume Gibsonville’s computer club (whose president is none other than Paul Pontiac, himself) should have the final beta of their game ready for testing by the end of March --- or sometime close to it. Therefore, the only thing we need to do before then is make a copy of it.”

“But isn’t Paul going to need Tim Hegler’s help in order to finish the beta?” George asked, raising his hand. “After all, “Clash of the BattleStars” was a joint effort.”

“Unfortunately, we’re not sure,” Mike replied, giving George a serious look. “But most likely it’s not going to be a problem.”

“According to The IT Business Journal, Titan Industries is supposed to officially announce this afternoon where it plans to re-locate its Game Division,” Ray quickly pointed out. “And it’s a fact, Greensboro was one of the sites they were seriously considering. ... And since Joe Hegler is Titan’s Industries gaming division president, I would tend to believe there’s a high probability his son’s already in North Carolina.”

“Interesting,” Mike replied with a nod. “But I would like to also point out that even if the company’s gaming division didn’t move to Greensboro, all would not be lost. Sources tell me Paul has made friends with an eleven-year-old computer whiz at Gibsonville, named Daniel E. Whitehouse the Third.”

“Daniel E. Whitehouse the Third?” Tom repeated, raising an eyebrow. “Hmm. He sounds young enough to be easily manipulated.”

“He might be,” Ray confirmed. “But most likely, we’re not going to need to use him. Word has it that a Mr. Carl Thompson, who happens to be Gibsonville’s Office Skills instructor and the school’s computer club faculty adviser, is in a monetary bind. ... No doubt, with a little financial, let’s say ‘encouragement’ ... I’m sure he’d be willing to help us.”

“I see,” Tom said, setting his half-empty, mocha latte on the table. “So how much ‘encouragement’ do you think it might take to convince Mr. Thompson to hand us a copy of the kid’s game?”

Ray stopped to examine a bit of data on his recently acquired MS Surface Pro tablet. “Considering his wife’s recent medical expenses, I would guess about 100K. ... Unless, the guy turns greedy – then the payoff could easily double.”

“That’s still not a problem,” Tom replied, before turning to face Mr. Furrow. “This new game should easily bring in at least five hundred times that amount. Right, Mike?”

“Yes, sir,” Mike readily confirmed.

“OK then, gentleman,” Tom said, rising up from his leatherback seat. “I believe we’re done here. Let’s get Operation Chicken Hawk started first thing tomorrow morning. And don’t forget, we’re trying to keep the total cost of this operation under five million.”

# Vengeance Is Mine

## Chapter Four

While the gym's warm shower rinsed the few remaining soap remnants from his slender teenage torso, a never-ending echo of Butch's promise began to play.

*You know, we're not done yet. And before this day is over, I'm going to stomp your scrawny tail so bad - they'll be carrying you out on a stretcher.*

"You did promise that Butch," Paul muttered to himself as he turned to verify that Tim was still keeping watch from the wooden bench in front of his gym locker. "But sixth period is almost over. And so far, you haven't done it."

He then grabbed the knobs to turn off the shower and commenced to dry himself.

"Paul," Tim yelled, the moment his friend straightened himself after drying his feet and legs. "I need to stop by my locker. I haven't been able to find my iPhone, and I think it might be there."

"Are you sure?" Paul walked toward him. "You usually keep it on you."

"Yeah. I'm sure," Tim said with a nod. "I've checked both my book bag and gym locker. It's nowhere to be found."

Paul frowned. "Well. If you must ..."

"Sorry. I don't have a choice," Tim replied while taking a brief glance at his friend's nakedness the moment Paul unwrapped the gym towel from around his midsection. "Otherwise, I won't know what my assignments are."

"Well." Sigh. "OK."

Tim looked at Paul and replied with an unspoken, "Thanks," then rose from the bench and began to walk towards the exit. However, the instant he stepped inside the gym's doorway, he turned around.

"I got an idea. Why don't you quickly get dressed and come with me? Then there won't be anything to worry about."

Paul emphatically shook his head. "Listen, Tim. I appreciate your concern. But I dealt with Butch all last semester. And as you can see, I'm not dead yet."



“You’ve just been lucky,” Tim replied, frowning. “I’ve seen Butch’s kind before. And they’re always bad news.”

Paul gave his friend a brief grin and waved him off.

“Just hurry up and get your iPhone Tim, and I’ll meet you on the bus.” Paul then watched Tim as his friend left the building.

Once Tim was totally out of sight, Paul grasped the stainless steel Master lock Mr. Franklin issued everyone at the beginning of today’s P.E. class and entered its combination.

“Starting at the number 6, let’s first turn the dial right two rounds and stop at 12. ... OK. ... Now left one round and stop at 18. ... OK, that’s also done. ... Now, let’s go right until I reach 24. ... Great. That should do it.”

Instantly, an odor similar to the stench of rotting eggs overwhelmed everything within a ten-foot parameter the second the dark-gray locker door opened, and Paul quickly grabbed his nose.

“Man. I ‘m gonna to have to start using odor eaters or something,” he exclaimed, unceremoniously dropping his gaudy boots onto the cement floor below.

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“So. You’re finally alone,” a familiar voice loudly stated a few seconds later when Paul proceeded to fasten the straps of his outdated overalls.

Paul gulped and took a quick gaze around him. “Butch?”

Butch chuckled in reply. “Who else were you expecting Tinkle Bell?”

“Tinkle Bell?” Paul repeated, looking confused. “Are you referring to me?”

“Don’t look so surprised, Tink. I now have undisputable proof that both, you and your friend are nothing but a couple of sex-crazed faggots,” Butch stated as he slid out from around the back row of lockers. “I’d make a bet you didn’t think I noticed Tim’s goofy-looking grin as he stared at your ass while you were taking a shower. And you certainly didn’t appear to mind.”

“Tim was staring at me? And smiling? ... You’ve got to be mistaken, Butch. I’ve known Tim almost all my life. And he’s clearly not gay.”

“Yeah. Right!” Butch took a step closer. “And the next thing I’d make a bet you’re going to say is, he was only keeping watch so I wouldn’t beat your ass while you were soaping up.”

Paul gazed at the cement floor while his nemesis waited for his reply. “Actually, Butch. You’re right.”

Butch snorted and then violently grabbed a fistful of his victim’s overalls.

“You never cease to amaze me. Do you, you little shithead? First, I find out you’re a f\*cking city slicker and a geek. Then you have the audacity to step inside my turf, wearing my gang’s fashion and colors. And now I discover that you and your new city slicker friend are nothing but a pair of ass kissing faggots wanting to grope each other.”

“Just wait a minute, Butch,” Paul replied as each exterior muscle within his slender bod began to stiffen. “You’ve been trying to claim I was a faggot ever since Daniel gave me a hug last semester and have never been able to successful prove it- so that’s old news. ... What’s truly got you majorly ticked? This 1950s-styled outfit I wore today?”

“You’re damn right I’m pissed off about it.” Butch spat his reply as he drew his fist backwards. “Not only have you stepped inside my turf wearing my gangs’ style of clothes, you purposely decided to mock us by adding a faggot-looking yellow scarf and maroon-colored cowboy boots to the ensemble.”

“Wearing that mocks you?” Paul raised his right eyebrow.

“You’re damn right it mocks us you stupid faggot. And now you’re gonna die,” Butch replied as his left fist slammed into the center of his victim’s abdomen, just below the ribcage.

Paul lost his breath and immediately began to crumble. However, before his knees could reach the floor, a massive right fist connected with the bridge of his nose. ... The resulting snap echoed between several horizontal rows of gym lockers.

Butch then stopped so he could see the extent of the damage he had done thus far... and after doing so, his lips transformed into a sinister smile.

Blood oozed in evenly timed spurts from multiple areas across Paul’s face. And with each additional kick or punch Butch violently bestowed, its flow would exponentially increase.

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A couple of minutes later as Butch’s enjoyment was about to reach its psychotic emotional climax, an unwelcome but familiar sound predominately told him it would soon be ending.

*“Damn. Somebody always has to interfere by yelling, ‘Fight!’”*

He then proceeded to bend down and to snarl at his victim – as if he were a pit bull getting ready for one final last attack.

Paul heard this frightening sound and tried to ease his 120 pound battered torso off the floor he seemed glued to.

Somehow. Someway. There had to be a way to escape from this monster. However, before his one and only futile attempt could begin, a brown-leather work boot abruptly struck his groin – and soon afterwards, two times in a row - it struck directly across the center of his chest.

Darkness immediately followed.

“Stop it right there, boys!” the P.E. instructor screamed as he and his assistant scampered across the locker room. “This fight’s over!”

*So true*, Butch thought as he gazed at the limp pile of bloody raw meat lying abnormally still near the front of his feet. *My victim no longer has ears that are able to hear you. For vengeance - a dish best served cold – has once again successfully taken its toll.*

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Not long afterwards 9-1-1 was called, and a piercing EMT siren began to reverberate across Alamance County’s countryside. However, it's repeating howling sound proved to be no comfort to the eight-year-old boy currently sitting in his wheelchair, staring at the person who used to be both his brother and hero.

“I tried to tell you this morning before we left for school not to wear that outfit, Paul,” Nathan uncontrollably wailed. “But you just wouldn’t listen. And now you’re ...”

# The Bad News In Burlington

## Chapter Five

Are you sure it was him?” Ray Sizemore asked, crushing the empty Starbucks coffee cup he sat on his desk the moment his cell’s ring tone started to play. “If you’re correct, Tom is going to have a cow. This could kill the whole operation.”

“It was him,” the voice over the phone gravely said. “But I don’t think this will necessarily kill the project. There is still a small chance Paul may survive. And if he does, it would only be a minor setback.”

“A minor setback?” Ray pounded the top of his desk. “Have you lost your mind, Phillip? Hearing that Paul had caught a virus would be a minor setback. From what you just described, there’s a strong chance the kid might not survive. And even if he did, most likely he won’t make it back to school this semester.”

“I know. But all’s not lost yet. We still have Tim Hegler and Daniel Whitehouse. They’re both proficient with computers. Couldn’t they complete the program?”

“Maybe. I’m not sure.” Ray tapped the screen on his iPad, so he could access the latest data the company recently had gathered about the boys. “Tim was one of the co-developers of Clash of the BattleStars. However, Daniel’s just an eleven-year-old freshman who happens to be a computer whiz.”

“Well, there you have it,” Phillip said trying to sound reassuring. “If Tim utilized Daniel’s help, there’s a good chance the two of them would be able to finish it.”

Ray paused to take a semi-relaxing breath. “I hope you’re right Phillip. But I’m still going to have to consult with Mike and get his opinion. He knows software development better than I do and would know if Tim and Daniel have the necessary skills to complete the game. In the meantime, as soon as you’re done with lunch, I want you to head back to Alamance Regional. We need to know the instant Paul Pontiac’s status changes – either good or bad.”

“Will do Boss.”

Ray stared at his phone a second after hanging up before deciding to get himself another cup of coffee.

“I can’t believe it. ... I just can’t believe it,” he then muttered as he passed through his office door toward the employee’s lounge. “Of all the dang things to happen.”

George soon walked up beside him. “Hey. What’s up, Bro? You look upset. Isn’t everything going as planned?”

Ray shook his head. “No. We’ve got big troubles George. You know how we were planning to steal the game the Gibsonville’s Computer Club designing for Titan’s Industries’ contest?”

“Yeah. What about it?”

“Well. Originally, everything was cool. With Clash of the BattleStars hitting the top of the gaming charts for the past couple of months and both Paul Pontiac and Tim Hegler being in Gibsonville’s computer club - the game their club’s developing for Titan’s contest was guaranteed to be a surefire winner. The only thing we needed to do was steal a copy of it before the final version shipped.”

“So what’s the problem?” George asked as they stepped inside the employee’s lounge.

“Everything!” Ray said, verbally exploding. “Phillip just called and told me Paul Pontiac had to be rushed to the hospital yesterday, and he’s in critical condition.”

George looked at Ray and frowned. “You must be joking. Aren’t you Ray?”

“I sure wish I was George,” Ray said, taking a dollar out of his wallet and slipping it in the coffee machine. “Unfortunately, I’m not. According to Phillip, things look mighty bleak for the kid.”

“Oh? ... So what happened? Did he slip and fall down a flight of stairs or get injured playing baseball?”

“I wish. He would have been far better off.” Ray replied, pushing the large, square button labeled mocha grande. “Apparently, he pissed off some gang leader named Butch McGuire, and the kid gave him a thorough ass-kicking.”

“A thorough ass-kicking? George raised a single eyebrow. “What exactly did Butch do to Paul?”

“Well. According to Phillip,” Ray began while reaching to get his coffee. “... not only did Butch do a serious number on Paul’s face and abdomen, just for the heck of it; he deliberately stomped the kid’s sternum – the part that lies directly over his heart.”

“Oh my gawd!” George replied, almost dropping the soda in his hand. “And Paul’s still alive?”

“Just barely.”

George stared at Ray and shook his head in disbelief, then the two of them began to walk in the direction of Ray’s office.

“I imagine Paul will have to be shipped to Duke,” Ray stated matter-of-factly. “It’s the only hospital I’m aware near Burlington who’s designed to handle this type of injury.”

“No doubt. Have you already told Tom about this?” George asked as they arrived in front of Ray’s doorway.

“No. Not yet. How do you tell your boss that the main developer of the game you were planning to steal just got a substantial ass-kicking and might not survive?”

George rose his palms in a way that clearly expressed he didn’t know.

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Stepping into his office a few seconds later, Ray stopped to take a sip of his coffee before grabbing the phone and punching Mike’s extension. “Hi, Mike. This is Ray. Would you mind stopping by my office? Something’s come up that we genuinely need to discuss.”

“Is it absolutely critical, Ray? I’m extremely busy at the moment.”

“I’d say it’s definitely important, Mike,” Ray replied. “It seems like Operation Chicken Hawk might soon be turning into what we’ll have to call Operation Dead Duck.”

“Operation Dead Duck?” Mike hesitated. “What in the world are you talking about Ray? ... Never mind, don’t tell me over the phone. It might not be secure. I’ll meet you in a few.”

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“Let’s step outside and take a short walk,” Ray suggested the minute Mike appeared inside his doorway. “Out there, there’s a smaller chance we’ll be interrupted or overheard.”

“Is what you need to tell me that bad, Ray?”

Ray nodded and the two of them quietly proceeded down the hallway. However, before they could pass through the building’s smoked glass entranceway which faced the west side of the Appalachian Mountains, a black Cadillac limousine came to a halt in the semi-circle driveway in front of them.

“Ray. Mike,” Tom cheerfully said, greeting them as he exited the Limo’s rear door. “What are you two doing here? Stepping out to get a breath of fresh air? The weather does tend to be beautiful this time of year. Isn’t it?”

“Yes, sir. Today is nice,” Ray replied, taking in the view. “But unfortunately, these clear skies aren’t going to last. Tomorrow’s forecast is calling for a few storms.”

Tom stopped and gazed at the clouds above him. “Oh? Well hopefully we won’t get any twisters like those that recently hit the Midwest. That was quite a messy business. In fact, a few innocent people even died.”

“Yes. That they did,” Ray said as both, he and Mike gave their boss an insincere smile.

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“So what exactly has got you riled?” Mike asked minutes later, after they had followed the company’s exercise path into a natural wooded setting.

Ray stopped to stare at the upper limbs of an oak tree. And just before he responded to Mike’s question, a black crow passed directly above and deposited a lengthy smelly streak down the front of his shirt.

Mike instantly started to laugh while Ray gazed down the front of himself and began to demonstrate his extensive knowledge of profane declaratives.

“So. Do you think Tim and Daniel will be able to finish the game without Paul’s help?” Mike continued, moments later. “If they can’t, then Operation Chicken Hawk is as good as dead.”

Mike paused to take a plug of tobacco out of the can in his pocket and placed it in his mouth. “Well. It all depends. If the main modules of the Club’s game are already completed, I doubt if Tim would run into any problems. However, if they not, then we’re in deep trouble. Paul has always done the programming for all complex items, and without him there, I’m not sure Tim has the necessary skills to do it - even with Daniel’s help.”

“But I always thought Tim was just as good of a programmer as Paul.”

Mike shook his head no. “No. Not when it comes to the integration of complex three-dimensional graphics. ... I’ve only seen a small number of coders that have the natural knack Paul appears to have been born with.”

“So. Are we going to let Tom know about this?” Ray asked as they turned to head back.

Mike raised his hand to his lips. “No. Not right now. Let’s deliberately wait a while. We first need to have Phillip steal a copy of the game, so we can figure out exactly what developmental stage it’s currently in. ... Not to mention, we need to know if Paul is going to survive or not.”

“And if he doesn’t?”

Mike frowned at the thought. “Then we’re facing one extremely serious situation.”

# The Meeting

## Chapter Six

*This better work out.* Phillip thought, pressing the doorbell on the off-white colonial-style home sitting in the outskirts of Gibsonville. *Otherwise, Ray is going to kill me.*

Within seconds, a thin-built man appearing to be in his early to mid-forties came to the door. “Hello. Can I help you?”

“Yes,” Phillip gulped. “I’m looking for a Mr. Carl Thompson. Our records show that he resides here.”

“Well. Your records are correct.” Carl confirmed, opening the screen door a couple of inches. “I’m Carl Thompson. Would you like to step inside?”

Phillip nodded and followed him into the living room.

“So what can I help you with today, Mr. ...?”

“Cuttingham,” Phillip answered. He then took a seat on the country-style sofa, while Carl sat down the lounge located a few feet away. “I’m from Krypton Software Corp. and have been instructed by my superiors to present you with a proposal. One I believe you will find to be profitable. ... But before we can get started, I’m going to need to ask a few preliminary questions. You don’t mind, do you?”

Carl raised an eyebrow and appearing to be debating the question. “If it’s not too personal,” he eventually said. “What exactly would you like to know?”

Phillip pressed one of the gold-plated latches on a leather case sitting next to his ankle.

“Let’s begin with, are you familiar with Krypton Software and its products, Mr. Thompson? Our company’s based a few hundred miles west of here – in Hidden Valley, Tennessee.”

Carl negatively shook his head. “No. I can’t say I am. Does it produce word processing software? If so, I might be interested. The Microsoft Word program we use in my Office Skills is the 2003 version, so it’s a bit outdated.”

Phillip glanced in Carl’s direction and gave him a smile. “I’m afraid not, Mr. Thompson. Our company specializes in top-of-the-line youth entertainment.”

“You mean like video games?”



“Precisely,” Phillip affirmed, popping his briefcase’s other latch. “And I’m proud to state; we’re also Titan Industries biggest competitor.”

“Titan Industries?” Carl repeated, tilting his head as if he was a bit puzzled. “Who are they?”

“You’re not familiar with Titan Industries?” Phillip took a brightly-colored DVD case out of his briefcase and raised it waist level. “Then perhaps I’m talking to the wrong Carl Thompson. Is there another one living in or near Gibsonville?”

“No. I’m the only one I’m aware of that lives within a couple of hundred-mile radii,” Carl replied, grabbing his remote and shutting off the TV. “Are you, in all reality, actually a door-to-door salesperson, Phillip ... and you’re about to try to sell me something – like a set of encyclopedias on DVD?”

Phillip laughed as he subtly tried to see if his victim's TV was connected to a setup box. If it was, then most likely Carl's Internet service was through a cable modem and hacking into his computer should be a simple three-minute process.

“No. I’m absolutely not a door-to-door salesperson. And I’m certainly not about to try to sell you anything, Mr. Thompson – at least not anything tangible. As I stated earlier, I’ve come to Gibsonville for the sole purpose of making you a business proposal. That is, if you can confirm you are the Carl Thompson, who’s employed at Gibsonville School. ... Are you THAT, Mr. Thompson?”

“Yes, I am.” Carl said as his stomach began to tense. “You need to see some ID or something?”

“No. It won’t be necessary, Carl. I do have a few reasons to believe you are exactly who you claim to be; otherwise, I wouldn’t be here.”

Turning to grasp the DVD he previously set near his lap, Phillip raised it to a position where Mr. Thompson could easily see its front cover.

“Have you ever seen this PC game before, Mr. Thompson? It hit the market last year just in time to make the Christmas season rush.”

Carl slowly leaned forward and a few wrinkles soon formed across his forehead.

“Clash of the BattleStars? Hmm. I’m personally not familiar with it. But, I’ve overheard a few of my students talk about it. Some even say it's one of the best action/adventure games they’d ever seen.”

“I see.” Phillip said, handing him the DVD. “Unfortunately, recent sales figures tend to agree with your student's assessment. This game has been topping the video gaming charts for several weeks now. Which brings me to the reason I’m meeting with you today.”

“Oh?” Carl glanced at Phillip and frowned.

“Yes,” Phillip said, counteracting with a smile. “If you don't mind flipping the DVD I handed you over to its backside, I'd like for you to read the names of the game's co-developers.”

“Sure. No problem.” Taking the game in both hands, Carl flipped it and proceeded to read its back cover. “Paul Pontiac and Tim Hegler,” Carl mouthed before his jaw dropped. “This can't be right. They're two are nothing but a couple of kids in one of my classes.”

“I know,” Phillip said, displaying a wide grin. “And I believe they're also members of the computer club you're in charge of. Isn't that correct, Mr. Thompson?”

Carl nodded yes, while his eyes continued to budge from the recent shock.

“Do you realize, Mr. Thompson, that if these students would have sold the rights to this game to Krypton Software, instead of Titan Industries, our company would currently be several hundred million dollars richer? And I wouldn't have had to make this trip to Gibsonville?”

Mr. Thompson's eyes narrowed, and he pursed his lips. “So you drove several hundred miles just to talk me about Paul Pontiac and Tim Hegler?”

“More or less,” Phillip acknowledged. “Those two are the most predominate members of your school's computer club, and we need to talk about the game they're developing for Titan Industries software contest.”

“Titan Industries software contest?” Carl repeated as if he wasn't familiar with it. “What game and contest are you referring to, Mr. Cuttingham?”

Phillip smiled a mischievous smile.

“Come. Come, Mr. Thompson. Please don't try to tell me you're not aware of all of this ... Both of us know better. Don't we?”

Phillip then reached forward and removed the “Clash of the BattleStars” DVD from Carl's hands.

“Unfortunately, my company doesn't know the name of the game your computer is developing for Titan Industries contest or its specific details. But we do intend to soon find out.”

“I see,” Carl replied, uneasily sitting back in his chair. “And how exactly does your company plan to do that without breaking into our school?”

“We have our ways,” Phillip said as his lips formed a sinister grin. “However, it would be unwise for me to divulge the specific details at this time, don't you think?”

Carl thought about it for a moment before deciding to ask what he deemed would be the question Phillip would be expecting.

“So what specifically do you want from me?”

“Nothing illegal,” Phillip answered, trying to sound reassuring even though his hand had begun to fidget. “And if you don't mind, before we proceed any further about this, I do believe I would like something hot to drink.”

Mr. Thompson frowned and took a deep breath. “Okay, if you insist. But it's going to take a few minutes to brew a fresh pot. We're currently out of the instant stuff, and my wife hasn't done this week's shopping.”

He then got off the couch and strolled toward his 1950s - styled kitchen. Near the door, an authentic ironclad wood stove connected to a fireplace and an old-fashioned aluminum whistling teakettle proudly sat on one of its burners.

“Would you prefer some tea instead Phillip? Fixing a cup would be a bit faster.”

“Coffee, please, Carl. I rarely drink hot tea.” Phillip answered. *That should keep him tied up in the kitchen for at least the next three to five minutes.*

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As soon as Carl exited the living room, Phillip tipped-toed toward his victim's LED TV. “Uh huh. Just what I thought,” he said, examining at the back of it. “A Time-Warner connection if I'm correct.” He then scampered across the room and took a peek down the hallway. A seventeen-inch HP laptop running the latest version of Windows sat in plain view a few feet inside the master bedroom.

Phillip smiled and re-took his seat – shortly before Carl returned with a couple of saucers.

“I take it you want me to make a copy of the kids' game and give it to you,” Mr. Thompson said, handing Phillip an “Intel Rules” coffee cup.

“Basically, you're correct,” Phillip replied, taking a sip. “We need a copy ASAP so we can determine how far the kid's game has progressed. After that, we shouldn't need a second one until the kids have completed the final version or at least are close to it.”

“The second copy may take a while,” Carl stated matter-of-factly while returning to his lounge. “As you probably already know, our club's recently experienced a major setback.”

“Are you referring to what happened to Paul Pontiac, or has something else happened?”

Carl folded his arms in front of himself. “You guys do have a way of keeping up with things, don't you?”

“Only things we deem necessary, Mr. Thompson.”

Carl shuffled his feet as if expressing serious doubts about that.

“Does your company actually believe my students are going to be able to finish the game in time to meet Titan Industries’ deadline Mr. Cuttingham? ... With Paul’s situation looking as bleak as it does, things obviously don’t look real promising.”

“Mr. Furrow, our programming chief,” Phillip began. “Believes they will. ... In fact, rumor has it that even if Paul Pontiac isn’t able to return to the picture, Daniel E. Whitehouse the Third and Tim Hegler are more than qualified to get the job done.”

“I see,” Carl said, shaking his head in disagreement. “Your company must think it has everything laid out. Doesn’t it? ... But what if it’s wrong? What’s going to happen if my kids don’t meet Titan Industries’ deadline? What is Krypton Software planning to do then?”

Phillip gazed at Carl and laughed.

“Whether Daniel and Tim completely finish the program on time doesn’t really matter, Carl. That’s totally irrelevant. All we need is a near-finished copy of the game. Our experts are qualified to do the rest.”

Carl grimaced and rose to his feet, then began to pace in a tight circle.

“And why should I be willing to steal what the kids are working on? It sounds like what you are asking me to do is not only downright unethical, I’d make an even bet – it’s probably illegal.”

“What could possibly be illegal about copying a DVD?” Phillip asked with a crooked grin. “It’s not like the program’s been patented or anything. Not to mention, our executives have authorized me to offer you a tidy sum ... for only a few minutes worth of work.”

“Oh?” Carl’s mind immediately reflected upon the enormous amount of cash he would soon need in order to pay for wife’s upcoming breast cancer treatment. “And what exactly does Krypton Software call a tidy sum?”

“How does twenty thousand fresh greenbacks sound?”

Carl grinned and released a small chuckle. “Are you out of your pea picking mind, Mr. Cuttingham? There is no possible way I’d consider potentially putting my career in danger for a measly twenty thousand.”

Phillip stared at him and grunted.

“Okay. How about fifty thousand, then? It’s not bad dough for less than five minutes worth of work?”

“No. I just can’t see it.” Carl said while gesturing for Mr. Cuttingham to proceed toward the door.

“A hundred thousand, then?” Phillip asked, looking dismayed.

“You just don’t get it. Do you? While the amount you’re offering sounds mighty good, and I seriously could use the cash. There is no way I am going to put my career on the line just because some software corporation wants to do something unethical. I owe both my family and my students a lot more than that.”

“Would two hundred thousand possibly change things?”

Carl looked at Phillip and hesitated.

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Depositing a number of coins into one of the very few pay phones still in existence within the Burlington city limits, Phillip waited for his company's operator to answer. Security was of top importance in this project and at least from here, no one would be able to trace the call.

“Oh. Hi, Sarah. This is Phillip. Could you ring Ray Sizemore’s office for me? Thanks.”

Phillip tapped his foot against the phone booth’s metallic floor as he waited for Ray to answer.

“Ah. Hi, Ray. Phillip Cuttingham here.”

“Hi, Phillip,” Ray said, with an optimistic tone in his voice. “Have you talked with Mr. Thompson, yet?”

“Yes I did, Ray. But I don’t have good news.” Phillip said, before pausing. “I offered him twenty thousand like we discussed, but he wouldn’t take it.”

“Okay. Did you then increase it to fifty thousand?”

“Yes, sir. But he still wouldn’t bite.”

Ray loudly exhaled. “What about a hundred thousand? That should more than cover his wife’s medical expenses.”

“I know,” Phillip mumbled, condescendingly. “However, he turned that down – as well as two hundred thousand. He claims what we’re trying to do is unethical, and he doesn’t want to risk his career by getting involved.”

Ray chuckled in reply. “What we’re trying to do Phillip is unethical. Not to mention, downright illegal.”

“So what are we going to do since he’s unwilling to cooperate?”

“Just what we previously discussed.” Phillip could tell by the tone of Ray’s voice that his boss was about to lose his patience. “Proceed with wiretapping his phone and his computer as mentioned in our backup plan, so we can find some dirt to use against him.”

Phillip silently shook his head in reply and began to stare at his surroundings.

“Now just wait a minute, Ray. Do you actually want to try to blackmail the guy? I think we need to discuss this with Tom before we proceed. After all, if anyone found out about this, it’d really get Krypton into enormous trouble.”

Ray growled into his phone’s mouthpiece.

“Phillip. I surely hope you’re not starting to get soft on me, are you? If you are, I can guarantee you can kiss that raise and promotion you’ve been bugging me about for the past few months, good-bye. ... Now go do exactly what I just told you and don’t give me any trouble.”

Phillip loosened his collar and gulped.

## Paul Gets A Visit

### Chapter Seven

“Paul IS going to be okay. Isn’t he, Mrs. Pontiac?” Vivid creases appeared within Tim’s forehead as an empty pit hollowed out his stomach. “We’ve been best friends, for as long as I can remember. I can’t imagine life without him.”

Mrs. Pontiac briefly smiled at the freckled-faced teenager as the stainless-steel elevator door in front of them abruptly jerked itself open.

*It’s no wonder Paul likes you so much, Tim. You’re certainly the type of person someone could call a true friend.*

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Like most hospitals, the environment within Alamance Regional was ultra clean, ultra sterile. And a distinctive hint of antiseptic seemed to cling in the air as if someone was constantly roaming the halls, spraying it, even in the most remote corners. Yet, unlike the other medical facilities Tim visited in the past, the decor at this one was different. It was warm and friendly, almost expressing an “I care about you” attitude.

“I really don’t know,” Mrs. Pontiac said, answering Tim’s question as they passed a medium-green, Formica-topped nurse’s desk. “Paul’s doctor, Dr. Morgan, recently told me his injuries were a lot serious than he had initially anticipated. There still could be a bone fragment in or near his heart, he might have accidentally missed. Not to mention, Paul could easily develop a blood clot since he’s physically too weak to be given an anticoagulant.”

“So Paul could still die even though he survived the operation?” Tim’s widened eyes revealed that he was ready to panic.

“There is a possibility, Tim. But, hopefully, it’s a slight one. Right now, the only thing we can do which might possibly have an impact would be to say a prayer and place Paul’s life into God’s hands. After all, Our Heavenly Father is well-known for being the Supreme Healer.”

Tim thought about this for a moment and began to tremble. “But what if it isn’t God’s Will for Paul to live? I have seen a few times where, for unknown reasons, God has taken good people home early. Like Harold, for example. Do you remember him? He used to live down the road from

me and every now and then the three of us would do things together - like drop water balloons off the roof of Hollywood Mall.”

“Oh, yes. I recall being told about that, and I also remember Harold,” Ellen said, visualizing the chubby blond-haired kid and how she didn’t find out about the incident until several months later - when Paul got into trouble with a mall security guard, who had recently been transferred to Burlington Square from Hollywood.

“Good. Then you know who I’m talking about,” Tim continued. “Anyway, just a couple of months before Christmas, while my family and I were living in Hollywood, for no apparent reason Harold died in his sleep. His parents said it was due to something the doctor’s called a brain aneurysm. ... What if this is just like what happened to Harold? What if God decides to take Paul home? What would we do then?”

Mrs. Pontiac’s lips unconsciously quivered as Tim’s dark-blue eyes began to welt.

“We’re going to have to deal with it should it happen, Tim,” Ellen replied, mentally trying to compose herself. “After all, God never promised anyone that life would be a rose garden. In fact, most of the time, it isn’t. Therefore, whatever happens, whether it be good or bad, we’re going to have to accept it as being God’s Will and live accordingly.”

Tim nodded in reply and soon afterwards, Ellen took a floral handkerchief out of her purse and gently dabbed his reddened cheeks.

“But for now, Tim,” Ellen resumed as room 413 came into view. “Let’s work hard at thinking positive and put a smile on our face. After all, we certainly don’t want Paul to think the doctor has pronounced his death sentence, do we?”

Tim let out a chuckle and shook his head.

“No ma’am. I guess you’re right. Perhaps I’m overreacting a bit.” Tim tightened his grip on the bag of candy he recently purchased for his friend at Wally World and began to approach the doorway. “Instead of thinking about death and dying. I’d make a bet that even though Paul is being forced to lie still, he’s probably busying himself, mentally working on some of the obstacles our computer club ran across during the development of Plutonium’s Revenge.”

“It certainly wouldn’t surprise me, Tim. And since you brought it up,” Ellen said, pushing her son’s door open. “How’s the game progressing? Will you and the computer club be capable to make Titan Industries’ guidelines if Paul isn’t able to help?”

Tim frowned. “I don’t know. I’m not sure. Paul’s always has been our 3-D programming expert. And even though I helped him with a lot of it while we were making Clash Of The BattleStars, it would really be hard to create some of the complex dazzling effects we were wanting to use without him.”



“I see.” Ellen smiled an intellectual smile, which implied she understood. However, it was a definitely a foregone conclusion that most likely, she didn’t - at least, not completely. Programming had never been one of her known fortes.

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A few seconds later when Tim entered Paul’s room, the first thing he noticed was his best friend was lying on his back – with his eyes so securely closed, one might have thought perhaps the doctor had super-glued them shut.

*Hmm. I wonder if Paul is sleeping. Or, could he still be unconscious because of the anesthesia they gave him?*

He then looked to the right at a metallic pole holding a bag of glucose. From the bottom of the bag, a singular tube, not unlike a clear plastic snake, traveled underneath the covers and presumably into his friend’s arm.

About once a second from a foot or two above Paul’s head, a rectangular-shaped heart monitor kept regularly beeping. And with each beep, a strategically placed needle would jump up and down with each of his friend’s heartbeats. Tim wondered about how he could integrate its sound into the game they were currently developing – in Paul’s honor, of course.

“Son. Are you awake?” Mrs. Pontiac asked, gently grasped her son’s free hand. “Tim and I have come to pay you a visit.”

With his eyes still closed, Paul released a low moan, then rolled over to his side.

Tim watched, before gulping at the sight before him. His friend’s ghostly appearance vividly reminded him of a scene from a movie he had watched on the Internet the night before, *Night of the Living Dead*.

“Maybe we should come back at another time Mrs. Pontiac. Paul ... ah ... appears to be still under the influence of the anesthesia. It might be best if we just let him rest.”

Ellen gazed at her son and pursed her lips.

“That is possible Tim. He still could be under. However, I was pretty sure he would have been conscious by now. ... It’s been at least a couple of hours since he’s left the Recovery Room.”

She then moved toward the door as if in search of a nurse. After not finding one, she continued into the middle of the doorway.

“I guess I’m going to have to stop by the nurse’s station to see what’s going on with Paul,” she muttered more to herself than to Tim. “As busy as nurses are, you can never find one when you want to.”

“Are you sure, Mrs. Pontiac?” Tim asked as he stared at the metallic chain located near the side of Paul’s bed. “If you really would like to talk to one, all we need to do is ...”

“I don’t trust those things, Tim,” Mrs. Pontiac interrupted. “The last time I was in a hospital and try to use one, so I could get a nurse to help me get to my feet; it took over twenty minutes before one arrived. Therefore Tim, I’d like you to stay here and keep a close eye on Paul, while I search for someone who can give me an update on Paul’s condition. Okay?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Tim said, politely nodding. “And don’t worry. Should anything unusual happen, I’ll pull the emergency cord.”

Mrs. Pontiac agreed with his plan, and Tim took a seat directly facing his friend.

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“Tim. Is that you?” Paul groggily asked after several moments had passed. “What are you doing here, and where’s Mom?”

Tim jumped onto his feet and hurried to his friend’s side.

“Yes, Paul. It’s me, Tim. Your mom will be back in a minute. She wanted to talk to someone about your condition. ... So how are you doing? Are you going to be okay now?”

Paul gazed at Tim as if he was trying to see him through a dense London fog.

“Yeah. I think so,” he slowly replied. “What happened to me? Where am I and how did I get here? The last thing I remember was Butch beating the crap out of me, and I was trying to get away. Man, that son-of-a-bitch can put a hurting on somebody.”

“I tried to tell you to leave his kind alone Paul. But you adamantly refused to listen to me. Now you’re in the hospital with a crushed sternum, and heaven knows what else,” Tim added as Ellen quietly reentered her son’s room.

“My sternum’s crushed?” Tim could see a pair of lightning bolts rapidly form within his friend’s narrowed eyes. “What did the Hell did that assh...?”

Unexpectedly, Paul stopped mid-sentence.

“Ah. Oops. ... Let me sort of rephrase what I was about to ask. Mom’s here. What did Butch do to me?”

Mrs. Pontiac gazed at her son and gave him an infamous, “I-caught-you, didn’t-I?” smile.

“The behemoth took his boot and stomped you, Paul,” Tim said while recreating the motion. “Directly over your heart. ... I swear; I think Butch was actually trying to kill you, just like he promised he would.”

Paul aggressively shook his head. “No Tim. I’m sure you’re mistaken. I refuse to accept that even though Butch is the leader of Gibsonville School’s gang, and he tends to be a bast..., ah ... mean. But I have never heard of him going so far as actually trying to kill someone. He usually prefers to make your life absolutely miserable, instead.”

Tim threw up his hands in exasperation.

“Paul. Either you’re looking at life through some kind of weird rose-colored glasses, or you must be still under the influence of the anesthesia they gave you. You’re definitely not thinking straight man. I’ve told you before, and I’ll tell you again. I’ve seen people like Butch before, back in Hollywood. And I’m telling you - they’re killers.”

Paul raised a single eyebrow and appeared as if he was about to speak. However, before a word escaped his lips, his eyes unexpectedly rolled upward and then shut. Milliseconds later, his body went completely limp and the alarm in Paul’s heart monitor began to resonate a nonstop piercing tone.

Tim instinctively jumped backwards upon seeing that the monitors bright green needle, which seconds later had been jumping up and down as it measured his friend’s beating heartbeat, was no longer wavering.

“Attention all staff! Attention all staff!” A voice began to roar up and down the hallway. “Room 413. We have a Code Blue. I repeat, we have a Code Blue. Room 413.”

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Now standing outside the doorway, Tim watched as multiple doctors and nurses dashed into his best friend’s room.

“I’m sorry, Paul,” he silently mumbled as a stream of tears flowed down both his cheeks like a white water rapid during a major thunderstorm. “I didn’t think talking about Butch was going to kill you.”

## Butch's Blue Light Special

### Chapter Eight

Sitting behind his three by five-foot dark-gray metallic desk wearing his tan-colored sergeant's uniform, Officer Majors looked meaner than a pit bull on steroids.

Before he joined the Guilford County Sheriff Department, Bill spent the previous twenty years as a roughneck in the U.S. Marines. And even though the U.S. armed forces now viewed him little more than a civilian, he insisted on running his department just as if he was still in the Corps.

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"Sergeant?" A young slender-built dark-brown hair deputy said as he carefully approached his superior's cubicle. "The warrant for the kid we talked about in this morning's staff meeting has arrived."

"The one for Butch McGuire?" Sgt. Majors took a sip from the coffee cup held tightly in his hand, and he placed it on his desk in a position where its bright-red military insignia would be facing him.

"Yes, Sir," Deputy Lee replied, displaying a zealous, eager-to-please nod.

"Good." Bill rose out of his faded green vinyl rocker, while his lips simultaneously transformed into a sinister grin. He then turned to face the Guilford county map pinned to the bulletin board behind him. "I've been looking forward to the day I could apprehend this particular kid. Ever since we locked up his old man a couple of years ago he's been a major thorn in my side."

"He has sir?" The deputy seemed puzzled.

"Yes, Deputy Lee. You see; you haven't been on the Force long enough to get to know Butch McGuire the way I do. For example, the first time you see the kid, you would swear on your mother's grave that he's nothing more than a typical overgrown moron with a pile of stale dog poop between his ears for brains. And furthermore, you would probably think he wouldn't be able to fight his way out of a paper bag even if somebody soaked it for 24 hours. However, that and a whole lot more is only a false facade of his."

"I know for a fact Butch was born with a non-stop ever-conniving supercomputer inside of that skull of his, and he knows how to effectively use it. ... Every time he and that bunch of hooligans he calls his gang get into trouble; you can almost guarantee he'll find a way to legalistically wiggle a way out of it."

“Thus, for the past couple of years, except for a couple of minor misdemeanors I somehow managed to nail him with, the kid’s been getting away with almost everything short of murder, and we’ve never been able to do anything about it.”

“I know that’s bound to be frustrating sir. But by the looks of this warrant,” Lee replied, raising it to a position to where he would be able to read the charges. “I believe we’ve got something that’ll put him away, long-term.”

“Long-term you say?” Sgt. Majors turned to face his deputy. “Let me see that. I’d like to read for myself what Judge Matthews has agreed to charge Butch with.”

Quickly snatching the paperwork out of Deputy Lee’s outstretched hand, the sergeant’s eyes dropped to the section where each charge would be listed.

“Let see here. We got assault and battery – that’s nothing new for this kid. I’ve seen him maneuver out of that one at least a half a dozen times. ... But what’s this?” Bill said, stopping to re-read the third highlighted item at least twice. “Hmm. Can this actually be true? Has our genius in hiding finally majorly screwed up?”

“It appears, he did,” Deputy Lee confirmed with a grin. “He’s looks like he managed to get an attempted first-degree murder charge.”

“Wow! That’s totally unexpected. I wonder what are the odds of getting it to stick? If we did, most likely Butch would end up doing five to ten years in the big house – barring no pussy-foot review board decides to parole him early.”

“At the moment I’d say the odds are pretty good,” Deputy Lee replied, taking the warrant back from his superior. “According to a number of sources, not only did Butch verbally threaten to kill his victim; he schemed for several hours how he would corner him in the school’s gymnasium and crush his sternum.”

“Butch did?” Sgt. Major raised an eyebrow. “That’s very unlike him. Butch usually tries just to hurt his victim, but not kill them. I wonder what could have set him off?”

“I’m not sure,” Deputy Lee stated as he stepped toward the hallway. “But if you give me a sec or two, I’ll get a copy of the incident report and see what it says.”

“You do that Lee.” Sgt. Majors said reaching for the mike sitting next to the police radio he kept on a shelf underneath the county map. “In the meantime, I’ll get a hold of Deputy Stevens. He’s supposed to be patrolling around Gibsonville today, and I’d like to know if he’s seen our hot-shot gang leader.”

“Yes, sir. ... Ah. ... That sounds like a good idea sir.”

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Twenty miles away almost due east from the Guilford County Sheriff's Department in an extremely rural environment – a collection of teenage boys each wearing identical flannel shirts and bib overalls was gathering behind Gibsonville School for their normal Saturday afternoon routine of shooting hoops. However, unlike most weekends when they got together so they could do a bit mischievous scheming, this particular session was different. There seemed to be unspoken nervousness prevailing.

“Hey. Yo, Butch,” Stan yelled dribbling his faded orange basketball in a perfect symmetrical beat to the rap tune playing on his iPod as he approached the Yellow Jacket's scoreboard. “Are you sure you want your ass to be seen out here man? I mean, considering what you pulled off recently, it wouldn't surprise me that The Man's out looking for ya. And this time he isn't gonna play.”

Butch glanced at his friend and casually leaned backward on the gray wooden bench he had been resting on.

“Ha! That's a laugh,” he said as his face reflected an I-don't-care type of expression. “There's no way the cops are going to run out to Gibsonville just because I roughed up a dumb computer geek. ... You must be getting starting to get stupid on me, Stan.”

“Stupid?” James, a longhaired blond kid, repeated as he gazed at the two of them. “I don't think so, Butch. Stan's probably right. Have you forgotten what exactly you did to that moron? ... You didn't just rough Paul up a bit like you normally would do, you almost killed the kid. ... Not only was he unconscious when the EMT's carried him out of the gym Monday afternoon, they even had to put him on a respirator.”

Butch vehemently shook his head. “Naw. I don't think so, guys. Most likely, I only cracked a rib or two. If I would have accidentally killed him Monday, the Guilford County cops surely would have locked me long before now.”

“So that's why you think you're still free?” short and chubby Henry asked.

Ray let out a whistle. “I tell you what, Butch. If I would have done what you did, I would have already hightailed my ass a long way from here – possibly even to Mexico.”

Butch placed both hands on the side of his hips and slowly proceeded to give each of his gang members a long cold stare.

“What's wrong with all you guys this morning?” he began. “There's absolutely nothing to be scare about. ... I swear. Just because I beat the living Hell out of a four-eyed computer geek this week, that isn't a reason for all of you to turn into a bunch of diaper soiling wimps. Now straighten up. Okay?”

The gang members immediately started to mutter among themselves, while taking occasional glances at their supposedly fearless leader – and after a few moments had passed, Stan finally took a step toward him.

“Butch,” he said before stopping when a Guilford County patrol car suddenly came into view.

He then waited for it to pass before continuing.

“I really don’t think you fully realize what you’ve done, man. Not only did you break a cardinal rule by stomping the ass of one of the administrative staff’s kids. Word has it on the street; Paul could be dead this very moment.”

“Now I know that this is your turf ... well, our turf ... but do you really want to be hanging around here when it could cause you to end up in the can with a murder rap?”

Butch smiled and yanked a razor-sharp switchblade out of his pocket, then opened it. “Hey. My Dad learned how to take care of himself in prison – and I can too.”

Pete lightly chuckled. “Yeah. You’re probably right. But your ol’ man’s only a short timer and will be getting out next year. ... If Paul Pontiac has ended up dying because of you’re stomping him, that’ll be a first-degree murder rap, and you’re going to be locked up for at least a good fifteen to twenty, unless they hand you the death sentence instead.”

Upon hearing these words, Butch looked upward and laughed. But soon afterwards, his pupils began to narrow as the truthfulness of his friend’s words began to sink in like the venom of a fully-grown copperhead.

“Maybe you guys are right. Perhaps I should lie low for a while – just to see if anything develops.”

Butch then stopped to examine the countryside surrounding him.

“Where do you think I should go – The cave?”

“The cave?” Pete looked at his friend and grimaced. “That’s not a good idea, Butch. If you recall, that’s where we stashed Gibsonville’s Regional Football trophy. If The Man somehow managed to find you there, he’d slap you with a charge for stealing it.”

“You really think pea brain Sergeant Majors would think to look there?” Butch said, gazing at Stan, Pete, and Henry to see their initial reaction. “I doubt if the dumb ass even knows about the place.”

“You might be able to stay at my place,” a scrawny sandy brown-haired kid named Curt suggested. “You know my mom is almost never around. And I haven’t seen my Dad in the last three months. I think he’s taken off with a young blond and headed for Mexico.”

“That’d be cool,” Butch initially stated. “But what if your mom sees me and starts asking questions. Or worse, what if for some unknown reason she gets pissed off and starts yapping? Before you know it, The Man would be all over me.”

“I think you’d be safer if you took off for Mexico. ... Immediately,” Fred interjected, expressing himself for the first time since the conversation started.

Butch studied the expression of each gang member, and he grasped his chin. Making the right decision certainly wasn’t going to come easy.

Heading to Mexico would most likely be a sure guarantee he wouldn’t get caught. But, what if Paul wasn’t as bad off as everyone thinks he might be? Then he would have given up everything he had ever cared about – for nothing. ... By staying and Paul being OK, most likely he would only get a probation sentence. However, if he was wrong and Paul’s dead – doing nothing could result in the death penalty or maybe even something worse, a life sentence with no chance of parole.

“I think I’ve made up my mind,” Butch announced, stomping his foot on the black asphalt below him. “I think I’m going to ...”

Less than a half a block away, the blue lights on a couple of nearby Guilford County Sheriff’s vehicles suddenly began to flash, and a loud, ear-piercing siren started to resonate throughout the neighborhood.



# The Chase

## Chapter Nine

Staring at flashing blue lights while echoes of multiple sirens filled the air surrounding him, Butch McGuire's eyes widened and his mouth opened. "This can't be. I haven't done anything wrong! Why do they want to arrest me?"

"Run, Butch," Stan hollered as the other gang members began to hightail it across the schoolyard toward the forest located at the edge of Gibsonville's property line. "You need to get your ass out of here unless you want it locked up!"

Butch gave his friend a quick nod and scrambled around the corner.

*I doubt the cops will realize I've headed in this direction, he thought as he continued to scramble. Most likely, they'll assume I would follow everyone else.*

After coming to a stop inside a small recess area near the front of the gymnasium's side entranceway, Butch thought about Curt. *It certainly would have been nice if my physique could have been a whole lot more like his. Having a scrawny build could be advantageous right about now.*

"Paul. You've now become a major pain in the ass," he muttered as he examined the various pathways around him.

While doing so, it didn't escape his eye that only a few hundred feet away a Guilford County black and white Ford was quietly easing into the designated student parking lot.

Seconds later, it came to a halt.

"If you only haven't been such a dumb-ass computer geek Paul and not even smart enough to know you don't wear a gangs' colors," Butch continued in his private rant. "...then I've never wouldn't have had to stomp your ass and wouldn't be in this mess. ... Damn you, you son of a bitching bastard. This is all your fault you f\*cking moron and I almost wish your ass was dead. Then I wouldn't have to deal with you anymore."

Having verbally expressed his feelings, Butch stopped and smiled – but only for a millisecond. He then remembered that if Paul were actually dead, it would be impossible for him to wrangle out of this situation with anything as insignificant as a Probation sentence. Instead, The Man would probably send him to the Big House for the rest of his life.

Butch looked up and sighed. *I have no choice. I must escape. So what would be the best route?*

“There’s a cop sitting in one of those new hybrids inside the student parking lot so heading toward Church Street probably wouldn’t be a good idea. And if I know Sgt. Majors, he’s stationed an officer not far from the Administration Building’s side entrance since it would be the most logical route to take. So, hmm. Let me think. What if I ...?”

About a hundred feet away on the far side of the gym just to the left of where Butch was standing, a car door creaked. Then a few seconds afterwards the echo of someone running across black asphalt resounded.

“Ah, Ha! Deputy Stevens must be heading toward the woods. ... Yeah. You just keep heading that way you skinny pig-headed moron. ... Didn’t your sergeant warn you I’d be smart enough to know not to go that way?”

Butch smiled a small smile and then started for the gym’s northeast corner. He wanted to peek around its corner. With any luck, the grassy area between the Office Skills classroom and cafeteria would be clear.

*Okay. So far, so good.*

Sprinting toward the end of one of the school’s main buildings and easing around its corner - Butch stopped to gaze at the school’s side parking lot where most of the faculty usually parked. Even though it was a weekend, he wanted to see if anyone might be parking there. Unfortunately, the school’s “Built in 1946” cafeteria was effectively blocking most of his view.

This caused him to grimace, and he exhaled his frustration.

“Damn it. It looks like I’m just gonna have to chance it.”

Even though no officer was in sight, Butch went ahead and checked both ways before starting to slither next to the side of the main building. Upon reaching one of school’s infamous tall oak trees whose trunk stood less than a foot away from the building a few moments later; he came to a halt.

*It isn’t hard to believe this wall was built before 1918, Butch thought as he carefully examined his new location. I’d make a bet there isn’t another school within a hundred miles with a tree large enough or so close to a building; I could have hidden behind it.*

He then diverted his thoughts back to the matter at hand and turned toward the part of the woods where his gang previously entered. Deputy Stevens was standing almost at the precise point his gang had escaped and from the way he was moving his head like a bobble head toy, Butch got the impression the officer was either lost or confused.

There was no doubt that Stan was smart and Butch knew his friend would have done a bit of double tracking before heading east. Therefore, unless Deputy Stevens came back with a K-9, the

odds were slim that he would find them and by the time the officer realized that, it'll be too late to try to locate him.

Butch chuckled at the Guilford County Deputy's foolishness as he made sure the pathway leading to the cafeteria was still open.

*Now, if Stan's following the instructions we made for a contingency like this, he and the gang should be heading for the cave where they'll be able to change out of our colors into regular street wear. And soon afterwards, we should be able to meet.*

Feeling good about the way things were going, Butch dashed for the side of the cafeteria. However, the moment he reached the chow hall; a police siren resonated.

"Way to go, moron," Butch confidently stated, keeping his back to the cafeteria's reddish brick wall as he headed for the northeast corner. "If you were trying to keep your presence hidden, you definitely blew it."

Within moments, a car door opened – making a scraping noise as if its hinges could have used a bit of lubrication three years previous.

"You're not fooling us, Butch McGuire," a voice coming from an amplified sound system began to wail. "We know exactly where you're located and have you surrounded. You might as well give up."

*Yeah. Right.* Butch thought, taking a single step backwards. *When pigs fly.*

"Butch. There's a satellite fixed on your precise location. ... Not only do we know you're standing near the backside of the school's chow hall. We can even read the word "Wrangler," written on each metallic button fastening your overalls."

"Really? Holy shit." Butch grabbed one of the round buttons holding his pant's straps and took a quick look. "He's right. ... Damn modern technology!"

*So what do I do now?*

Pulling out his iPhone, Butch remembered an application he had acquired off the Internet a few months earlier from a place considered to be a black market website. Rumors had it that a group of foreign terrorists had developed the program so it could help them escape. Scrambled, as the app was entitled - was designed to jam any electronic device within a hundred-foot radius of an iPhone by causing any nearby electrical transformers to repeatedly release a short-burst high-frequency pulse for a total of thirty seconds. After that, the program would have to be re-initiated.

"This probably won't block that damn eye-in-the-sky, but at least for a moment, they shouldn't be able to use radar to track me."

Butch smiled as he pressed his phone's touch screen.

“How about getting a good look at this, Sgt. Majors,” he then yelled, dropping his pants and shorts, so he could present a full moon to any high-definition camera above him. “Despite your modern high tech technology, you still haven’t caught my ass yet. So, bite me!”

As if the sergeant had been able to hear him, before a full minute had passed the rumbling of black-walled tires echoed as additional county sheriff patrol cars came to a halt at each corner of the faculty’s parking lot.

It seemed the demise of Butch’s freedom would be imminent.

“Ho. Ho. What’s this?” Butch questioned upon hearing a dull clank as he rushed along the east side of the cafeteria. “I was hoping something like this would be located here.”

Getting down to his knees next to dark-green industrial-size garbage bin, Butch brushed off the leaves that had fallen the previous Fall onto the top of a man-size sewer drain.

*How convenient. The town of Gibsenville is going to provide me the convenience of a hidden escape route.*

Butch grinned from ear-to-ear, and after lifting the heavy solid steel lid, climbed inside and replaced the cover.

“Just try to find me now you morons,” Butch laughed as he activated the lantern feature of his phone. “There’s no way you’ll ever be able to track me.”

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“So. How did you manage to escape?” Stan asked thirty minutes later, while Butch was taking a large bite out of the double-stacked hamburger he had the owner of Pedro’s Grill fix for him.

“It was simple. I just ...”

As Butch relayed the details of his escape in a fashion, which made it appear that even a third grader could have done it, the rest of his gang leaned forward so they could capture every word spoken.

“A sewer drain,” Stan questioned when Butch had finished. “I didn’t know they had one near the cafeteria.”

“Well, they do,” Butch confirmed, wiping his lips after completing the last bite of his meal. “And it was a damn good thing it was there. Otherwise, I would have had to head for the elementary classrooms’ building and try to find a way to enter the woods from there.”

“It would have worked,” Curt remarked before swallowing a swig of Coke.

“I know. But using the drain was a lot easier,” Butch countered. “Now. If you don’t mind, gents, we need to hightail it out of here and find me a good place to hide.”

“Are you heading to Mexico?” James asked as they got up from the table and paid the bill.

“I’m not sure.” Butch answered, slipping his wallet into his overall’s front pocket. He then stepped out the front door and discovered four Guilford County patrol officers waited nearby.

“Butch Edward McGuire,” one of uniformed deputies began, while a second one handcuffed his wrists behind his back, “You are officially under arrest for Attempted First-degree murder, Assault and Battery ...”

“But how did you find me,” Butch asked as he entered a patrol car’s back door. “I thought I had covered all angles.”

Deputy Stevens looked at him and smirked.

“For being a Class A punk, you managed to show us where you were,” he said. “Quite well, in fact. ... Apparently, you forgot that for the past few years, all cell phones have a built-in GPS tracking device that is normally used for 9-1-1 purposes. Thus, once you left the drainpipe and were back out in the open. It wasn’t difficult to track you...”

Butch immediately gazed toward his pant’s pocket and frowned.

Damn f...cking technology!

## Is He or Isn't He?

### Chapter Ten

“Is Paul dead?” Salty tears flowed down Cathy’s cheeks like a pair of roaring rivers as she rested her head on Tim’s chest and tightly wrapped her arms around his waist.

It didn’t matter that they were standing just outside the door of Gibsonville’s Office Skills classroom, where other students or a faculty member could easily see them. Her only concern was for her boyfriend.

*Cathy is so beautiful. I can see why Paul likes her,* Tim thought when she raised her head, and he could stare into her eyes. In seeing her pain; he gave her a peck on her forehead.

“I don’t know, Cathy,” he said as a couple of students passed on their way to the weekly after-school Computer Club meeting. “Like I already told you, Mrs. Pontiac and I were visiting him at Alamance Regional Saturday night when his heart unexpectedly stopped beating. Then the second the Code Blue was issued, I didn’t have a choice but to leave.”

Cathy frowned. “And nobody has said anything about his condition ever since?” Her blue eyes pleaded for a response; one that would tell her that the most important person in her life was going to be okay.

Unfortunately, Tim could only look at her and gulp.

*What should I say? If I tell her the truth, it wouldn’t provide the answer she is searching for. Yet, if I lie by saying he’s okay and Paul has actually died, she would never forgive me.*

“I’m sorry, Cathy. Nobody has said a word, so I really don’t know,” Tim replied, before taking a deep breath. “Soon after the code Blue was issued, Mrs. Pontiac called my Dad, and he took me home.”

Cathy smiled a small smile as if she understood, yet her deep feeling of disappointment still managed to seep through.

“Yesterday was Sunday,” she then said. “Couldn’t you have called Paul’s mother before she went to church and asked?”

Tim shook his head, no. “By the time I got up and gazed out the front window towards the Pontiac’s driveway, she was already gone.”

“Hmm.” Cathy scrunched her eyes in frustration. “What about your father? Did he have a chance to talk with her yesterday? He should know something.”

“No. Not really. When I asked yesterday afternoon, he said Paul had been helicoptered to Duke. But that’s all he knew. And it wasn’t until a bit after 11 o’clock last night when I saw Mrs. Pontiac’s blue Impala pull into her driveway. So giving her a call would have been totally inappropriate.”

“You’re right,” Cathy reluctantly agreed before the two of them stepped into the classroom. “It wouldn’t have been.”

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“So. Are all of us computer geeks ready to get this meeting started?” Grabbing hold of his notes, Daniel E. Whitehouse the Third scanned over what to a stranger would appear to be a convention of foreign exchange students sitting in front of him.

Everyone replied with a half-hearted, yes.

“Okay then. As most of you are probably aware, last Friday our club experienced a major setback. Paul Pontiac got injured and most likely won’t be with us for a while.”

“For a while?” a Russian student in the front row questioned. “From what I heard, Butch beat the living crap out of him. I’d be surprised if he makes it back before the end of the semester.”

The other students simultaneously nodded, and a small roar commenced as individual discussions began.

“Order. We must have order,” Daniel shouted, pounding a small gavel unto the top of the wooden podium in front of him. “Tim. Rumor has it that you were able to visit Paul last Saturday. Could you provide us an update?”

Tim glanced toward Cathy’s sad eyes and frowned, then leaned backwards in his seat.

“Yeah. I could. But nobody’s going to like what I’d have to say.”

“Oh? Did Paul flop over and die?” one of the other students half joked.

Tim turned to face the person who had made the foul remark and if his eyes would have been razor-sharp daggers, the other kid would have been sliced into stew meat.

“Actually,” Tim began, as his body shook in anger. “During my visit with him, Saturday night ... he did.”

“Oh, My Gawd,” a student yelled, just before a deafening silence prevailed.

Daniel’s face turned ghostly white. “Paul’s d...?”

Daniel’s lips formed the word he wanted to say, but his voice refused to vocalize it.

“No. I don’t think so,” Tim tried to reassuringly reply, noticing the newly formed tears in Daniel’s eyes. “They must have somehow revived him. ... According to my Dad, he’s now at Duke.”

“So what do they say is wrong with him?” a concerned black student asked.

Tim rose to his feet, so he could easily face his fellow club members.

“Well. From what I’ve been told, which isn’t really a whole lot, when Butch stomped Paul’s chest last Friday, he managed to crush part of his sternum - the part right next to his heart. And because of that, Paul now has to deal with blood clots. ... That’s why his heart stopped while I was visiting him. A large blood clot somehow managed to lodge itself inside his left ventricle.”

“Are we going to be able to complete Plutonium’s Revenge since Paul might not be able to help us?” a freckled-face freshman named Mike decided to ask the moment Tim sat back down in his seat.

“I don’t know. We’re going to try to,” Daniel replied, looking perturbed at the question. “But in the meantime, there is something we need to do in order to help us get back on track.”

“And that is?” Tim said, raising his eyebrow.

“We’re going to need someone to be an Acting President, until Paul returns.”

Daniel stopped to gaze at Tim, and then turned to face Cathy. It definitely wouldn’t have taken a genius to figure out what he was thinking.

“As you all know, I don’t mind being the V.P., but I would prefer someone with a lot more programming experience than I have to be our club president.”

“And who in Gibsonville could possibly have more experience than you?” a dark-haired girl asked.

Cathy grinned and raised her hand.

“I’d like to nominate Tim Hegler. He was Paul’s co-developer in the creation of “Clash of the BattleStars,” and we all know what a big success that’s been.”

“That’s true,” the Russian kid enthusiastically agreed, before Tim interrupted.

“Now hold on, folks. It is a fact that I worked with Paul on the BattleStar game. But, when it comes to programming 3-D special effects, I’m not too proud to admit - Paul’s got me beat, hands down.”

Daniel gazed across his audience as a murmur filled the room, and Cathy gave Tim a look like she was ready to tear him apart, limb from limb.



“So you’re not willing to be acting president just because you might need a little help with the graphics? What’s wrong with you, Tim? Don’t you care about our club?”

Tim instantly moved his hands to the front of chest in a defensive manner.

“Whoa. Slow down, Cathy. I never said anything even close to that.”

“Then what exactly are you saying, Timothy James Hegler?”

Tim opened his mouth, and then hesitated before slowly turning to face each of the fellow students.

“Okay. I’ll do it,” He eventually conceded with a short nod. “If that’s what everyone here wants. However, I do want everyone to know I normally avoid positions like this because I prefer to do whatever’s required of me, in the background.”

“I can relate to that,” Daniel commented, shuffling his papers on top of the podium. “So do we have any other nominations?”

Daniel waited several seconds for a verbal reply.

“How about you, Cathy?” he asked. “Wouldn’t you like to be acting president?”

Cathy smiled and shook her head, no.

“OK,” Daniel said, taking on a resolute expression. “Everybody, let’s vote.”

As multiple students’ hands began to rise, twenty miles away, in High Point, an eight-year-old handicapped boy who was currently being taken care of by his uncle, suddenly felt a strange sensation. It was telling him that someone he cherished dearly was about to meet their maker.

# It Takes A Thief

## Chapter Eleven

“Are you absolutely sure Tom wants that done?” Phillip’s hand nervously shook the latest feature-filled iPhone he had purchased over the weekend. “And what if I get caught?”

“Then you won’t have to worry about the raise and promotion you’ve bugged me about for the last six months,” Ray stated, before releasing a small laugh. “Cause you’ll no longer be working here. In fact, should you do get caught and someone comes around here asking about you, the only reply they’ll get is, ‘Sorry. No one at Krypton Software has ever heard of him.’”

“Unbelievable,” Phillip shouted, banging his fist against the outer realm of his Mustang’s steering wheel. “You are one cold-hearted mother, Ray. I had a feeling that if I took this assignment I could end up getting screwed – and you’ve confirmed that I was right.”

Ray replied with total silence.

“I’m sorry. What did you say, Phillip?” he said a moment later. “I couldn’t make it out. There must have been some interference on the line. Would you mind repeating that?”

“No. It’s wasn’t anything important. Don’t worry about it,” Phillip replied through gritted teeth. “So Tom specifically ordered that we obtain a copy of the computer club’s game, even though it’s far from being completed?”

“Indirectly, yes. Mike and him held a meeting yesterday to discuss Paul Pontiac’s condition, and shortly afterwards, I got the word that this is what they want done.”

“Tom must be worried that Paul’s going to die.”

Ray took a deep breath, and then loudly exhaled.

“It certainly sounds like it. But I believe he’s more concerned about possible programming changes the other club members might start making on the game since it’s obvious Paul’s going to be gone for a while.”

“So Mike isn’t comfortable with the way Tim and Daniel might complete it?”

“Maybe. But it looks more like he doesn’t want to take a chance of something getting screwed up. After all, we’re depending on the slightly modified version we’re going to make from it in order to get us back on top of the sales charts.”

Ray suddenly paused, and the metallic clack of an aluminum beverage can being set on the top of a Formica desktop could be heard over the phone's headset.

"As we've previously discussed, Tim does have limited experience working with 3-D graphics since he helped Paul develop Clash of the BattleStars. However, from the info we've been able to get regarding Daniel, all the graphic work he has ever messed with was only in 2-D. ... And since the release of Avatar, 2-D games no longer are best sellers."

"True. But let's not forget that Daniel's a fast learner. I'd make a bet he'd be able to pick up 3-D in no time."

Ray rapped his fingertips across the top of his desk.

"Yeah. You probably right, Phillip. However, a student is only as good as their teacher. And Daniel should be learning 3-D programming from Tim, not Paul."

Phillip paused. "Hmm. You do have a point."

"So. In getting back to the matter at hand. How soon will you be able to get this job done?" Ray asked, grabbing a pen and a "Post-It" so he could remind himself to tell someone to quickly develop an instant delete program that could be used to erase Phillip's records from the company's employment files should his mission fail.

"I'll drop by Gibsonville's Administrative offices around two this afternoon and pretend I'm a local building inspector so I can scope out the place. And if things aren't too complicated, I'll slip inside about an hour after sunset."

Ray nodded his approval, though Phillip couldn't see it.

"OK, Phil. But remember to play it cool when you do. We definitely don't need any suspicions aroused if you're expecting to be successful."

"10 - 4. No problem, Ray. Just be sure to have the paperwork for my raise and promotion all ready for signing the moment I return tomorrow."

"Don't worry. It will be ... as long as you don't screw up."

And upon hearing those words, Phillip pressed the iPhone's End button and commenced to stare out his Mustang's windshield.

*Would the plan I devised weeks ago for this contingency work? And if it doesn't, what going to happen to me then? I could be looking at some serious jail time.*

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Sunset arrived quickly as Phillip mentally spent hour after hour fine-tuning his scheme for entering Gibsonville School and making a copy of the computer club's game. Sure, getting inside the

antique, brick-and-mortar building wouldn't be hard. After all, construction back in the eighteenth century wasn't nearly as impregnable as it is today. But making a copy of the kid's game in such a way where not even an expert would be able to detect it? – That would be another story.

To enter inside the school, Phillip decided by taking East Joyner Street, then turning right on Church Street – not only would he be able to determine if anyone was parked in the Faculty parking lot, he would also be able to catch any visible lights coming from either the front or east side of the building. And if there weren't any, he could then pull into the school's back entrance and scan the student's lot before parking on the other side of the gym, in the designated Bus Parking area. This location would be pretty much hidden from anyone passing by since it was more-or-less a large gravel patch located between the gym and the school itself.

*Gibsonville should be empty now*, Phillip thought, revving the Mustang's engine after spending the past forty-five minutes stuffing himself at the Golden Corral off Garden Loop Road in Burlington. He never could resist their "All you can Eat" Seafood night.

The headlights on his Boss® automatically flickered on the second their sensors determined it was dark, and twenty minutes later, he was cruising past the front of the school.

"Well. It seems I lucked up tonight," Phillip muttered as he slowly coasted into the Bus Parking area and shut off his engine. "All lights are off. There are no cars in either parking lot. Nor is there a single person in sight."

A broad smile automatically formed as he opened the driver's side door. He then turned and gazed at the oak trees lining Church Street, before diverting his attention toward the gym and eventually the colonial-style school building now facing him.

*This is going to be child's play.*

However, the moment he reached the last metallic step leading to the school's back entrance, an unexpected creak resounded.

"Whoa. What was that?" Phillip blurted, before stopping to survey his surroundings.

He paused to watch the back of the surrounding houses on Church Street. Heaven knows the last thing he would need is for a concerned citizen to be calling 9-1-1.

"Hopefully, no one else heard it."

He then laid low in order to see if any porch lights were going to flick on.

A few minutes later after not seeing anything, he took out the master key he had swiped during his earlier visit and unlocked the school's back door.

"Okay. That was easy enough," Phillip declared as the lock clacked open. He felt quite pleased when the door, soon thereafter, shut behind him.

Thus, grabbing his flashlight, he proceeded down the hallway toward the stairwell, which would take him to the Office Skills classroom.

Directly across from the magnificent old school building with its tall, white columns standing proud amongst the surrounding giant oak trees, and a red-brick sign declaring this residence was “Home of the Yellow Jackets,” stood a prominent religious center known as the Gibsonville United Methodist Church. Its bell tower struck the hour the moment Phillip opened the door to the Office Skills classroom.

“So where would a bunch of kids from the computer club store a copy of their program?” Phillip asked himself as he gazed over the thirty-some desktops residing inside. “They wouldn’t be so foolish as to keep their game on a hard drive, or would they?”

Phillip took a seat in front of a nearby monitor and flipped a nearby desktop’s red switch. A Windows logo soon appeared.

“This is all too simple,” he said with a grin while selecting the keystrokes needed to bypass the operating system’s Start-up password.

Less than five seconds later, Phillip was examining the hard drive’s directory.

“So you must be calling it **Plutonium’s Revenge**.” Phillip chuckled as he opened the game’s folder and displayed the Properties of the game’s EXE file. “Nice title. A good eye-catcher.” In selecting each Properties tab, he continued to search for every detail possible. “Owned by the Gibsonville Computer Club. ... Saved in read-only mode. I see that only Paul, Tim, and Daniel are allowed full access.”

*The software gods must be with me tonight, Phillip thought, glancing toward the ceiling. After all, what are the odds of Tim Hegler’s PC being the first one I sit at – One out of thirty?*

Hearing a sudden noise outside and noticing a Guilford County Sheriff’s vehicle in view of the classroom’s back window, Phillip involuntarily gulped.

“Uh, oh. This isn’t good. Was there a motion detector I somehow missed? ... If there was, I certainly didn’t see it.”

Phillip frowned before taking a small flash drive out of his pocket and shoving it into one of the computer’s USB slots. He then activated the third-party software he had preinstalled. The program would prevent the time and date stamps within the desktop’s primary FAT table from being changed the moment the files in the Plutonium’s Revenge directory were successfully copied.

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“So how soon will you be stopping by my office?” Ray asked over the phone as Phillip turned his Mustang into the Krypton Software’s employee parking lot. “Mike wants the game in our developer’s hand - ASAP.”

“That all depends,” Phillip replied. “How soon will I be getting my raise and promotion?”

“In a couple of minutes – if you didn’t screw anything up.”

Phillip grinned, and a couple of minutes later he entered Ray’s doorway and handed him the flash drive.

There was no doubt. From here on out, life was going to be good to him, and he was finally going to get what he really deserved. Phillip looked happier than a child who had raided a candy store.

Until ten seconds later ...

# Welcome To Guilford County Jail

## Chapter Twelve

Despite having visited his father on numerous occasions, Butch McGuire quickly learned that things inside Guilford County Jail looked a whole lot different from what he was accustomed to seeing the visiting area.

Not long after his arresting deputy's patrol car came to a halt in the downtown Greensboro's booking center, Butch was shoved into a fluorescent lit, twenty by forty foot sparsely furnished room.

Once there, he was led toward a heavily engraved wooden bench where many prospective inmates, it seemed, had used a key or some other sharp object to scratch their name or initials on its surface. Others apparently wanted to record a date or perhaps how they felt. Four and five letter profane words were definitely in abundance.

*You think they'd have a least a decent air circulation system in here,* Butch thought, as he took a seat on the spot where the short, semi-chubby, dark-haired deputy was pointing. *This room smells like a large rat died in here and was left to stink ... or perhaps it's the officers I smell.*

"Okay, Butch," a slender four-eyed uniformed gentleman wearing a chrome-plated tag with the name Perkins on it said as he walked up and glanced at the sheet attached to a wooden clipboard he held in his right hand. "I need you to hand me everything on your wrists and in your pockets – watches, keys, money, wallet, you name it. ... It'll be returned to you if and when you get released."

Butch looked at Perkins and then glanced at his watch before hesitating. *Dad gave me this just a few weeks before he got locked up again. And I haven't removed it since.* Butch recalled as he studied the black digital Timex on his arm. *Now, this jerk wants me to take it off?*

"Do you have a problem with my request, McGuire?" Perkins asked, showing a grimace while using a slightly louder, more forceful tone.

"Ahh. No, sir." Butch narrowed his eyes and sneered as he complied – handing the officer one item at a time in a manner indicating he really didn't care if the booking process continued into the wee hours of the morning.

"That's better," Perkins stated when McGuire was finished, though the tightness within his cheek reflected his agitation. "Now we're going to head over to the Sergeant Kirkland's office, so he can ask about a few details regarding what lead to the charge you've been accused of. And mostly likely after that, you'll be ordered to see our shrink so he can obtain a quick psychological profile."

“So in other words,” Butch countered as he proceeded to rise to his feet. “You need to see if I got all my marbles in order.”

Perkins nodded as the two of them started toward a six by eight office whose door opened into the farthest side of the booking center.

“Once you’re done with those two,” he then added while raising a small plastic container Butch recognized as the type used in drug tests. “I’ll escort you to the restroom so you can provide us a urine sample. . . . We don’t want anyone coming in here whose about to go into DT’s (Delirium Tremors) without us knowing.”

After all the necessary paperwork had been completed (on a PC, which appeared to be a model barely a step above a 20+ year old IBM XT), a staff member handed Butch a bright orange jumpsuit and instructed him to put in on. “Guilford County Sheriff’s Dept” was embossed on its back, with the first two words resting across his shoulder blades in bold, six-inch, solid black, capital letters. The others were directly underneath.

*A person would have to be extremely blind to miss wording like that,* Butch thought as the officer in charge watched him zip up the uniform’s full-length front zipper.

Later on when a few more minutes had passed, Officer Perkins offered him the only opportunity he would ever get while incarcerated to make a free phone call. All calls afterwards would have to be made “collect.”

Butch appreciated the gesture but had a slight problem. Who could he call? His father was presently residing at the Guilford County Prison Farm – which was located about five miles west of Gibsonville. And since it was a Saturday afternoon, his mother would be at her job at the large 24 hr. “Simon Says” daycare center in Burlington.

Cindy McGuire was one of their three professional daytime instructors and had given Butch strict orders never to call her on the job unless: One – an earthquake had struck and their home now resided somewhere within a twenty-foot crevice (which was highly unlikely since the nearest major fault line from Guilford County was over a hundred miles away) or Two, the Rapture her preacher had harped about on numerous occasions finally occurred, and Butch was one of the many who was left behind.

*Gee. Thanks Mom,* Butch thought after contemplating the latter for a second. *If the Rapture did transpire - trying to call you would be a total waste of time since you’re supposedly “saved” and would no longer be around.*



In regards to calling another relative, even a distant one, not a single other member of Butch's family cared a rat's ass about what happened to him. As far as they were concerned as long as he stayed away and never bothered to contact them, they were happy. After all, like his father, George McGuire, Butch was considered a black sheep.

Butch then considered calling one of the members of his gang. However, he quickly deemed that would also be a waste of time. The gang was bound to know where he was. And instead of making a conscious effort to help him get free, most likely, the whole bunch of them were hanging around the schoolyard – arguing about which one of them were going to be their new leader.

“Are you ready to head to your cell?” Officer Perkins asked when it became apparent that Butch wasn't interested in calling anyone.

Frowning, Butch nodded he was and promptly got to his feet.

The officer then slapped a pair of slightly rusty cuffs across both his wrists and ankles, and they proceeded towards the back, triple-barred doorway.

“Is all this really necessary?” Butch asked, holding out his wrists as he shuffled down the dimly lit hallway.

“Is what necessary?” Perkins replied, even though it seemed like he was far more interested in observing Butch's movement or potential movements than he was in conversing. “Making sure you don't have an ice cube's chance in Hell of getting free, or you wearing both cuffs and ankle bracelets?”

“The latter,” Butch replied as the two of them turned a corner.

“Yes, it is,” Perkins stated with a hint of a grin. “After our local psych got the results of the questionnaire you completed, he determined you're both violent and suicidal.”

Butch smiled, then raised his head and let out a laugh. “Violent and suicidal? Me? That's a good one, Perkins. I've never seriously injured anyone in my whole life. And I certainly shouldn't be considered violent just because I gave Paul Pontiac a couple of love taps.”

“Love taps?” Perkins repeated as his lower jaw dropped. “Is that what you call impassivity committing first-degree murder in the middle of Gibsonville's bus parking lot – giving someone a couple of love taps?”

“First-degree murder?” Butch's eyes widened and he immediately came to a stop – which caused a second officer who had been watching them approach from halfway down the hallway to methodically place his palm around the Smith and Wesson in his holster. “What in the hell are you talking about Perkins? I haven't murdered anyone. I'm here on a simple assault charge. ... Paul Pontiac was very much alive the last time I saw him.”

“Yeah, right kid.” Giving Butch a smile, Perkins motioned for them to resume walking. “It sounds to me like you better have a long talk with your lawyer and fast. From what I heard, you’ve got a lot more hanging over that self-righteous pale-white ass of yours than you’re aware of.”

“I know my situation,” Butch replied as Perkins continued to lead him down the stairwell toward the basement. “And there’s no possible way you guys got anything serious like a murder rap you can pin on me.”

Perkins looked at Butch briefly and sadly shook his head. *I guess the kid’s going to have to learn the unfortunate truth for himself.*

Soon after the two of them arrived at the damp single cell psychotic block, Officer Perkins abruptly removed the dangling over-sized metallic key ring from his belt and opened a nearby cell’s solid steel door.

Butch, in reply, paused – just long enough to take in a good stare – then walked inside, deliberately showing a cold-faced expression so anyone who might be watching wouldn’t sense the ardent fear currently spiking down his spine.

Perkins then removed the cuffs.

“Are you going to need anything, McGuire?” he asked after handing the system’s newest inmate the standard county issued items – a pillow, one tan polyester blanket, a couple of fairly worn, white cotton sheets, one towel and washcloth, a roll of toilet paper, and a bar of generic blue soap.

Butch glanced at the sink/toilet combo unit residing in the middle of the cell’s back wall, then looked upward at the a/c vent located directly above. He then indicated no – even though the breeze blowing through was cold enough to where the temperature in his cell would be freezing.

“Good,” Perkins replied, locking the door behind him. He then stopped to gaze at the stainless steel Bullwinkle moose watch fastened around his wrist. “Supper should be served in about an hour. Should you need anything before then, just yell. Sooner or later, whoever happens to be on duty down here will either stop by, or tell you to shut the hell up.”

Butch smirked. “Gee. Thanks for the hospitality, Perkins.”

“No problem, kid,” the officer said, before trudging down the hall. “Living like this is something you better get used to since it looks like you’re going to be incarcerated for at least the next twenty to thirty years.”

Twenty to thirty years? Butch took a seat on the narrow, metallic bed frame, which had been built into the wall and began to contemplate Perkin’s words. *No one ever gets twenty to thirty years for*

*something like a simple assault. ... Probation, yes. ... Or even being given three to six months jail time. But not twenty to thirty years. That would involve being sent to prison! ... Could Paul have possibly died?*

## Reality Hurts

### Chapter Thirteen

Setting his navy blue book bag against the leg of his assigned desk, Tim gazed at the empty chair next to his and frowned – before sliding into the gray plastic seat in front of his computer. It just didn't feel right being in the Office Skills class without his best friend being there. Heaven knew that ever since their first year of middle school Paul and him had always taken the same classes, so they could sit together – especially if the class was going to be something technical.

But starting this week things were going to be different. It was going to be the way things were during the six months Paul lived in North Carolina, and he still resided in South Florida. Just like then, somehow he was going to have to make it on his own for awhile.

*Awhile. ... Hmm. ... That's such a funny word. ... Will Paul's absence actually be for only awhile? Tim wondered. After all, if he was out because of having the flu or some virus, then he would be back in awhile – a couple of days, or maybe even a week or two at the most.*

Unfortunately, things weren't that simple. Paul was currently a patient at Duke Medical Center. And according to the info Mrs. Pontiac gave Tim's father, their highly specialized doctors had recently reluctantly admitted there was a grave possibility his best friend may never leave. ... At least not alive.

*This wasn't the way I had planned things to be,* Tim angrily thought as he stretched his arm in order to turn on his computer.

The uncaring Dell desktop, being a multi-core system only a few months old – soon flashed its colorful Windows logo across its black fifteen-inch flat screen monitor in reply.

*We were suppose to finish high school together,* Tim continued in his thoughts. *And then use the MIT college scholarships Titan Industries was going to provide. After that, both of us were planning on taking the program developer positions, they had offered in their contract.*

Briefly forgetting his friend's critical situation, Tim smiled at the thought.

*Just imagine – Both Paul and I, working for my Dad in a PC Game development team at Titan Industries. ... Wow!*

Unfortunately, “reality” soon prevailed and Tim's smile faded faster than a sand drawing on the seashore when hit with a tsunami at high tide.

“I brought the DVD like you asked, ” Daniel said, interrupting Tim’s thoughts as he reached across Paul’s empty chair with the metallic-coated disk clutched between his thumb and forefinger. “Maybe sometime during class you can look at my files and tell me what I’m doing wrong. ... I thought I had the 3-D graphics coded correctly. But whenever I run Plutonium’s Revenge, everything beyond the initial start-up screen soon becomes one super jumbled mess.”

“What?” Tim gave his young friend a puzzled expression as he turned toward him. He then realized what his younger compadre was referring to and took the silver-colored object out of his hand. “Okay, Daniel. I’ll look at it if I get a chance. Otherwise, it will have to wait until school’s out – that is, IF I’m able to convince Mrs. Pontiac to give me a ride home, so I can skip the bus.”

Daniel pursed his lips and nodded that he understood.

“Sandra Anderson,” Mr. Thompson yelled, beginning his tedious daily roll call.

“Here,” a blonde longhaired girl replied.

“Steven Bates.”

“Here.”

“Charles Bellows.”

*At least, Mr. Thompson seems to be taking Paul’s absence in stride,* Tim thought, pressing the slotted button on the front of the system’s DVD player.

Dropping the circular metallic-colored disc inside, Tim watched as its drive slowly closed and then proceeded to click his mouse a few times the moment the DVD’s green drive light flashed on.

“Tom Godwin.”

“Here.”

“Cindy Greystone”

“Here.”

“Timothy Hegler.”

No answer.

Mr. Thompson lifted his head and began to gaze down the aisle where Tim was supposed to be sitting.

“Timothy Hegler,” he repeated, catching sight of the fire red haired teenager intently staring at his PC.

Daniel instantly turned toward him and panicked. “Tim. Quick. You need to say ‘HERE.’”

“Huh?” Tim jerked his head out of the screen he’d been studying so he could face his obviously disturbed friend. “What you want, Daniel? I’m busy trying to find your error like I said I would.”

“Mr. Thompson’s waiting for you,” Daniel silently shouted as their Office Skills instructor repeated Tim’s name an additional time. “Say ‘HERE’ so we can proceed with the roll call.”

“Okay. Okay. Don’t have a cow.” Tim twisted around to face the instructor and gave him a sheepish grin. “I’m here, Mr. Thompson. ... Sorry ... I was so involved with trying to fix Daniel’s problem, I didn’t hear ya.”

“That’s obvious, Mr. Hegler,” Mr. Thompson said, folding his arms in a manner which reflected the irritation shown by the wrinkle in the middle of his forehead. “Now ... if you don’t mind, Tim, I’d like you to join the rest of the class. Or would that be too much to ask since apparently you ‘d prefer to be working on the game our computer club’s developing?”

Tim’s cheeks rapidly turned a shade of crimson red as the other students within the classroom chuckled.

“Yes, sir. ... I mean no sir,” Tim stuttered as he moved his mouse in order to minimize his code-editing program. “I’ll try to pay attention – Sir.”

“I’m glad,” Mr. Thompson sarcastically replied, then resumed taking roll.

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In what seemed to be a matter of only a few short minutes, Tim soon came to realize it was time to shut down the computer since the end of the fourth period bell had commenced to repeatedly clang.

“Were you able to find anything?” Daniel nervously asked as he slung his official black and red NC State University book bag on top of his desk, so he could open it and drop his Plutonium’s Revenge’s DVD inside.

Tim aggressively shook his head no, and the grimace showing across his face underscored his disappointment. “I’m afraid we’re going to have to continue examining the code after school this afternoon.”

Daniel frowned as he lifted the bag over his shoulders and stuck his arms inside its straps.

“Are you sure you’re gonna be able to hang over? You told me earlier you would have to ask Mrs. Pontiac for a ride.”

“I’m still going to need to,” Tim replied, turning toward the Office Skills classroom’s opened front door. “Hopefully she’ll be in her office when I pass by on my way to my sixth period P.E. class. ... If she isn’t or for some reason can’t take me home, we’ll have to wait until tomorrow.”

Daniel nodded okay. “I understand. Thanks, Tim.”

Fortunately, for both of them – Paul’s mother was busy filling out reports on her computer when Tim stopped by.

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Much later that afternoon, while in the Office Skills classroom – still trying to locate Daniel’s 3-D coding errors, Tim decided to give his eyes a short break and glanced toward the clock located near the top of the front wall. It stated it was already 4:30.

*Uh. Oh, he thought. We’re going to have to wrap things up soon. Mrs. Pontiac could be here any minute now.*

“Did you find my mistake?” Daniel asked, noticing Tim turning back toward his monitor.

“No.” Giving Daniel a brief frown, he continued to study the code in front of him. “What I’ve seen so far all looks correct so I don’t know why it’s refusing to display the game’s graphics properly. ... Maybe I should check to see if it displays correctly in 2-D. That way I could be certain this is an isolated 3-D coding error.”

“I sure wish Paul could be here,” Daniel offhandedly remarked, moving his chair a bit closer to Tim’s screen. “I’d make a bet he would know how to fix it.”

Tim immediately leaned backwards in his seat, and it seemed like he was about to laugh.

“Daniel, my friend. If there was any way possible Paul could somehow be here, not only would this problem already been fixed, most likely we’d be halfway home by now. Unfortunately though, that’s not the case. At the moment, it’s up to me to try to figure out this complex gobbledygook stuff since no one else in our computer club has ever worked with 3-D graphics.”

“Is there any possible way you could give Paul a call? He might be able to fix the problem over the phone.” Daniel’s red spidery-laced eyes reflected the desperation the poor kid was feeling.

“I doubt it,” Tim answered as Mrs. Pontiac casually strolled through the classroom’s open door. “From what I’ve heard he’s pretty darn weak and still has to have another operation.”

Daniel’s mouth instantly dropped. “Will Paul be able to survive another one? ... He’s been through two already.”

Tim slowly nodded no while noticing Mrs. Pontiac was pointing at her wristwatch.

Understanding the silent message Paul’s mother had given, he selected the option which would tell the program he was running to re-encrypt the code he’d been working on and save the file. However, soon after he clicked the proper icon, a bold, bright-red, 36-point, Franklin Gothic font, error message unexpectedly appeared.

“That’s strange. ... Daniel, did you make a revised copy of our game before you left class yesterday?”

Daniel negatively shook his head. “No. The one I’ve been using was made last Friday.”

“Are you sure?” Tim asked, raising his eyebrow – before clicking the part of the program that would display the day and time of the last five times each file within their game had been accessed. ... He then frowned. “According to this, someone last night successfully copied an encrypted version of our game.”

“Last night?” Daniel repeated, rising from his chair as Mrs. Pontiac walked up to their table. “That can’t be. Would you know anything about anyone copying our program Mrs. Pontiac?”

“No. I don’t,” she replied, looking at Tim and then towards Daniel. “No one’s supposed to be in the building after five P.M. unless there’s a scheduled event.”

Tim’s eyebrows turned downward as he double-checked the date and time stamp in front of him.

“Mrs. Pontiac,” he said, before pausing. “According to my program, it seems like not only did someone break into the school last night. They illegally made a copy of our game.”



# Oops!

## Chapter Fourteen

Hidden Valley, Tennessee – A relative small community in the midst of the Bible Belt consisting of a few thousand average American citizens living near the base of the Appalachian mountains and one of very few places where land was cheap, the air's clean, and the cost of labor continued to be affordable.

For those reasons and a few more, in the mid-90's it also became the home of one of the top ten software companies within the continental U.S. – Krypton Software.

“This has to be God's country,” Allen Sharp, the company's CEO declared the moment he arrived at their new ultra-high tech headquarters. “The panoramic view outside looks identical to a Bob Ross mountain scene, it's absolutely breathtaking.”

And so it was.

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However today, an early spring Tuesday, things were different. Even though picturesque blue skies still surrounded the company's exterior, deep within the steel walls and dark tinted glass of Titan Industries biggest competitor, a major storm was brewing – and it appeared lightning would soon be striking one of company's most dedicated employees.

“Phillip!” Ray screamed, turning toward him as error code 666 started to repeatedly flash across the middle of his screen – exactly 10 seconds from the time he inserted the DVD the security employee handed him. “The kids' game's encrypted! You do have the password, don't you?”

Phillip covered deeply within his seat. “I'm sorry, Ray. I don't,” he replied, as his boss grimaced. “It took me a lot longer than expected to locate Gibsonville's Office Skills classroom and find Tim's computer. And soon after I did and was able to locate the files on his hard drive – I discovered someone had apparently seen me and called the cops.”

“Oh?” Ray's hazel-colored eyes narrowed, and if it could have been humanly possible, Phillip was sure he would be seeing more steam escaping from his boss's ears than what would pour out of a teakettle at a full boil. “And what exactly gave you that impression?”

“When I glanced out of the classroom windows, shortly after locating Plutonium's Revenge – I noticed a Guilford County Patrol stationed directly in front of the school, and it was turning its blue lights on. Therefore, I didn't have a choice but to make a fast copy of the kid's game and hightail it away from there – before I got arrested.”

Ray frowned as he leaned back in his rocker.

“So in other words ... our highly trained professional corporate espionage officer happened to see a county deputy – who most likely was about to chase someone who had run the red light at Joyner and Church. And he got scared and ran before doing everything he needed to do to get the job done – without even bothering to check if the cop was even after him. ... Correct?”

Phillip’s cheeks turned a few shades of crimson. “That’s not exactly the way it was, Ray. I’m not that stupid.”

“You’re not?” Ray chuckled as he gazed toward the ceiling and rolled his eyes. “Then please tell me, Mr. Moron Emeritus, why in heaven’s name did you drive all the way back to Tennessee with a DVD full of encrypted files ... without having the security password?”

Quickly studying the multiple creases now showing on his boss’s forehead, Phillip knew Ray had surmised exactly what happened in Gibsonville, and he needed to find a way to wiggle out of this mess. Otherwise...

*What can I say without getting myself fired? And if I did get fired, how would I be able to support my wife and kids? Without consciously realizing what he was doing, Phillip gulped. I must come up with something. And quick.*

Just as he was about to speak, his boss's phone resounded – and a smile seemed to migrate across his boss’s lips as the conversation continued.

“You found out what?” Ray replied, sliding his phone over to his good ear.

With the look on his boss’s face – his eyes, now brightly shining and a subtle licking of the lips, Phillip didn’t know who it was on the other end of the line – but, he could tell that whatever they were telling Ray, it must be something awfully good. His boss wasn’t known for getting overly excited – unless, he was presented with a real game changer.

“So. What was that all about?” Phillips asked, the moment his boss terminated the call.

Ray looked at him and deliberately hesitated. It was almost as if he wasn’t quite sure he was ready to relay this new bit of information to the idiotic pinion sitting in front of him. Thus, for a second, he only gazed at Phillip and chuckled.

What Charles informed him regarding the background check he did on Carl Thompson was definitely good news. Krypton Software could now easily get the password they needed to get access to the game's encrypted files or obtain an unencrypted copy of the Gibsonville’s Computer Club’s program.

In utilizing this newly found information, if the Gibsonville Office Skills Instructor had plans to maintain his position on the school's staff – from this moment on, not only would he be willing to cooperate with the company's upcoming request; most likely, he would also be willing to hand over whatever game Paul and Tim might develop during the next four years they were in school. ... That is, if Paul Pontiac somehow overcame the odds currently facing him and escaped death.

But for now – the question at hand was, did he really want to let Phillip off the hook after majorly screwing up. After all, his pinion should have done the job correctly. And if he had done so, this complex scenario would never have been necessary. They would have already had a workable copy of the computer club's game, and its modifications would have started on schedule.

*Phillip has not only wasted a lot of company money; he wasted something even far more important – company time,* Ray thought as he turned and gave the cockroach a hard stare.

"I believe we have something useful in light of your inexplicable screw up," Ray eventually admitted. "Unlike yourself, your best friend, Charles, not only knows how to get a job done, he gets it done right the first time."

"Oh?" Phillip presented his boss with a pathetic smile, while briefly glancing at the smirk on Ray's face. There was no doubt about how much his superior was enjoying this.

"That's right, helplessly hopeless. While you were busy wasting the company's valuable time and money, I asked Charles to begin a background check on Carl Thompson. And what Charles thinks he's uncovered sounds like something I would classify as being rather interesting."

"Really?" Phillip yelped, almost jumping out of his chair. "Is he gay, an ex-felon, or something else just as useful?"

Ray looked at the Phillip and mischievously grinned. "Not quite. But seems to be something we definitely can use."

"Oh?" Phillip maintained his stern expression.

Ray nodded, affirmatively – then proceeded to stare at his pinion, as if he'd like to shoot a guided missile directly through the center of his obviously hallowed skull. "In light of this new development, Phillip," he began, before briefly pausing. "I want you to head back to your office and carefully examine what Charles has found. ... Should it be anything even halfway near what your co-worker has described, I believe we might be able to nail Carl Thompson once and for all – despite your moronic blunder. OK?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good. Now get that scrawny ass of yours out of here!"

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And as Carl began his seemingly three-mile journey back to his cubicle, within Duke Medical Center – which was located inside Durham, N.C. city limits, Paul slept as a peaceful darkness slowly engulfed him.

# The Beginning Of The End

## Chapter Fifteen

The absolute silence currently filling the sterile twenty by thirty square foot room was so eerie; it was almost overwhelming.

Not unlike the proverbial calm before the storm, the operating room at Duke Medical Center at the moment was nearly empty – barring one anesthetist and her attendant who watched as the fourteen-year-old male patient silently lying next to them dropped into a deep peaceful sleep.

In a matter of minutes though – things would completely change.

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Very soon, countless doctors, nurses, and dozens of students would begin to enter both the operating facility and the auditorium stationed directly above.

Yet, despite the increase of movement around him, Paul Pontiac's world remained just as dark, just as silent, as before. The pain deep in his chest he had been forced to endure during the past few days no longer was felt. And the reoccurring nightmares, the result from the beating Butch had given him, at least for the moment, were not present.

Thanks to the chemicals the anesthetist recently administered, there wasn't any awareness that his chest would once again be opened so the thrombus lodged inside his left ventricle could be removed. Nor was Paul aware of the spiritual beings present ... watching ... and patiently waiting for the designated moment to arrive.

"Is everyone ready?" Dr. Matthews asked as he turned from side to side so he could view the masked expressions of those around his young patient.

Upon seeing a short nod from the staff surrounding him, he proceeded in what would be a lengthy, on-going lecture to those above.

"Since the majority of you attending this procedure are either students thinking about joining Duke's medical program or are early pre-meds," Doctor Matthews began to drone as he eyed the mostly twenty-to-thirty-something age group above. "The terminology I'll be using during this procedure will be in what some refer to as 'layman's terms'. However, please don't think for even the briefest of moments that after you're enrolled, I'll continue to do so. ... Medicine, after all, is a serious career and learning its complex terminology will only be the beginning of the multiple challenges you'll learn to face."

A number of students sitting above, some still pimpled-faced, smiled upon hearing these words and nodded their agreement.

“Now what we have gentlemen and ladies,” Dr. Matthews continued before pausing. “... is a fourteen-year-old male who was originally admitted to Alamance Regional Medical Center after suffering injuries due to altercations with another student. ... And unfortunately, the human beast who inflicted these injuries was apparently larger than him.”

“Besides the normal contusions medical staff would expect to see from an incident like this, the center of our patient’s sternum was crushed – leaving multiple bone fragments within the heart, lungs, and all surrounding organs and tissues. Dr. Stanley Rogers, who is both a close friend and a very prominent specialist at Alamance County Regional, operated on our patient twice in order to remove such. However, shortly after the second procedure, blot clots began to develop. And when Dr. Rogers did a Doppler ultrasound, he discovered a major thrombus embolized inside our patient’s left ventricle. ... Congestive heart failure, which resulted in additional tissue damage, occurred the night before a third procedure was scheduled. Thus, he was transported here.”

“Is he going to die?” a freckled-face male, “Doogie Howser” age student sitting in the above auditorium unexpectedly blurted.

“Let’s hope not,” Dr. Matthews replied, giving the teen a perfunctory smile. “During the past couple of days we were successful in dissolving all of our patient’s smaller thrombus through the use of thrombolytics. Therefore, our present goal, students, is to remove the remaining large one before it has a chance to enter the aorta and possibly cause an ischemic stroke. ... Any questions?”

“Yes,” a highly intellectual-looking female student announced, raising her hand high so the doctor could easily see it.

“Very good. Ms. ...”

“Ms. Kay Scott.”

“Okay, Ms. Scott. Would you please stand?”

Rising to her feet, Kay glanced from side to side for a second to see if there was going to be a reaction from any male students. Then not noticing anything, except a few boys in men-size bodies who appeared to be so bored, she could not help but wondered why they bothered to make a physical presence at this event; she proceeded.

“Dr. Matthews. In my early studies, I’ve observed that in an operation such as this where complications could easily arise, it seems an increasing number of doctors are moving away from traditional surgery techniques in favor of use of robotics. Yet, you chose not to do so. ... Could you please tell us why?”

Dr. Matthews set the towel he was holding in his right hand onto the edge the table where his surgical tools were waiting to be used, then glanced at the first-year pre-med student and cleared his throat.

“Ms. Scott,” he began, displaying a distinct air of superiority. “Deciding which technique would be most beneficial for the patient is a matter which has to be seriously considered. While the use of robotics does have its advantages when removing an appendix or performing fairly standardized brain surgery, in a situation as the one I am about to undertake I had to consider the possibility of unexpected severe complications. Therefore, I chose to manually perform the operation since doing so would allow me to rapidly utilize any sub-standard surgical tool that might be needed. ... I trust this answers your question?”

“Yes, doctor,” Kay replied. A frown revealing her disagreement clearly showed as she took her seat.

Doctor Matthews smiled as if internally satisfied that he had successfully conveyed his obviously superior intellect, before gazing, once again, into the auditorium above him. *Would there be any other student brave, or perhaps foolish enough, to question my reasoning?*

“Does anyone else have any questions before I proceed?”

A low, continuous murmur echoed among the students while Dr. Matthews repeatedly tapped his foot.

“Okay then,” the doctor replied, seconds later, while assuming an extremely serious demeanor. “Since there isn’t any – Let’s begin.”

## Ashes To Ashes

### Chapter Sixteen

Still unconscious as he laid upon the operating table, Paul continued to be totally oblivious of the surgery his body was undergoing. And if it were somehow possible to remember anything, the last thing he would recall would be resting in his assigned bed at Alamance Regional Medical, enjoying the company of his mother and best friend. Unfortunately, a few short minutes after they arrived; everything unexpectedly went dark.

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Inside the operating room at Duke Medical Center, the atmosphere was tense. The delicate but routine operation Dr. Matthews decided to use to introduce the school's medical curriculum to students who might be considering going into the university's medical program initially started smoothly. However, soon after the first incision, things steadily deteriorated.

Within a half-hour after the procedure began, the doctor realized an MRI, instead of standard X-rays, should have been performed. And soon after opening Paul's rib cage, Dr. Matthews discovered far more hidden bone fragments and areas of residual clotting were present than what the x-rays had indicated.

To complicate things even further – Dr. Matthews discovered that the thrombus inside the Paul's left ventricle was steadily increasing in size. Now, not only could complete blockage potentially occur at any given moment – the fine narrow line which separates life and death, was, in his opinion, in serious jeopardy of being crossed.

“Doctor. We're losing him,” the nurse yelled as she helplessly watched Paul Pontiac's heartbeat become increasingly irregular as the procedure to remove the thrombus methodically continued.

For a brief second, the doctor came to a halt and stared at the erratic heart monitor in front of him. *This definitely isn't good.*

“Damn it. I was afraid this was going to happen,” Dr. Matthews eventually said, shaking his head. “The kid's going into cardiac arrest. ... Okay everyone. Let's proceed with Code Blue procedures.”

Making a quick 180° turn, the doctor rapidly snatched the paddles from the defibrillating unit, and Nurse Higgins placed the required gel packs across both sides of their patient's chest.

“Get ready, people. ... Clear!” the doctor screamed, making physical contact.



The second 150 joules shot through him, Paul's thin teenage torso bucked upward like a wild bronco at a rodeo. Unfortunately though, when he abruptly landed on the table below, the needle on the heart-rate monitor quivered for only a few milliseconds, then continued to draw a deathly straight green line.

"What in the devil is going on here?" Paul heard an echo of his voice say in a tone, which seemed more like an audible thought than something he had actually spoken as he viewed the surreal scene in front of him. "Where am I, and what is this place?"

Stopping so he could get a slight comprehension at what he was looking at, Paul first noticed the huge surgery light, which should have been located above the operating table.

For some unexplainable reason, it appeared to be at the same level he was located – near the roof, and just a few feet away in front of him. And below him, a traumatic scene similar to what he had seen on numerous medical dramas was taking place.

*Hmm. This reminds me of one of those med shows where someone goes to the hospital and ends up dying on the table,* Paul thought as he watched the action below. *But how can this be – where's the TV?*

Paul grimaced as he scanned the environment around him. Something definitely didn't seem right.

*I must be dreaming.*

Placing the pads on his patient's chest, "Clear," Dr. Matthews yelled. And again, Paul's body violently jerked – but his heart flatly refused to cooperate.

Dr Matthews looked upward and quickly uttered a silent prayer.

"Come on, Paul. Work with me," he yelled, while once again activating the pads on his patient's chest. "You need to live ... You're way too young to be giving up the ghost."

After watching Paul's body jerked upward, his face rapidly paled with the realization that the carefully attached heart monitor remained flat-lined.

"Don't do this to me, Paul," he screamed as beads of sweat continued to drip from his forehead. "Don't do it to yourself!"

And once again, the youth's body heaved upward the moment the word "clear" started to reverberate throughout the sanitized room. Yet, the doctor's efforts continued to show that they were totally in vain.

Twenty minutes later, Dr Matthews slumped in extreme disappointment and exhaustion admitted, “He’s gone.” And soon afterwards, a white sheet was slowly raised until the once vibrant teenage body was completely covered.

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“Hey. Wait a second, everyone. You’re not going to just give up, are you?” Paul frantically began to yell at the doctor and nursing staff as they initiate their wrap-up procedures.

However, no one seemed to be able to hear him.

“What’s wrong with you people? Whoever that kid is, he still may live if you give him another chance. Don’t stop now. Please don’t. You need to try at least one more time.”

“I’m sorry, doctor,” Nurse Higgins soulfully whispered as she approached the sink where Dr. Matthews was about to wash his hands. “We all know you did your best. I guess it just wasn’t meant to be.”

“I know ... and thanks, Nancy,” he replied, gradually turning his head, so he could face her. “This just shouldn’t have happened though. This was supposed to be a standard routine. ... Not to mention, Paul was too young and overall too healthy.”

Dr. Matthews sighed. “How in the world am I going to explain to Mrs. Pontiac that her son died under my care?”

Nurse Higgins gazed into the doctor’s dark-brown eyes and sadly shook her head. “I don’t know.”

Seconds later, Dr. Matthews removed his left glove and carelessly tossed it inside the metallic trash beside the sink.

Nurse Higgins, having worked with him for the past ten years, could tell he was a lot more disturbed than he wanted to let on.

“Is there going to be an autopsy?” she asked, after washing and drying her hands.

“Definitely. Especially since a potential criminal case is involved,” he replied. “Soon after the Pontiacs leave the premise, I’ll ask one of my associates in pathology to perform one. In the meantime, I’d appreciate it if you could ask someone to let me know the moment Mrs. Pontiac and her son, Nathan, have left.”

“Yes, Doctor. No problem.”

## Dad?

### Chapter Seventeen

Staring at the scene before him, Paul's mouth partly opened. He just couldn't believe that Dr. Matthews and his staff and the few remaining students who had watched the failed surgical procedure from above were leaving.

"This isn't right! Doesn't anyone care about the kid down there?" Paul shouted to the emptiness surrounding him. "I mean. The boy was someone my age and still had his whole life ahead of him. Don't any of you medical people care?"

For several moments, nothing but a lingering deathly silence responded.

"I care. ... I always have, and it saddens me that you had to die."

Paul immediately glanced skyward. "Me?" A puzzled expression spread across his face. "Who are you? And why are you trying to tell me I'm the one who died? ... That can't be. I'm still very much alive. ... Can't you see and hear me?"

Paul's emotion-filled outburst, once again, was momentarily answered with silence.

"Paul. It's time for you to leave Duke Medical Center," John Pontiac calmly stated. "I'll explain everything to you soon after you join me. Okay?"

Paul shook his head no. *This can't be. My dad, who's been dead for several months, is asking me to join him? That's impossible.*

He then turned back to gaze at the section of ceiling where his father's voice seemed to come from. And within a few milliseconds after his father's last word was spoken, what appeared to be a never-ending tunnel soon materialized at that exact locale.

"This can't be real. What is that thing? ... Not to mention, the voice I just heard, it certainly can't be my father's," Paul said in an attempt to reassure himself as he stared at the ever-churning, lightning-bolt surrounded, spiritual wormhole now directly in front of him. "My father died months ago in a tragic auto accident, shortly after Thanksgiving. It happened just before we were about to become a "real" family again."

"That's true. I did die in an auto accident," John's voice echoed from the distant end of the vortex. "However, dying is not your soul's end. Now please, Paul, step into the passageway God has created for you. You'll understand everything much better once you've arrived."

Though completely dark, the inner-sides of the tunnel, which had miraculously appeared before him, were similar to what one would expect if looking down the center of a deep-space wormhole. However, unlike a wormhole's, its center wasn't entirely black. A pure bright white light emanated through its middle, as if its far end contained a super-powered translucent spotlight.

An inexplicable force then began to draw him in.

At first, Paul tried to resist the invisible tractor beam tugging at him by flinging his extended arms and legs outward in a frantic swimming-type motion. However, his actions quickly proved to be shamefully futile. The ever-increasing power which had seized him was overwhelming and Paul found himself unwillingly being sucked inside – despite his best efforts.

“S-t-o-p,” Paul wailed as the speed his body was traveling continually increased at a rate well beyond a starship’s warp ten. However, before he could finish screaming, he had already arrived at his designation.

“Interesting way to travel, isn’t it?” the voice now remarked from behind him, in a tone that would indicate the person speaking was smiling.

Paul expeditiously turned around, and his pupils flashed wide open. *My eyes have to be lying to me! ... This is totally impossible.*

“Dad?” he squeaked at the personage beside him.

John Pontiac smiled a broad smile, and he nodded affectionately. “Yes. It's really me, son.”

He then opened his arms so he could give his son a large hug. However, Paul seemed to have froze to the spot he had landed - and clouds of doubt quickly filled his eyes.

“No. This isn’t real,” Paul said, trying to convince himself. “You can’t be my Dad. I know for a fact that my father’s dead! Mom and I buried him months ago. And I can even remember how it started to snow during the time Cathy tried to comfort me – shortly after the service had ended.”

“Yes. You’re right,” John replied with a nod as he continued to gaze at him. “All of those things did occur. But, at the time they did, couldn’t you sense my presence?”

Paul shook his head no and took a step backwards so he could carefully eyeball the personage who was claiming to be his father. ... In a way, the man beside him looked like his dad, but appeared to be much younger than Paul remembered. It was almost as if his father was only in his late 20s or early 30s instead of his 40s.

“It's a shame because I was there,” John continued. “And I even heard your thoughts about how you felt that, with the exception of your mother, everyone else who spoke at the funeral was acting like a hypocrite.”

Paul briefly grinned at the memory as he began to take in the beyond-lifelike vivid colors of the mountainous countryside enveloping them. It was almost as if the two of them were standing in a luscious green pasture near the Blue Ridge Parkway, but only better.

“O-K-A-Y,” Paul slowly replied. “So you know the thoughts I had at the time. However, it still doesn’t mean anything. After all, I’m sure a demonic spirit could have known the same thing.”

John chuckled as his son defiantly folded his arms across his chest. *Hmm. Some things never change, do they? Paul continues to question the obvious.*

“No,” John calmly replied. “If you had been more like your mother and carefully studied your scriptures, you would have known that while satanic beings are able to do a few things people could consider to be miraculous feats, reading a person’s mind isn’t one of them.”

Paul’s eyes narrowed, and he grasped his chin. “I guess you’re right,” he acknowledged. “I had forgotten that. ... So. Let me ask you this, just so I can be sure once and for all you’re really you. And this is going to be something only you, me, Nathan or Mom would know.”

“I see,” John interrupted. “Whatever it is you’re about to ask ... don’t you think God would know it, too – after all, he’s both omnipresent and omniscient?”

Paul immediately choked at the mention of his Higher Power's name, and John could see the frustration within his son's eyes.

“Of course he would know,” Paul stated, spitting his reply. “But I’m about to ask about something we humans would know and an ordinary spiritual being probably wouldn't take notice.”

“Oh really,” John chuckled. “But there’s only one problem. I’m not human anymore and neither are you, at least not at the moment.”

That statement immediately caused Paul to glance down the front of himself.

“I’m not?” he said, after seeing he was wearing one of his “Intel Rules” T-shirts, Wrangler jeans, and a pair of Nike tennis shoes. “Than what am I - if not human?”

“You're a living spirit, just like me,” John said, answering his son's question. “... and we’re currently in the afterlife.”

“Yeah. Right.” As Paul studied the personage in front of him, a couple of angelic beings unexpectedly appeared on each of his father's sides ... and they started to confer with him.

*Uh, Oh. ... Apparently, my Dad's been telling the truth.*

“Father? It really is you!” Paul exclaimed, no longer questioning the reality before him. And almost at once, large tears formed within his dark-brown eyes, and he fell into his father's beckoning grasp.

Since his father's death, an impregnable concrete dam had resided inside of Paul's teenage heartbroken soul. Now the river of pain and mournful sorrow he had quietly held could finally be released.

## This Can't Be

### Chapter Eighteen

Clink.

Clink ... Clink.

“Are you gonna to eat today or not, McGuire?” the thin, balding officer yelled, while banging a metal cup against the steel bars positioned at the front of the jail cell as he glared at the seemingly asleep teen laying in his bunk, facing one of its three damp cold gray walls. Deep inside Butch’s cell – it was dark and smelled worst than a pair of sweaty athlete socks. “Or would you prefer that I give your chow to one of the other teenage mongrels down here? I’m sure any one of them would love to get a hold of it.”

“You got that right, Samuels,” a freckled-face, straggly longhaired fourteen-year-old hollered from the far end of the cellblock. “I’m starving enough that I’d even be willing to sweep and mop the hallway later on tonight – if you’d give me his tray.”

Butch paled as he pulled himself up to a sitting position. *This can't be real. I've been here a full five days now, and the same thing keeps happening over and over again – just like it did in that movie, "Groundhog Day." Are the other kids in this place that desperate?*

“Just shut the hell up Cory and let Butch get his meal,” another teenage inmate shouted from the cell next to his. “It’s not right the way the officers here take advantage of us. And they definitely don’t need any encouragement from you, you HIV deathtrap.”

“I ain’t got any HIV, you jerk,” the freckle-face kid replied from inside his cell as Officer Samuels shoved Butch’s supper tray into the small rectangle window built inside the cell door. “I’m careful about who I’m with.”

“Don’t you mean whom you’re with,” a third inmate interjected. “You need to get your English right Goldilocks.”

“Yeah, Cory,” a fourth guy abruptly added. “And in regards to HIV, wasn’t it just last weekend you told us your latest boyfriend was diagnosed HIV positive?”

Cory frowned as he moved a couple of inches closer to the bars. He hoped to catch a glimpse of whoever made that last remark.

“Yes.” he eventually responded. “But it wasn’t because of m, he caught HIV. I’d swear that on a Bible. I’ve always been clean. ... Ron caught it ‘cause last fall the fool decided to start prostituting himself so he could keep affording another fix.”

“So in other words, your boyfriend was a crack head,” a handsome black sixteen-year-old matter-of-factly stated.

“Yeah. Unfortunately, that’s true,” Cory reluctantly confirmed. “It was a damn shame too, ‘cause whenever he was straight, I seriously loved the guy. He was really cool.”

“So how can we be sure you don’t have HIV? ... It seems like if your boyfriend had it, you should too,” another inmate asked.

“Not necessarily.” Cory paused for a moment to let his reply sink in. “Just because you’re around someone with HIV does not mean you’ll necessarily get it – especially if no body fluids were exchanged. And we always used protection.”

“Oh?” someone’s voice from down the hallway resounded.

“That’s right. I ain’t stupid,” Cory continued. “Also, didn’t I already tell you idiots that soon after I arrived, the Nurse found out I was gay and gave me an HIV test – and it came back negative.”

“That’s true. I had forgotten about that. So what’s the odds we can get a little something going on tonight Cory?” the fifteen-year-old residing next to his cell asked, giving his compadre a wink. “It’s been at least 48 hours since I’ve had any action, and I think my eyeballs are starting to float.”

Cory opened his mouth and was about to respond when Officer Samuels gave him a stern look that strongly advised him to shut up.

“That’s enough, kidos. I’ve got enough problems without you bunch of horny desperadoes trying to get at each other. ... So get it quiet and let me hand out this slop ... okay?”

Butch slowly smiled. *At least while the others are busying fooling around with each other, none of them will think about making me their girlfriend.*

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During the next few days, time passed about as quickly as twenty-yard snail race. And with each day Butch waited for his court date, his six by eight-foot cell seemed to become increasing darker and smaller.



*How could my Dad ever stand being locked up like this?* Butch thought, staring at the cold cement floor in front of his bunk. *There's never any peace and quiet in this place except for the middle of the night. And even then, there're usually at least two or three guys snoring as loud as an elephant trumpeting. It's almost impossible to get to sleep. ... No wonder my Dad tried to escape a couple of times.*

Briefly smiling at the thought of his father, Butch turned to see if he could find something he could read. Not that he actually enjoyed reading, but within the small confinement he was restricted to, there was nothing else to do. Thus, he took to reading whatever magazine or book a guard might hand him, then he'd sleep the other times just to pass the time.

The only other jail activities available were: going to a tiny rec room, which only occurred a couple of times a week if no one on their hallway had recently caused any trouble and every so often on a non-regular basis, a couple of the officers would let them take a five minute shower.

"Are you McGuire? Butch McGuire?" Deputy Henderson asked, checking his roster after opening the cellblock's main entrance and coming to a halt in the middle of his doorway.

Tilting his head slightly upward, Butch leaned forward so the center of his back would no longer be resting against the wall that ran parallel with the side of his bunk. "Yeah. I'm McGuire," he replied, though he wondered why he did. There was something within the deputy's voice that seemed to tell him not all was kosher in paradise. "What do you want?"

"You have a visitor, kid."

"I do?" Butch paused, then dragged himself onto his feet. *Hmm. I wonder who it might be? Mom, maybe?* Glancing at a wall clock down the hallway, he noticed it was a bit after one-thirty. *Naw. She'd still be at work. Not to mention, she was here yesterday so I'd doubt she'd be back today.* "So who's come to see me, Henderson?"

"Some man in a suit. I don't know," the deputy replied, opening his cell and slapping a pair of stainless steel handcuffs around Butch's wrists. "I haven't seen him before."

"Are you sure you don't know him?" Butch stated as they proceeded down the dimly lit hallway.

Henderson didn't say a word, though by the way he kept gazing at Butch, one could tell that the words he had recently spoken wasn't running true.

*Whoever it is that has come to see me, Henderson seems determined not to reveal their identity – which is stupid. I'm bound to find out once I'm in the visitor's center. So why doesn't he just go ahead and tell me the guy's name?*

Butch shook his head in frustration.

A few minutes later when he sat down inside the small booth he had been ushered to, an older gentleman whose hair was far grayer than black, looked up and gave him a business-like smile. He then motioned for Butch to pick up the phone receiver located near the right corner of the double paned window which separated them.

“So you’re Butch McGuire. Correct?” the man said, looking deadpan into the teen’s eyes.

Butch unconsciously shuffled in his unpainted wooden seat. “Yeah. What about it? Who are you and what do you want?”

“Well. Depending on your attitude, I could be your best friend ... or perhaps your worst enemy.”

Then reaching for something located on the dark-gray tiled floor beside him, the guy nonchalantly lifted a black leather briefcase and sat it on the narrow counter in front of him. It appeared to be an Italian Analine, which meant either he or the firm he worked for recently had spent some real serious bucks for it. “So which would you prefer?”

Butch glared at the suited personage in front of him as he contemplated his decision. Without knowing who this guy worked for or the purpose of his visit. He wasn’t sure if the man was a lawyer or an FBI agent. Either way, he would most likely end up being totally useless.

“The name’s McKinney. John McKinney,” the lawyer finally admitted after a number of moments had passed and it was clear, Butch wasn’t going to respond. “The county’s assigned me to be your attorney.”

“Oh really?” Butch leaned backwards in his seat and gave John the impression he was about to break out laughing. “You look old enough to be spending your time inside some cozy retirement home, instead of wasting time with simplistic welfare cases. And where did your lawyer’s degree from – Walmart or Kmart?”

“The Methodical School of the Arts. And I minored in Psychology of Circus Clowns since I knew they’d be times in this business I’d eventually have to deal with morons like you.”

Butch chuckled. “I see you have a sense of humor,” he commented before crossing his arms across his abdomen.

“I’ve had to develop one.” Moving his seat an inch closer to the glass, John pulled a few documents out of his suitcase and laid them out on the gray painted shelf residing between them – despite the fact there was no way Butch could read them unless he held them against the glass. “Are you now really to get down to some serious business, son?”

Butch nodded affirmatively.

“Good.” John said, before stopping to take a deep breath. “As you are aware, when you were first booked into this place Butch, it was for a simple assault charge – with the possibility the prosecutor might add attempted murder. Isn’t this correct?”

“Yes.” Butch glanced at the ceiling. “Is the son of a bitch going to press for the latter?”

John shook his head no.

“I’m afraid things are a lot worse than that, Butch. Charles Greenfield, who is the prosecutor in this case, has been keeping close tabs on the status of the kid you had dealings with. ... What was his name, Paul Pontiac, or something like that?”

“Yeah. That was him,” Butch interjected. “So what’s happened? I figured the geek’s probably back at school by now.”

“I wish he was,” John exhaled. “Then I could be talking to you about a probationary sentence or maybe doing about 180 days jail time. However, things have substantially changed and neither option is currently on the table.”

“It’s not?” Butch half choked as eyes widened.

“No. It’s not,” John confirmed. “Due to the severe injuries you inflicted upon Mr. Pontiac, he ended up being sent to Duke, where a short time afterwards – he died.”

“Paul’s dead?” Butch couldn’t believe his ears. “That mother-f\_cking, son-of-a-bitch. It can’t be. I only tapped his chest a couple of times with the heel of my boot. It was nothing near enough to kill somebody.”

“He’s dead, Butch,” John repeated in a perfect monotone. “You killed him. And now, not only are they going to try to charge you with premeditated first-degree murder. The prosecutor told me this morning that the state’s going after the Death Penalty.”

Butch’s mouth flew wide open as a resounding “NO” tried to escape his lips. However, before his vocal denial could be uttered, his brown eyes unexpectedly rolled upward, and he collapsed on the wooden floor below.

## The Message

### Chapter Nineteen

Thousands of daisies, morning glories and other wildflowers filled the tree-covered, spiritually created mountains with contrasting yellows, greens, blues, and oranges so vivid - if the most scenic view along the Blue Ridge Parkway could have seen it; it would have blushed with envy. And directly below this scene were two brown and white quarter horses playfully cantering through a two-hundred+ acre grass-filled valley. Its end was located near the spot where Paul and his father were talking.

“Dad,” Paul began, staring at the stallion whose forehead contained a diamond-shaped spot almost identical to the one his horse, Half Pint, had. “Why do the two horses heading toward us seem familiar?”

Turning his head, John gazed at the approaching stallion and mare, and a smile formed across his lips. “Oh. Those two,” he said with a slight chuckle. “If I told you, you wouldn’t believe me.”

“I wouldn’t?” Paul raised an eyebrow.

“No.” Reaching downward and picking up a dandelion, John blew its hundreds of seeds into the warm summer-like breeze surrounding them.

Paul watched as each feather-like paratrooper floated away, then began to tap his foot. “Why not?”

“Because,” John answered before pausing.

“Because what?”

“I’m not sure you’d believe me.”

Paul pondered this for a second. “If I told you I’d believe you, would you tell me?”

John smiled. “Yes.” He then pointed to the stallion, which was a couple of feet in front of the mare. “The stallion in the lead is Rushing Wind and behind him is Sunny Days. Do those names ring a bell?”

Paul shook his head no.

“Okay,” John grunted. “You were young and probably so excited about getting a horse at the time we bought Half Pint; you weren't paying attention. ... Those are her parents.”

“That's Half Pint's parents?” Paul's mouth dropped open. “You've got to be kidding?”

“Nope,” John replied, shaking his head. “Like Half Pint, they were also born and raised a few miles outside Boca Raton.”

“Wow! That's unbelievable,” Paul exclaimed as the two slender, four-legged creatures moved closer. “Who would have thought there would be horses in heaven? Not to mention, Half Pint's parents. I can't wait to tell her.”

John gave his son a grin. “I'm glad you said that Paul. Because, before long you'll get the opportunity to do so.”

“Do what?” Paul asked as a quizzical expression washed across his face. He was clearly perplexed.

“Tell Half Pint that you've seen her parents,” John stated.

Paul frowned. “How could I? I thought once you died and went to heaven, you were here for all time and eternity.”

“That's normally true, son,” John agreed with a nod. “However, in this particular incident that's not the case. ... Haven't you ever heard of anyone having an afterlife experience?”

Paul's hand raised to his chin, as was his habit when thinking. He then shook his head.

“No. Not really. However, a few weeks ago Mom took me along to see one of her friends, and the two of them got to talking about stuff like that. But, I really didn't give it any mind. ... It sounded too much like what you might experience if you were doing something stupid, like sniffing glue.”

John laughed. “Well, son, I hate to say this, but congratulations. Without doing anything even close to glue sniffing, you managed to get yourself high. In fact, we're so high above the planet Earth, if you glanced in its direction it probably wouldn't appear to be much more than a tiny speck of light.”

“It wouldn't?” Paul instinctively raised his head and began to gaze at the Carolina-blue sky above them. “Hmm. I don't see it.”

“Try closing your eyes,” John suggested, displaying a small grin.

In less time than it would take a flash bulb to flash, a huge, rotating, bluish-shaded globe full of continents, islands and oceans with numerous cloud formations floating directly above, appeared within Paul's mind. It was almost as if by shutting both eyes and mentally focusing, he could see it as

if he was looking through the most powerful telescope man has ever built – after it had been enhanced a thousand-fold.

“Wow!” Paul proclaimed. “Can we also see whoever we want if they’re still on earth?”

John negatively shook his head in reply. “No. Unless it is His Will.”

“His Will?” Question marks formed inside Paul’s eyes. “And who is He?”

“God,” John solemnly answered. “This is His kingdom you know.”

Paul bowed his head in a display of contriteness. “I’m sorry. I temporarily forgot. Do you think he’ll forgive me?”

“I’d have no doubt about it,” John stated, gently patting his son’s shoulders. “Our Heavenly Father is a very Loving God. And I’m sure he would be more than willing to forgive any of us for a small mistake like that.”

Paul gazed at this father and an ear-to-ear grin spread across his face.

“Whew. I’m glad. ... I was afraid He would be the same way He’s described in the Old Testament and either the ground would open up and swallow me whole or a slew of fire and brimstone would start falling.”

Upon hearing those words, John could not help but burst out laughing. Paul, in return, stood and stared at him – in puzzlement.

“What so dang funny? Isn’t that the way God used to operate?”

“Yes, He did,” John replied, between a few remaining chuckles. “However, that was thousands of earth years ago. Things have changed considerably since then. You’re talking about a time when mankind used to live under ‘The Law’. ... Man now lives under Grace.”

“Oh. I see,” Paul said, appearing to understand the difference. “So in getting back to what you said a few minutes ago, what did you mean when you stated you were glad I wanted to tell Half Pint I’ve seen her parents?”

John’s expression quickly turned serious. “What I meant was – very soon now, it’s going to be time for you to return to earth.”

“I can’t stay here with you ... for all time and eternity?”

“I’m sorry, son,” John said, embracing Paul’s shoulders in a tight, loving grip. “God brought you here for a very specific purpose, and soon it will be time to go back. He has a plan for your life and part of it involves providing support for your mother and Nathan in a way only you’ll be able to do.”

“They need my support?” Paul stared deep inside his father’s eyes. “That’s certainly news.”

“Of course they need your support,” John confirmed. “Your mother loves you very much and needs your assistance since I no longer can be with her. And in regards to Nathan ... my youngest not only adores you. He considers you to be a computer god. And he’s definitely going to need your guidance – especially during his teen years.”

“Okay. If you say so.” Paul folded his arms across his chest. “So you’re able to see the future.”

“That’s a definite maybe,” his father said, answering the half question, half statement. “But whether I can or not is irrelevant. What is important is the fact that I know a lot about teenagers. After all, weren’t you the one a few months ago who let the adversary tempt you into smoking your first cigarette inside the hayloft of our barn. And you ended up getting so sick you fell through the floor – and landed in a pile of horse manure?”

Paul’s eyes flew wide open. “Hey! How do you know about that? I certainly never told you.”

John grinned a mischievous grin. “I know. But your mother did during Thanksgiving – just shortly before I returned to Hollywood.”

Paul thought about this as a bald eagle glided overhead. Then a few seconds later, a gray storm cloud developed in the distance, and a flash of yellowish-green lightning lit the sky – milliseconds before one of its tentacles struck the ground with a resounding boom.

“I think it’s near the time I provide you with the information you’re going to need before returning.” John said in a hurry as he watched the emerging scene in front of them. “These few precious moments you’ve been allowed to stay in the afterlife is about over.”

“What information?”

“Since my burial last December,” John began. “... the game you and Tim Hegler developed has become a best seller. But of course, you already knew that.”

“Yes,” Paul confirmed. “What about it?”

“That in itself isn’t a problem. And neither is the fact that both you and Tim are members of Gibsonville School’s Computer Club.” John then started to draw what appeared to be a box in midair, directly in front of them. And shortly thereafter, a 3-D movie began to display recent events involving the game the club was currently developing for Titan’s Industries software contest – Plutonium’s Revenge.

“Wow. I never knew you could watch anything 3-D without having to wear special glasses,” Paul stated, mouth half open as he viewed the executive meeting at Krypton Software, which transpired several weeks earlier. Its purpose was to finalize the company’s plans to steal the boys’ game.

When the “movie” finished, Paul turned to face his Dad.

“Do those people really believe they can get away with that? I’m gonna need to tell Cathy, Daniel and Tim about it, so we can stop them. And Mr. Thompson and Titan Industries, too!”

John waved his hand, which made the picture box disappear.

“Not so fast, Paul,” he began in a low tone. “As you know, God knows everything ... including what Krypton Software is up to. And He has a plan on how he’s going to use their misdeeds for His Purpose.”

“He does?” The wrinkle in Paul’s forehead reflected his doubts. “How is He planning to do it?”

A bolt of lightning unexpectedly struck the ground less than ten feet away from where John and Paul were standing, and it brightly lit everything within a half-mile radius around them with an eerie glow.

“Here’s specifically what you are going to need to do ....”



# The Faith Of A Child

## Chapter Twenty

Within the inner depths of one of the finest medical facilities in the world, an undisturbed hospital room remained dark and a deafening silence prevailed. In its center, a male teenage body lay covered with a thin white cotton sheet. No plastic tubes were attached, nor were there any high-tech medical equipment hooked up to monitor any life signs.

There weren't any – and never would be.

Paul's insistence at staying flat-lined remained substantially worse than the incident he pulled as a four-year-old child – when he had refused to get off Santa Claus' lap until given a cherry-flavored Tootsie Pop.

According to the medical report, Dr. Matthews hastily completed a few short minutes after his young patient's failed surgical procedure ended: Mr. Paul Michael Pontiac, though only fourteen, was officially declared deceased. Cause of death – congestive heart failure induced by an embolized thrombus. However, this conclusion would not be confirmed until the state-required autopsy was completed.

To all aware of the horrifying incident, it appeared that Butch's repeated stomping on the center of Paul's sternum created multiple blood clots. Then as each hour passed, the one within his left ventricle continued to increase in size until it eventually proved to be fatal.

At present, Paul's lifeless corpse remained in wait. At least until Mrs. Pontiac and her youngest son, Nathan, left the medical facility. Once that occurred, Pathology would be notified and an autopsy would commence.

Following the procedure, the teenage corpse would be placed on one of the numerous shelves inside the morgue specifically designed for human remains until the scheduled time arrived for it to be forwarded to whatever funeral home Mrs. Pontiac would have specified.

Once again, due to uncontrolled bullying, a valued human life had been violently terminated. Its multicolored quasi-dimensional life's fire extinguished – way before its designated time.

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Being between the lunch and supper hour, the cafeteria at Duke Medical Center at present was nearly empty.

On the far right of the dining area, a twenty-something couple appeared to be involved in an extremely intense discussion. Loud words were being spoken and their arms repeatedly flayed in the air. Yet, their servings of Caesar salad and lattes, which sat on top of the gray Formica table between them, remained untouched.

Sitting opposite the livid couple about midway on the left side, an older seventy-something gentleman wearing a multi-shade green plaid shirt and tan casual-styled dress pants - sat alone. His left hand was tightly grasped around a cup of black coffee he continually stared at. In viewing the redness in the aged one's wrinkled cheeks, one might conclude that if it were socially acceptable to cry in public, then he surely would. Apparently, a loved one had recently passed or was deathly ill.

In the center of the hospital chow hall resided a third party – a middle-aged, blond-haired mother sat beside her wheelchair-bound, eight-year-old son. And even though their conversation, for the most part, was so quiet that someone sitting a few feet away from them would not be able to make out the words spoken, from a distance it appeared the boy was adamantly refusing to accept what he was being told.

“It can’t be!” Nathan screamed in a raised whisper as he glared into his adopted mother’s face. “Paul can’t be dead, Aunt Ellen. I don’t believe it. Paul would never leave me.”

Understanding her young one's reason for denial, Ellen watched as two continually flowing streams coursed down her son's reddened cheeks like a pair of rushing waterfalls.

*I can only imagine the heart-wrenching pain of losing so many loved ones within such a short period. Early last Fall, it was Nathan's parents. Then shortly after Thanksgiving, my husband and his natural father, was killed. And now, here we are at the beginning of a new year, and his half-brother is murdered. That's more than enough to drive anyone into denial.*

“I’m sorry, Nathan,” she eventually said, trying to comfort him by grasping his right hand. “I know how much you loved Paul. ... We both did. And if there was any possible way I could bring him back to life, I would.”

Nathan briefly looked upward and gazed into her face, then exploded, once again into a silent sob. “You just don’t understand, Aunt Ellen,” Nathan’s voice squeaked as he stared at the tear-covered cheeseburger and fries sitting in front of him. “Paul can’t be dead. I know he can’t be. There was so much we were supposed to do together, like finish his computer game – Clash of The BattleStars II.”

“I know, Sweetie,” Ellen replied, quietly reaching inside her navy colored purse to pull out a flora-designed handkerchief, so she could dab his eyes. “But I’m afraid it will no longer be possible. Paul’s gone to live with our Heavenly Father.”

“Heavenly Father?” A crooked smile unexpectedly surfaced on Nathan’s face and he bent his head as if to pray.

About a minute later, “No. That’s not true,” Nathan calmly declared as if injected with a burst of profound inner strength. “Paul hasn’t gone to stay! He only went there to visit our father, and he’s going to come back - very soon. ... I can prove it.”

“What?” Ellen’s grayish-blue eyes widened, and she stared at the youngster in total bewilderment. “Paul’s going to come back from the dead ... and you can prove it? That can’t be,” she replied in a non-believing tone. “Dr. Matthews is one of the best cardiologists around here, and he declared your brother dead. There’s no way your brother can come back to life.”

“Yes, he can,” Nathan stubbornly insisted as his brown eyes glared in pure determination. “God told me he would.”

Leaning back, Ellen folded her arms across her abdomen and displayed a false smile. “God told you he would? How and when?”

“Just a few seconds ago,” Nathan calmly answered. “Soon after I finished my prayer. I heard his voice speaking ... inside of me.”

*Yeab. Right,* Ellen thought as she continued to stare into the face of her stepson. She then paused for a second and took a deep breath. *I really wish Nathan could be right. ... Heaven knows I’d be willing to do about anything to have my son back.*

“Is there any way we can go see Paul?” Nathan asked, breaking into her thoughts. “If we did, I could prove to you - he’s alive.”

Ellen considered the possibility. *I know what Nathan wants. Yet, common sense clearly dictates it would be a waste of time. Not to mention, the additional hurt it would bring upon him. And isn’t Nathan hurting enough? Then again, maybe letting Nathan see Paul’s lifeless corpse would bring the closure he obviously needs.*

“Are you sure you really want to see him?” Ellen asked, knowing she would first have to find someone who would know where Paul’s corpse was residing. “Seeing your brother dead is only going to upset you. Especially since for some unknown reason, you think that God has told you he’s alive.”

“I know Paul is.” A confident smile predominately displayed on Nathan’s face, and he reached for one of the rear wheels of his stainless steel chair. “Like I just told you. I can prove it.”

“Okay. But you know what you’re suggesting is virtually impossible, Nathan,” Ellen said as she stuck her handkerchief back inside her purse and snatched the half-empty coffee cup in front of her. “Not only did your brother die on the operating table; I’m sure no one bothered to sew him back up since an autopsy has to be performed. So there’s no way Paul can be alive.”

Nathan turned to gaze at her, and his eyes twinkled. He then rolled his chair slightly more than a foot backward and repositioned it, so he could directly face her.

“Don’t you have faith in God, Aunt Ellen?” he questioned in an innocent tone only a child his age could utilize. “He is the best physician ever, so nothing’s impossible for Him. You’ll see. God’s going to heal Paul.”

Ellen sighed. *If we all only had the faith of a young child.* “Yes, Nathan. I do believe God occasionally heals people. But just because we would like Him to bring Paul back to life – doesn’t mean he’ll necessarily do it. Sometimes people die for a reason and when they do, they stay dead.”

“So you think God’s lying to me?” Nathan said, raising his eyebrows high.

“No. That’s not what I’m saying, Nathan. God would never lie to you. ... I just think that perhaps you want Paul to be alive so much, you have somehow tricked yourself into believing God has told you he is.”

Nathan stopped for a moment and pondered what his stepmother just said.

“No. I don’t agree, Aunt Ellen. I believe it was God. ... Can’t we go see Paul so I can show you I’m right?”

Ellen loudly exhaled. “Okay Nathan. Since you insist. But I hope you're not going to be too shocked or lose your faith in God when you discover all that remains of your brother is nothing but a lifeless empty shell.”

“Paul left us an empty shell?” Nathan’s small mouth formed a perfect circle and question marks formed in both of his eyes. “What do you mean? ... Would it be like those you find on the beach?”

Ellen chuckled. “Never mind, Sweetie. ... Let’s get going.”

Carelessly slinging her overfilled purse over her right shoulder, Ellen stepped behind Nathan’s wheelchair and the two of them proceeded toward the help desk inside the hospital’s entranceway.

## What Was That?

### Chapter Twenty-One

Even though more than a couple of hours had passed since he left Duke Medical Center's twenty-nine room operating suite, each step of Paul's failed surgical procedure continued to replay deep inside Dr. Matthews' mind.

"I just don't get it," he shouted for at least the twentieth time since entering his third-floor office. "I did everything absolutely correct. This was a standard procedure and every step I took was by the book. Yet, directly in front of at least a hundred pre-med students, my fourteen-year-old patient died. ... I just don't get it. ... It should not have happened. Yet it did."

Dr. Mathews glanced upward at the white ceiling tiles above him and paused to catch his breath.

"I swear. I don't consider myself to be one of those god-fearing men ...," he said, starting his rampage, once again, to no one but the four tan walls surrounding him. "... but I'm starting to believe that either someone or something within our universal cosmos is against me."

Craig then frustratingly snatched the small black rectangular remote from the arm of his dark-brown leather couch and flipped on his 32" LED TV, even though he didn't have the slightest inclination of watching it. Mentally, he was just too wired up.

A knock resounded from the door minutes later, and Nurse Higgins entered inside - giving him a smile upon seeing he had finally calmed enough to sit down.

"Dr. Matthews?" she said, stepping a couple of feet inside the doorway. "You can contact Pathology now about Paul's autopsy if you'd like. I just got word from Nurse Smith on the first floor that Mrs. Pontiac and her son have finally left the cafeteria and are most likely heading home."

"Thanks, Nurse," Craig loudly exhaled as he shut off the TV and turned to face her. "It's about damn time. I was starting to think Mrs. Pontiac had decided to call a priest and have 'last rites' or some other type of service performed."

"Last rites?" Nancy raised an eyebrow. "I didn't think the Pontiacs were Catholic. ... Not to mention, aren't last rites supposed to be performed before a person dies?"

Craig shrugged his shoulders in a manner, which indicated he didn't know.

"I'm pretty sure it is," Nancy said, answering her own question as Dr. Matthews reached for his fifth cup of coffee. "I think you meant to reference the Catholic's 'Prayer for the Dead.'"

“I guess so. I don’t really know, nor do I really care,” Craig said, getting to his feet. “I’m not big into religion so I don’t keep up with any mumbo jumbo like that. What’s important now is, we get someone in Pathology to do the autopsy - pronto. I’d like to quit worrying about the possibility I somehow screwed up this procedure, and it’s killed my patient. Not to mention, Tom stopped by about a half-hour ago and said some deputy from the Guilford County Sheriff’s Department is bugging every staff member he runs across about getting a copy of Paul’s autopsy report. It’s needed so they’ll have the paperwork to back up the first-degree murder charge they’ve nailed on his assailant. ... What’s his name, Butch McGuire?”

“I think so, Doctor,” Nurse Higgins agreed, though she actually didn’t know. She then paused for a moment as if in thought. “Isn’t a prosecutor supposed to wait until they have an autopsy report in hand before charging somebody with something like that? ... At least, that’s the way it’s done on TV.”

“Damn if I know,” Craig answered, shortly before they started for the door. “Paul Pontiac’s definitely dead so it shouldn’t really matter if the standard legal procedure has been broken or not.”

The nurse nodded in agreement, and the two stepped into the hallway.

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“Doctor Taylor?” Nurse Gilbert said, finding the pathologist sitting behind his desk deep inside the Duke Medical Center’s morgue, reviewing the medical record of the teenage patient he was planning to do the next autopsy on – as soon as he received word the boy’s mother and younger brother had left the facility.

“Yes,” James replied, reaching to turn down his radio, even though it was currently playing one of his favorite songs from the 70s.” He then swiveled on his stool to the right - about eighty degrees, so he could see her. “What on your mind, Mary?”

Nurse Gilbert smiled and handed him a high-energy drink he had asked her to get the next time she passed the basement’s “employee’s lounge.” “I just thought my Indian, dark-skinned friend might be interested in taking a short break before the fun began.”

“Fun,” James questioned, before taking the bottle and thanking her. “I seriously doubt if I would call it fun. But at least the higher powers in this place hand out a couple bucks once a month for doing it. And needless to say, unlike a few other professions around here, there isn’t a line of vampires waiting to replace me. Most people prefer to stay far away from this place.”

“I can understand why,” Mary said, nodding. “I also prefer to be deal with the living, than the dead.”

James grinned a crooked grin and glanced at the monochrome computer screen beside him. Its bright green lettering reminded him of one of the original IBM 5150 monitors he used for research while studying at the Chhatrapati Shahuji Maharaj Medical University in Lucknow.

“I know. You’ve mentioned it before. ... At least a hundred times this past year alone. But there’s at least two good things about working with the deceased.”

“Oh?” Mary folded her arms across her chest in a subtle show of defiance. “And what’s that?”

“For one,” James began, raising his forefinger after shifting his position so he could gaze at his monitor and watch her at the same time. “No matter what you’re doing you’ll never hear the dead complain, even though they do pass gas every now and then. And two,” he added, extending a second finger. “The odds of being hit with a malpractice suit are almost next to nil.”

“Hmm.” Mary pursed her lips. “Okay. I’ll give you credit for that one. You ARE probably saving a bundle in Medical Insurance costs. ... So are you about ready to get started on the Pontiac kid?”

“Almost,” James replied. “I’m just waiting for ...”

Unexpectedly, his words suddenly froze – while his jaw dropped and eyes widened as a blinding yellowish-white flash, not unlike a bolt of lightning, instantly flared across the forty by forty-foot room. It seemed to have emanated from somewhere down the hallway.

“Did you see that?” James exclaimed, jumping to his feet. “Wow!”

“I sure did,” Mary confirmed, staring toward the hallway as she moved a foot closer to his side. “What was it? A power surge?”

“I don’t know. I wouldn’t think so. Not way down in the basement of a faculty like Duke Hospital,” James answered, his hands now visibly shaking. “There are supposed to be generators and some other stuff inside here to prevent something like that happening.”

“That’s true,” Mary agreed, slowly turning her focus back towards him. “So what do you think it was?”

“Heaven knows,” James replied with a shake of his head. “But I’d like to find out. ... Let’s go check it out. Okay?”

Mary hesitated for a second and then tightly grasped his right hand.

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“Why aren’t we going up to Paul’s room?” Nathan asked, glancing over the back of his wheelchair at his stepmother as they continued down the hallway away from the cafeteria – totally unaware of what had just happened a couple of floors below them. “That’s where he should be. Isn’t it, Aunt Ellen?”

Mrs. Pontiac negatively shook her head as they approached the hospital's large entranceway. "I'm afraid not, Nathan. Once someone has died, they're usually sent to the morgue."

"The morgue?" Nathan questioned in a slightly raised tone.

"Yes, Sweetie. Haven't you ever seen one in any of the police shows on TV?"

"Oh. That place." An understanding look rapidly flashed across youth's face. "You mean the weird underground room they take dead people to, so they can see what killed them?"

"That'd be the one," Ellen confirmed, while noticing the help desk was only a few feet away.

A dark brown-haired lady currently sitting behind it seemed to be busy at the moment conversing on the phone. Thus, upon reaching her desk, Ellen brought Nathan's wheelchair to a halt and proceeded to patiently wait.

"But why would they take Paul there?" Nathan asked, glancing upward as his stepmother came up beside him. "He's not dead."

Ellen gazed downward as if she was about to answer when the help desk lady abruptly lowered her phone's handset.

"Hi. Welcome to Duke Medical Center. How can I help you?"

Ellen paused to clear her throat. "Yes, Ms?"

"Ms. Kindle," the smiling thirty-something said, briefly glancing at the nametag attached an inch above her front pocket.

"Yes, Ms. Kindle," Ellen continued with a slight quiver in her voice. "I'm Mrs. Pontiac and my son ... son ... ah ... this afternoon."

"Died," Ms. Kindle said, displaying a sympathetic smile, while acknowledging the unspoken intense pain within Ellen's blue eyes.

"Yes, ... and I wondered ...?"

"Where his ... is located?"

Ellen nodded, then reached for the flora handkerchief from inside her purse and dabbed her left eye.

"Most likely the morgue, Ma'am. ... If you'll kindly give me your son's name, I'd be glad to call down there just to make sure."



## Nathan's Discovery

### Chapter Twenty-Two

Eyes wide open, staring down the long, eight foot wide, dark gray tiled hallway, both Dr. Taylor and Nurse Gilbert looked first to their left and then to their right.

*What could have caused that momentary flash? It was so bright; it was literally blinding, even inside the main office located at the end of the corridor.*

Even though both James and Mary continued to strain their eyes to the point that jagged, thin red veins formed inside the whites of their eyes, nothing out of the ordinary could be found. Each refrigerated human storage shelf lining this eerie corridor was still closed. Both of the morgue's operating rooms remained dark, their mahogany doors shut. And nothing could be seen inside the currently unlit, twenty by thirty-foot Pre-op room, except a shady, silvery outline of two metallic carts – one, which contained the sheet-covered corpse of a fourteen-year-old male Dr. Taylor hoped soon to perform an autopsy on.

“I don't see anything that would have caused it. How about you, Mary?” James asked, turning to face his nurse-friend as she flipped the light switch inside the doorway of Operating Room #2.

All lights flickered on, causing Nurse Gilbert to grimace. “No. Nothing unusual in here, James,” she answered, flipping the switch back off and slamming the door shut. “Let's check the storage room, even though I've never seen anyone go in there except the third shift janitor.”

“Okay. If you want to,” James agreed, and they continued their progression down the hallway. “But it'll probably be a waste of time.”

Mary half smiled. “I know. But what's there to lose? The light had to come from somewhere. And it obviously wasn't from the operating rooms or any of the fluorescents in the hallway.”

James turned and gazed at the light fixtures above them once again since they had started their investigation. It seemed that he believed by taking a second look, he'd be able to locate which mysterious bulb was trying to play a trick on them.

Today's fluorescent tubes are known for sometimes supernaturally flashing the moment their mercury vapor and argon gas-filled souls' decide to burn themselves out. And you never know. Maybe this time I'll find a dead one.

In seeing each bulb performing normally, *Hmmp. No such luck*, he later sighed.

Mary grabbed the storage closet's metallic door handle and gave it a yank downward.

"Oh," She said, sounding disappointed upon noticing the bulb inside the broom closet-sized space was a standard 60-watt incandescent. "This certainly couldn't have caused what we saw."

James chuckled as his female friend closed the closet door. "I didn't think they used a fluorescent inside there."

"Well, Mr. Smarty pants," Mary replied, giving him a scowl and placing both hands on the side of her hips. "If you didn't think one was in there, why didn't you just say so, so I wouldn't have wasted my time looking? Were you in need of a cheap laugh at my expense?"

"No. And please don't get your feathers all ruffled so easily Mary. That wasn't it at all," James said, moving his palms to a defensive posture upon seeing Mary's cheeks turn red with anger.

The left corner of Mary's lips slightly raised and her accompanying narrowed eyes clearly articulated she didn't believe him. "Oh really. Then why did you laugh?"

"W-e-l-l. To be honest. I honestly didn't mean to, but ..." James began, when his apology rapidly cut itself short – the moment the morgue's entranceway unexpectedly opened, and Craig Matthews stepped inside. It appeared that for some unknown reason, the doctor wasn't extremely happy.

"Could I help you, Dr. Matthews, Sir?" James said, humbling himself while approaching the doorway.

Dr. Matthews stopped to gaze into their Pre-op room before answering. In seeing his former patient covered with a cotton sheet and apparently still very dead, "Yes," he said. "Have either one of you noticed anything unusual down here, let's say, in the past couple of hours or so?"

"Unusual? What do you mean, doctor?" James replied, raising an eyebrow. "No. ... There hasn't been anything out of the ordinary I'm aware of." He then turned toward Nurse Gilbert and discreetly winked. "Have you seen anything unusual Mary?"

"No," she concurred, directly facing Dr. Matthews. "Everything's been quiet down here. Why? Were you expecting something, doctor?"

Craig frowned. "No. Not really. It's just that... well ... On my way down here I ran into Mrs. Pontiac and her son, Nathan, and the youngster wants to see his brother."

"Oh?" James replied, looking a bit curious. "What for?"

Dr. Matthews flushed. "Well ... you see," he said before hesitating. "The Pontiac's are the religious sort. You know. Believing in God and all. And ... well, for some unknown reason young Nathan has come to believe that God is going to bring his brother back to life."

“God is going to bring Paul Pontiac back to life?” James repeated, half choking on his words. “I would hardly think so. I haven’t seen a patient yet who found their way down here ... come back.”

Mary nodded her agreement.

“So Paul Pontiac is still dead?” Craig questioned, glancing one additional time in the direction of the teenage corpse.

“Yes. Very definitely so,” James replied, and the three of them began to head toward Pre-op.

As soon as Dr. Taylor passed through the double-door entryway, Nurse Gilbert flipped on a nearby light switch and the three of them positioned themselves at the head of the steel cart Paul’s body was lying on. James then stopped to study Dr. Matthews’ facial expression, before lowering the section of the sheet currently covering his patient’s head.

About a millisecond later, when James moved the sheet a couple of feet downward, everyone present could see Paul’s lifeless dark-brown eyes staring deadpan at the ceiling above and that his cheeks had already begun to turn various shades of bluish-green.

“If anyone ever had a doubt, it’s obvious no life-sustaining respiration exists. Paul indeed, is quite dead ... just as I thought,” Craig boldly stated as his lips formed a small smile. “Once dead. Always dead. I guess I just haven’t succeeded in transforming into a god yet.”

“You’re trying to turn into a god?” James said, his eyes wide in sheer amazement. He then looked at Mary, who shared the same expression.

“Figuratively, yeah. And it would have been helpful right about now if I could have. ... Poor eight-year-old Nathan Pontiac is absolutely sure God,” Craig stated, before stopping to emphasize the word "God" by making double quotes with his fingers. "... has told him Paul would soon be alive.”

“You must be joking?” James and Mary responded in unison, staring at each other, before turning to face Dr. Matthews. “Was the kid high on something? What he’s suggesting would take the type of miracle that hasn’t occurred since the Old Testament days.”

“I know,” Craig confirmed as if he was familiar with the miraculous works within the Old Testament. “Personally I think the boy is simply overwhelmed with grief, and it’s causing his imagination to run wild.”

“That would make sense,” Mary nodded, pulling the sheet back over their patient’s head. “So what are you going to tell Mrs. Pontiac?”

“The truth. I guess.”

The door at the morgue's entrance then creaked open and soon afterwards, Mrs. Pontiac rolled young Nathan inside the hallway. Upon locating Dr. Matthews inside Pre-op, she smiled a brief smile.

"I'm sorry, Dr. Matthews," she began as soon as he approached them. "But we waited for you to return to the Employee's lounge for quite a long while and Nathan kept bugging me about ..."

Dr. Matthews instinctively looked down at her handicapped son and displayed a perfunctory smile. "I understand, Mrs. Pontiac. But do you really think letting Nathan see your older boy's corpse is a good idea? You know he's still ..."

"Dead?" Mrs. Pontiac unconsciously blinked her eyes and swallowed.

"Yes, ma'am," Craig confirmed. He then gazed toward James and Mary. "Dr. Taylor and I have just completed a visual inspection, Mrs. Pontiac, and I'm sorry to report that the miracle Nathan had hoped to occur – hasn't."

"I see," she automatically replied, then slid over to Nathan's wheelchair's left side and crouched down so she could directly face her youngest. "I'm sorry, Nathan," she said, her voice containing a noticeable quiver. "I'm afraid your brother is still in Paradise with our Heavenly Father."

"No he's not, Aunt Ellen," Nathan insisted as he stretched his hand, so he could wipe the tear which had formed in the corner of his stepmother's eye. "You just need to believe – the same way we're told to in the Bible."

"Believe?" Dr. Matthews repeated, looking first at Ellen and then toward Nathan. "What's there to believe? What we have here is clearly factual. No matter what they may have taught you in your Sunday School class, son, when a person dies, they remain dead. That's just the way life is."

"Oh really?" Nathan looked up and gave Paul's cardiologist a defiant stare. "And how would you know? Are you God or something?"

"Nathan!" Ellen yelled, glaring at her youngest while almost falling backwards. "How dare you be so rude? Now tell Dr. Matthews you're sorry. Dr. Matthews here is a certified professional, and he did his absolute best to try to save your brother's life. Therefore, he certainly doesn't deserve any disrespect from you."

Nathan continued to glower at the doctor for an additional second, then lowered his head and folded both arms. "I'm sorry," he quietly mumbled. "But God did tell me ..."

"I know," Dr. Matthews said, interrupting him. "Your mother already told me. However, what you don't realize son, is the fact that when people get extremely upset, they sometimes trick themselves into believing the impossible. And I have reason to believe that's what happened here."

“It has? You think I’ve tricked myself?” Nathan looked deeply into Dr. Mathews face, and a hint of self-doubt began to appear within his own.

“Is there any way possible we could show him Paul hasn’t returned?” Ellen asked as the doctor resumed an upright position. “As a High School Guidance Counselor, I am starting to believe what Nathan needs the most is closure, and it’s going to take seeing his brother to do that.”

Craig grabbed his chin in thought and considered it for a second. “I don’t believe it’s normally allowed,” he said, more to himself than to Ellen. “However, if Dr. Taylor ...”

“If Dr. Taylor, what?” James asked, looking at Dr. Matthews as he and Nurse Gilbert came up to join them.

“Mrs. Pontiac would like for Nathan to view her older son’s body,” Craig stated, pointing towards the younger boy’s wheelchair. “He still believes Paul is going to come back to life.”

“He does?” James glanced at Nathan as if the kid was some type of alien oddball. “Didn’t you clearly explain ...?”

“Yes, he did,” Ellen firmly replied. “But Nathan’s not accepting it. And it seems to me that showing him Paul’s corpse is going to be the only way he’s ever going to accept reality.”

“I see.” James looked over his shoulder to where Paul laid, and loudly exhaled. “This normally isn’t allowed Mrs. Pontiac. However, I don’t really see where any harm might occur, except Nathan will probably have some nightmares during the next few evenings.”

Ellen pursed her lips and nodded that she understood.

“Well. Okay then,” James said, opening the door to Pre-op. “Let the ghostly tour begin.”

“Are you sure you want to see this, Son?” Ellen asked Nathan the moment she parked his wheelchair near the steel cart where, once uncovered, Nathan would be able to clearly see the right side of his brother’s face.

“Yes,” Nathan said in almost a whisper.

“Fine. But please remember, you insisted.” Glancing upward, Ellen shut her eyes as if she was about to say a quick silent prayer. “Let’s proceed, Doctor.”

Taking hold of the cotton sheet where it covered the edge of the steel cart, Dr. Taylor gently raised it, as if by doing it slowly, it would lessen the shock he knew the juvenile in front of him would soon experience.

*Come on, Paul. Be alive!* Nathan mentally shouted as he watched the sheet pass below his brother’s front bangs. *God told me you’d return. So do it!*

Eyes fixated, Ellen stared as the sheet passed over her older son's discolored nose and lips. Then without realizing it, a sob escaped.

"I am so sorry, son," she suddenly began to wail with a deep emotion that had been totally unknown for her to display during the last ten years she was married to Paul's abusive, alcoholic father. "I should have somehow protected you ... but I ..."

Nathan's face became as glazed as the frozen ice around the North Pole as he stared at his older half brother, his personal hero and computer-programming god. The shock of the morbid sight before him was clearly overwhelming.

"I don't understand," he said as Mary walked up and placed her hand on Ellen's shoulder. "God told me ... He ..."

Though Nathan's mouth remained open, and he wanted to express his belief, the words refused to be spoken.

"It's okay, Son," Craig replied, while motioning for Dr. Taylor to cover Paul's corpse. "We all make mistakes."

Nathan watched as salty tears flowed down both cheeks. "But I didn't make a mistake Doctor..."

"Matthews," Craig completed for him as Mrs. Pontiac, still quietly sobbing, was being led toward the door.

"Whatever. What it seems you don't understand, Doctor Matthews, is," Nathan continued. "Paul has to be alive. God told me he would ... and God does not lie!" He then turned so he could view his brother's covered face.

"Paul! It's time to come home!" Nathan shouted from the top of his eight-year-old lungs for what seemed to be a completely inexplicable reason. "And in the name of Jesus Christ and our Heavenly Father, I order you to live!"

Upon hearing Nathan's blaring demand, all present within the room instantly turned and stared at Paul's corpse.

A second passed. ... then two seconds ... then five, and ten seconds passed.

Nothing. No flash of light. No booming thunder. Nothing. ... No miracle occurred.

"I'm sorry, Nathan," Craig stated, mentally re-gathering himself after seeing what he considered young Nathan's absolute ridiculous display. "Your brother isn't going to..."

Nathan shook his head and his brown pupils suddenly widened. He then began to point in Paul's direction.

“I’m not going to what?” Paul nonchalantly asked Dr. Matthews while the white cotton sheet dropped to his waist as he leaned forward and slung his legs over the side of the table.

His exposed healed chest revealed a heavenly glow.

# **Fury In Hidden Valley**

## **Chapter Twenty-Three**

Mile-long bolts of lightning flashed across the dark stormy Hidden Valley skies like jagged white electrical arms reaching for the nearest tall object they could seize. And ear-piercing thunder resounded as if coming from trillion watt speakers, while sheet upon solid sheet of half inch sized hail laced rain unceasingly pelted the tinted Plexiglas exterior of Krypton Software headquarters. Yet, despite the atmospheric violence being bestowed upon those living next to the western slopes of the Appalachian Mountains, the storm's ferocity almost paled in comparison to the fury being released within the company's executive suite.

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“Are you aware of what day this Sunday is going to be?” Tom Steel asked, slamming his personalized Company President coffee mug on top of the four by fifteen foot, tinted glass-topped table – causing a small amount of its contents to spill across the surface.

“Yes, sir,” Ray Sizemore replied. The look he gave Phillip Cunningham was sharp enough to behead the man if that were possible and Krypton's Head of Corporate Security could mentally picture his minion's head tumbling down the hallway as it's disembodied lips mumbled, “It's Valentine's day, sir.”

“You're damn right it's going to be Valentine's Day,” Tom stated, forcefully pressing a button on the remote within his hand.

Two panels on the front of the conference room instantly opened and within seconds, each detail of Operation Chicken Hawk flashed across a 50-inch LED screen.

“And would any one of you incompetent morons like to remind us the date this project first started?”

Software-Development Chief Mike Furrow momentarily glanced at the ceiling. “The fifth of January,” he nervously squeaked.

“That's right, Mike. The fifth of January,” Tom confirmed, grabbing a laser pointer and aiming it toward a flashing green box, which displayed today's date. “According to this tracking chart, up to this point we have spent roughly four weeks and a hundred thousand dollars on this project. ... Yet, despite all the company time and money spent, I haven't even seen a basic outline of the game we're about to create. ... I want to know why?”



Mike gazed at his superior, and his lips formed a frown. “Presently, sir,” he said, turning toward Ray and Phillip. “Software development is still waiting for a copy of Plutonium’s Revenge. The minute we get it, we’ll immediately start converting it.”

“I see.” Tom grunted before focusing on his Security Chief. “So what’s the problem, Ray? You’ve had four weeks to steal a copy of Gibsonville School's Computer Club’s game.”

Ray looked down toward the grayish tinted tabletop and gulped. “Well,” he began, while reaching to loosen the knot of his maroon pinstriped tie. “As everyone knows, the day after this project was originally initiated; our department did attempt to get a copy of the boy’s game. However, due to an unexpected encryption problem, it proved unsuccessful. Then, before another attempt could be arranged, Paul Pontiac, the computer club's president and co-developer of Titan Industries’ best-selling game ‘Clash of The BattleStars’, got beaten by a member of a local gang and was hospitalized.”

“I heard about that,” Tom said with a serious expression. “And according to a news blog I read a while back, the kid died from the encounter.”

“That’s partially true,” Phillip acknowledged in an authoritarian tone. “Soon after arriving at Duke Medical Center, Paul Pontiac did die during a surgical procedure and his body was taken to the morgue. However, a few hours afterwards a highly unusual thing happened. The kid didn’t remain dead.”

“What?” Tom yelped, now staring at Phillip as if the guy had gone loony. “What do you mean, he didn’t remain dead? Did someone discover that the kid was only in a coma?”

“No sir. Paul Pontiac unquestionably died. ... According to the medical personnel I spoke with, the kid flat lined and was irreparably gone before the end of his thrombus removal procedure. Yet, somehow, less than three hours later – in front of both Doctor Matthews and Dr. Taylor, a couple of nurses, and his mother and brother, Paul unexpectedly sat up and swung his feet over the edge of the steel cart his decaying corpse had been lying on.”

“Yeah. Right,” Mike loudly blurted in a show of disbelief, while shaking his head. “And the next thing you’re going to tell us is Celestial Angels then filled the morgue and began to sing ‘Glory Hallelujah’.”

“No, I’m not. And please don't be so overly dramatic, Mike,” Phillip replied in a raised tone. “What I’m telling all of you is true. It actually happened. And to add to the strangeness ... the kid was completely healed - no crushed sternum, no signs of being beaten, nothing.”

Tom raised his left eyebrow. “So you’re telling me Paul Pontiac is now completely okay.”

“Yes, sir,” Phillip solemnly nodded. “And to confirm this - during the two days following this inexplicable miracle, Dr. Matthews (who kept emphatically insisting this event could not have possibly occurred), scheduled a number of tests, took x-rays, and even had an MRI done on the kid.

And in the end, everything came out clean. It was just as if the injury or death never happened. So come Friday afternoon, the doctor sent the kid home.”

“You don't say?” Tom chuckled in a manner that reflected he didn't believe a single word which had been spoken. He then turned to face Ray Sizemore. “Ray,” he began. “... isn't Phillip the same employee you told me a few weeks ago wasted company time and money by stealing an encrypted copy of the boy's game - without having the password, just because a local patrol car drove past the school?”

Ray nodded affirmatively.

“I thought so,” Tom continued with a partial grin. “And now he's insisting that not only has Paul Pontiac risen from the dead, just like Jesus Christ supposedly did. He's also implying that if I phoned the kid's house, I could probably reach him.”

Ray looked at Phillip and once again nodded.

Tom made a steeple with his fingers. “And what has Paul been doing since then Mr. Cuttingham, flying around the neighborhood, playing a golden harp? Or maybe he's decided to become a disciple and is currently knocking on all the neighbors' doors, trying to spread The Gospel. ... Not to mention, has he done any walking on water or turned any liquids into wine recently, Phillip?”

Phillip Cuttingham gazed into Mr. Steel's hazel eyes and lowered his head. “No, sir. I'm sure he hasn't done anything like that. .... If Paul is staying true to his nature, I'm certain the following Monday he returned to school, and he and his club resumed working on their game.”

Tom grimaced. “Ray,” he said, shaking his head. “You know that having an employee who's occasionally incompetent is bad enough. But apparently, Phillip here seems to also be living in a fantasy world. People just do not come back to life once they're dead. So what do you recommend doing with him?”

Ray gazed at Phillip and sighed. “I know the two of you no doubt believe I should terminate him and that's probably the politically-correct thing to do. But in seeing that Phillip has been a loyal employee during the past few years I have known him, I recommend we give him a second chance.”

“A second chance?” Tom echoed, choking on his cappuccino. “Are you out of your damn mind, Ray? This project is worth well over a half a billion dollars if we're successful. And not only did Phillip majorly screw up a few weeks ago. The guy has obviously lost his Fruit Loops. ... People coming back from the dead ... of all things.”

“But Paul did,” Phillip quietly insisted. “Just ask Dr. Matthews. He'll tell you. The whole incident was so bizarre. It almost made him convert from being a Wiccan into a Christian.”

Tom folded his arms around his waist and exhaled as he turned back toward Ray. “Is what’s Phillip’s claiming actually true?”

Ray’s eyes flickered downward, and he began to squirm in his seat. “To be honest, Tom. Everything Phillip just reported to you has been verified. And believe me, I wasn’t the only one astonished at this turn of events. According to a bit of info I received from Charles yesterday, the defense attorney for Butch McGuire (the kid who started this whole ordeal by beating up Paul), is presently throwing a raving fit because his client was officially charged with first-degree murder. ... Since it’s obvious that Paul is actually alive and well, he’s currently pushing to get all charges dropped. “

“I see,” Tom responded, grabbing his chin. He then sat and thought about this for a while. “You know; I got half a damn mind to fire both of you. ... What in the Hell is my corporate security division turning into? First, your boy here bungles a major assignment and now both, you and this idiot who works for you expect me to believe the impossible. What do you think I am Ray, a mother-f\_cking nincompoop?”

Ray glared at his boss as his face and neck flushed an angry bright red.

“No, you’re not a mother-f\_cking nincompoop, Tom,” he eventually replied between gritted teeth. “And if you want to fire us, fine. I’m sure both of us can find a job elsewhere. But know one thing, Tom, before you do. What Phillip has presented to you during this meeting was the absolute truth, as unbelievable as it may seem.”

Tom stared at his Security Chief and then at Phillip, and took a deep breath. “Okay, Ray. You win. ... Here’s what I’m going to do. I’ll give the two of you until Friday to come up with a fail-safe plan that get us a useable copy of Plutonium’s Revenge.... However, should you fail to do so, and the DVD or memory storage card is not on the top of my desk within the following week - you’re both fired.

# The Golden Rule Trojan

## Chapter Twenty-Four

Gazing intensely at the twenty-four inch, 3-D, flat-panel computer monitor in front of them, Paul Pontiac and Tim Hegler patiently watched as Daniel E. Whitehouse the Third (who had recently turned twelve), grabbed his wireless Logitech mouse and clicked the pulsating silvery-white icon at the bottom of his Windows screen.

“Do you think this is actually going to work?” Tim asked, raising his multidimensional viewing glasses.

“I’m not sure,” Paul said as an egg-shaped asteroid similar to Haley’s Comet began to soar toward them. The meteor exponentially increased in size while the words Plutonium Revenge flashed like an extended gold-colored firework display, both above and below. “I’ve never coded anything like this before. There was never a need to.”

Tim nodded his understanding as the game’s start-up demo and programming credits steadily rolled across the screen.

“I think my system’s about ready,” Daniel stated, his eyes twinkling as he joined his friend’s conversation. “But do you really think ...?”

“It better,” Tim answered before Daniel could finish. “Somebody already tried to steal our game once. And with it now being almost three fourths finished, we’d be stupid to think they’re not going to try again.”

Daniel and Paul nodded their agreement as a resounding BOOM, not unlike a nuclear bomb exploding, echoed from all directions in dramatic 7.1 surround sound.

The moment Daniel’s light blue, plaster walls stopped vibrating, Paul smiled, and the game’s Main Menu appeared before them.

“Okay, Daniel,” he said in an authoritarian tone. “Let’s execute the Kryptonite Module.”

Within milliseconds of the moment Daniel selected the Skull and Cross-bones icon; a high pitch whined blared so astoundingly loud; it seriously threatened to burst their eardrums.

“Power Down! Power Down!” Tim and Paul shouted at the top of their lungs while Daniel reached for his computer’s Power Off Button.

However, before Daniel could reach over and flip the switch, a bright blue screen of death, not unlike what used to appear in Windows XP, flashed in front of their eyes - just moments before the flat panel turned completely black.

“Ah, Paul,” Daniel said, hitting his desktop’s Reset button before twisting around so he could face his friends. “I don’t believe we’ve got this set up right.”

Both Tim and Paul stared at Daniel while displaying a grimace and then Paul tilted his chair back and presented Daniel an overly sarcastic grin. “No kidding, Sherlock,” he retorted as Tim chuckled. “And exactly how long did it take you to figure that one out – a couple of hours?”

“About a couple hundred microseconds,” Daniel stated, not catching the sarcasm. He then picked up the half-empty soda sitting on his desk just to his left and took a long sip.

“So what are we going to do now?” Tim asked as Daniel flipped his desktop’s power switch on. “This obviously isn’t working as planned.”

“Do you think getting a few of the smarter programmers in our computer club involved in the development of this module might help?” Daniel asked a couple of minutes later. “I’m sure Cathy and Richard would be interested.”

Tim grunted, and Paul gazed toward the ceiling.

“Maybe,” Paul slowly acknowledged. “But if we’re going to let them work on this particular module, what would be the best way to do it? There’s no way we want to utilize the Office Skill computers since they’ve been broken into once this semester.”

“True,” Tim concurred before grabbing the orange, six-inch nerf basketball from off the bed next to him and tossing it towards Daniel’s hoop. “Ah, two points. ... I always knew I was good. ... So what do you guys think about everyone working from home and storing Plutonium’s Revenge’s files on a data cloud like the one Amazon offers?”

Paul looked at Tim, and his eyebrow lifted as if he was puzzled. “Amazon’s offering a cloud-based data-storage service?”

“Yeah. That’s old news. Don’t you keep up with Tech stuff like that?” Tim said, giving his friend a look as if pink and purple polka dots suddenly materialized on his face. “They offer five Gigs worth absolutely free. And if that’s not enough, they’re currently running a special where if you buy an MP3 album from them, they’ll give you a free upgrade to twenty Gigs.”

“Oh really?” Paul displayed a half smile before turning to glance in Daniel’s direction. “That might work ... at least temporarily.”

“Temporarily?” Daniel repeated as the desktop went into screensaver mode and began to display a galaxy class starship zooming through an ever-changing star field. “Why couldn’t we use it permanently?”

“We could,” Paul replied, starting to display a sinister grin. “However, in doing so, I wouldn’t be able to accomplish my goal. ... In order to do that, we’re going to need to set up an official Gibsonville School Computer Club website.”

Tim shook his head in disagreement. “No. I don’t think it would work, Paul. ... While it would provide a common area for us to communicate and share files, whoever it is that’s trying to steal our game would soon discover the site and try to hack it.”

“Yep. You’re absolutely correct, Tim” Paul replied, releasing a sinister laugh. “And that’s exactly what I’m counting on.”

Tim looked at his friend as if he had gone bonkers. “Now wait a minute Paul. Did I just hear you right? You want to set up a website so our software thief can find it and hack it? ... Are you crazy or something?”

“Nope,” Paul nodded. “We’re going to teach Krypton Software a valuable lesson?”

“Krypton Software?” Daniel raised an eyebrow. “Who are they and how do you know they’re the ones trying to steal our game?”

“Krypton Software is Titan’s Industries biggest competitor,” Tim answered before Paul had a chance to reply. “And not only have I overheard my dad mention their name multiple times; he’s ranted a good many times about how the company has tried to steal nearly completed games from them on umpteen occasions.”

“Oh really?” Paul said, sitting up a bit more upward. “So your Dad’s employer hasn’t been able to stop them?”

Tim looked at his friend and shook his head. “No. Not yet. Even though they’ve tried, they haven’t been able to successfully catch them in the act. So the only thing the company’s been able to do is file a Patent-infringement lawsuit each time Krypton releases a “copycat” game – and years later, when the suit’s finally heard in court, the judicial settlement given is way too late to be effective.”

“I see,” Paul said with a nod.

“So if Titan Industries hasn’t been able to stop them, how in the world are we gonna be able to do it?” Daniel asked, grabbing his wireless mouse.

Paul jumped onto his feet and headed over to Daniel's bookcase. He then pulled out a Bible and opened it to the book of Matthew, chapter 7, verse 12.

"Gentlemen," he began, becoming abnormally serious. "I believe it's time for us to complete 'The Golden Rule Trojan'."

## Black Mail

### Chapter Twenty-Five

Sitting in front of the flat screen Dell monitor inside of his six by eight cubicle, Charles leaned forward and studied the late 1960's video his Internet search had uncovered.

*Could this be the golden egg I've been looking for the past three weeks? ... It certainly looks like it is.*

Charles grabbed his mouse and selected his browser's zoom option. Upon reaching a four hundred percent zoom factor, his mouth partly opened and an ear-to-ear smile streaked across his face.

"I've finally got you, Carl Thompson," he exclaimed, gazing toward the sunlight outside one of Krypton Software's Plexiglas exterior walls. "And unlike the last time I thought I had something we could use against you, when Ray Sizemore sees this, he'll have a mega hoot."

"A mega hoot?" Phillip asked, narrowing an eye, as he stepped into the cubicle next to his coworker's. A twelve-ounce cup of hot coffee tightly grasped within his right hand revealed his tension.

"Yeah," Charles beamed. "You're not going to believe what I just found. Come ... take a look at this."

Phillip turned toward his friend and displayed a superficial smile.

*I'm sure you couldn't have found anything that good, he thought, setting his hazelnut brew on the left side of his keyboard. I've been trying to dig up something on Carl ever since the first week of January. And it seems that from the day this guy was born, his life has been so goody two shoes; he should have been nominated as a poster child for Mr. Clean.*

Upon entering Charles' cubicle a few seconds later, Phillip proceeded to study the video being displayed on his co-worker's twenty-two-inch monitor.

"That is Carl Thompson, Gibsonville's Office Skills instructor. Isn't it?" Phillip asked, staring at the young, longhaired hippie in front of him.

"Yeah. Back when he was either in his late teens or early twenties," Charles replied. "Isn't this amazing? Who would have thought someone as straight-laced as he is would have been involved in something like this?"



Phillip nodded, but kept his eyes glued to the screen.

“You know,” Charles began, when the video reached its end. “... With Mr. Thompson now working in public education, if word about this or any accompanying pictures ever got out; it could easily cost him his job – especially since he works in a ‘Peyton Place’ neighborhood like Gibsonville.”

“You really think so?” Phillip took a second look at Charles’ monitor and clasped his chin. “He was just a kid when these were taken.”

“It doesn’t matter.” Charles picked up his handset, so he could dial his boss’s office. “As sensitive as society is today, in order to be an effective instructor you must maintain a high reputation. And if only a couple of these photos or the video were ever brought to the local media’s attention, it would be more than enough to blow Mr. Thompson’s reputation all the way to hillbilly heaven.”

Milliseconds later, upon hearing the telltale click of Ray picking up his phone being resounded on Charles’ external speaker, Phillip wondered if the exposé his coworker had found would actually be as effective as Charles thought it would be.

Thirty minutes later, the answer came in the form of a company-issued iPad and an order to immediately head toward Gibsonville.

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“Now why couldn’t Ray send Charles instead of me?” Phillip asked himself aloud as he turned right off Apple Street onto Micra Dr. – inside of Gibsonville City limits.

Carl’s off-white colonial-styled home, once again, stood proudly in the center of the block – completely surrounded with a picket fence and a three-foot high stainless steel gate which blocked the entrance to its 1950s styled front porch.

“After all, it was Charles who found the incriminating photos,” Phillip continued, reasoning with himself. “Yet, I’m always the one who gets sent out to do the dirty work. And if I fail, it’s always my job that’s on the line – not his. ... This just isn’t right.”

Phillip shook his head in frustration as he pulled behind Mr. Thompson’s cobalt blue Volkswagen Beetle, before stopping to focus on the condition of the ladybug-shaped automobile.

*Gee. Either Carl Thompson is a lot worse off than when I last saw him, or he started to collect antiques. This car looks like it was built in the early 70s. ... Hmm. I wonder if he bought it because of the burden related to his wife’s breast cancer?*

Phillip made a mental note to ask Carl if the opportunity arose and headed toward his front porch.

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“Hello. May I help you?” Carl asked, offering his outstretched hand soon after the doorbell rang.

“Yes,” Phillip replied, grabbing Carl’s hand in a firm grip. “I’m ...”

While Phillip was in the middle of answering, predominate question marks unexpectedly appeared in both of Mr. Thompson’s eyes. “You’re Phillip Cuttingham ... from Krypton Software if I recall,” Carl interrupted.

“That’s correct,” Phillip confirmed, taking a step back in surprise. He definitely wasn’t expecting Carl to remember him.

Mr. Thompson’s smile disappeared faster than a coon being chased by a dozen hounds, and he instantly dropped Mr. Cuttingham’s hand.

“So what brings you back to Gibsonville? I figured after your failed attempt to bribe me a few weeks ago, I wouldn’t be seeing that incorrigible hide of yours around these parts again.”

Phillip lowered his black leather briefcase before opening it, so he could pull out his iPad.

“We’ve got a bit of unfinished business, Mr. Thompson,” he replied in a serious tone as he clicked on his ten-inch tablet. “And this time I believe you are going to want to cooperate.”

Carl released a slight chuckle and folded his arms in front of him.

“You really think so, slimeball? I’ve already told you how I feel about my students. ... I’m not about to steal their game – no matter how much you’re thinking about offering.”

Phillip ignored Mr. Thompson’s reply and pressed a few icons. He then looked deeply into Carl’s brown eyes.

“Krypton’s not offering you any money, Mr. Thompson,” he said, giving his soon-to-be victim a menacing grin. “That deal is ancient history. What I am going to ask you to do now, you’re going to do for free.”

“Free?” Carl choked. “You must be kidding. If I wasn’t willing to help your unscrupulous organization for two hundred thousand dollars, what in the devil makes you think I’d be willing to help them for absolutely nothing?”

“This.” Phillip turned his iPad around so his victim could get a clear view of what was on its screen.

As Carl watched the short video in front of him, his pupils widened and his throat constricted.

“What the ... Heaven forbid. ... Where in the world did you get a copy of this?” Carl gasped.

“Off the Internet,” Phillip replied, sliding his iPad back into its case. “You should have known videos would be made of something as historic as Woodstock, my used-to-be nude and carefree flower child.”

“I swear. I didn’t ...” Reaching for the doorknob, Carl quickly closed the wooden front door behind him. With any luck, his wife had not overheard them. “I was just a kid at the time and never thought about things like that. Not to mention, the Internet didn’t even exist back then.”

“I know.” Phillip gave Carl a grin, not unlike a Cheshire cat’s. “But here it is and in living color as they used to say ... a young, nude, pot smoking Mr. Thompson having a great time partying with his hippie girlfriend at Woodstock. Now imagine if your neighbors or the Guilford County School board got wind of this. It might tarnish that great reputation you’ve worked so hard to maintain.”

“Tarnish it?” Carl angrily replied. “You might as well kiss my career good-bye.”

Phillip agreed. “Yep. So do you think you might be willing to cooperate this time?”

Carl stared at him and frowned.

*Heaven knows helping Krypton Software is the last thing I would ever want to do. But I have no choice. This video alone could easily cost me my job. And if that happened, how could I pay for Laura’s cancer treatment or even make the house payment?*

“You still want me to make a copy of the kid’s game?” he squeaked, moments later.

Phillip laughed. “Not exactly ...”

## The Plea Bargain

### Chapter Twenty-Six

*It was the best of times; it was the worst of times.*

Scanning the tattered copy of *The Tale of Two Cities* he found on a shelf within the Guilford County Jail cellblock he was assigned, Butch wondered why he bothered to bring it back to his bunk. Nevertheless, he opened it.

“Hmmp. I don’t know anything about the best of times, but this is certainly the worst of times.”

He then frowned and looked down the hallway towards the ten by twenty-foot common area each of the ten cells within the unit shared.

At the two stainless steel tables in view, a number of inmates were busy playing a card game – most likely, Spades. Others seemed to be passing the time conversing about women, sports, or the intimate details of their crime.

*Well. At least, it’s not as bad as it was over the weekend. ... Geez. Thirty inmates in a cellblock designed for sixteen. What were these people thinking? Are they trying to get someone killed?*

Butch contemplated the thought before turning his head toward the book hanging loose in his hands.

If things are this bad here, I can only imagine what life is going to be like at Central Prison.

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It had been a number of weeks since Butch was moved from the psychotic single cell cellblock designed for inmates deemed potentially hazardous to themselves or others. And upon arriving in these new quarters, he felt the change would be an improvement. However, less than twenty-four hours later, he was starting to have second thoughts.

*At least where I was, he began to think after spending his first weekend in the new residence, you didn’t have others bugging you about giving them your meal. Not to mention, it was a lot less cramped and noisy. And one could enjoy some private time.*

Thus, starting the next day whenever he found someone who appeared to be experienced in long-term county jail life, he would ask them if there was a way to get reassigned to the psychotic cellblock. Unfortunately though, the answer he would get was always the same.

“In order to get sent back, you have to make a serious attempt at committing suicide – one good enough to land you in the hospital. However, the risk in making it look “for real” is, there’s always the possibility you’ll succeed in your attempt and end up dead.”

*Hmmp. The odds doesn't sound like it would be worth the risk,* Butch recalled thinking.

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***It was the age of wisdom; it was the age of foolishness.***

“Man, why am I still bothering with this?” Butch muttered as he continued reading in a futile attempt to avoid boredom. “I’m no literary student. And I certainly don’t need a frigging book to remind me of what an idiot I was.”

Grasping its faded hardback cover, Butch took a deep breath and vigorously tossed the four hundred and twelve page novel toward a small lumpy pillowcase which covered the worn piece of foam, he was forced to rest his head on each night.

“What in the world was I thinking?” he shouted as the narrative sailed across his bunk. “Wasn’t beating the crap out of Paul Pontiac enough? Why in the Hell did I have to stomp his chest? I should have known doing something stupid like that would have killed him. Now, because of my idiocy, I’m gonna have to spend the rest of my life locked up like a caged animal.”

“Butch McGuire?” A voice that sounded like one of the jail deputy's, unexpectedly interrupted. “Butch Edward McGuire. I need you front and center.”

“Yes, sir,” Butch bellowed, rising from his bunk. However, soon after getting to his feet, he felt a sudden urge to urinate. ... Glancing over his shoulder in the direction where the voice called him, he lined himself in front of the stainless steel sink/commode combo unit and then added, “I’ll be right there in just a sec. Okay?”

Officer Evans peeked through the window toward Butch’s assigned bunk and frowned. However, after seeing Butch’s position, he decided not to reply.

*Dang nerves.* Butch silently grumbled. *I definitely would like to know why every single time one of the deputies calls my name; I get so dang nervous. Could it be, I'm afraid of my upcoming trial and what's bound to happen?*

Looking downward a few moments later, he verified there weren't any loose drips and zipped up his orange jumpsuit.

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“Butch McGuire,” a mostly silver-haired gentleman said, offering his hand and giving him a smile the instant deputy Evans led his client into the small six by eight-foot office public defenders was occasionally allowed to use. “I’m John McKinney. It’s been a while, since we last spoke.”

Butch nodded and took a seat in front of the dilapidated wooden desk his attorney sat behind, while the deputy moved to a position just outside the doorway. He then watched Mr. McKinney reach inside his Italian Aniline briefcase and pull out a number of documents.

“I’ve got some good news Butch, considering the fact that the last time we spoke you were looking at a first-degree murder charge.”

“Oh?” Butch lifted his head, so he could stare directly into his public defender’s eyes.

“Yes,” John confirmed. He then paused and started to read one of the papers he had previously placed on top of the scratched desktop. “It would seem a mistake was made regarding your victim. And as a result, the first-degree murder rap has been dropped.”

“Been dropped?” Butch mouthed in disbelief. “How can that be? Is Paul Pontiac alive?”

John hesitated before answering, without showing even a hint of a reciprocating joyous expression.

“Yes. It would seem so,” he replied. “And with this major charge dropped, you will no longer have to worry about potentially facing the death penalty or having to spend your remaining life incarcerated.”

“Wow. That’s fantastic.” Butch's eyes sparkled as he beamed from ear-to-ear. “So how soon can I go home?”

John McKinney leaned backwards in his wooden seat and let out a chuckle.

“Now hold on, Sport. Nobody said a word about you going home. I just wanted you to know that the worst of the charges against you has been dropped.”

Butch’s smile instantly disappeared, and a somber expression replaced it. “There’s more charges?”

John nodded in reply. “There certainly are, Son. The least of them, Assault and Battery.”

Butch sat quietly for a moment, momentarily glancing toward the ceiling.

“You WILL be able to get me off with something like six months probation ... won’t you?”

John laughed. “It's highly unlikely,” he said, grabbing one of the documents from his desk. “In consideration of the fact that your victim, Paul Pontiac, somehow survived your brutal attack, the initial charge of first-degree murder was dropped a few weeks ago. However, Prosecution isn’t about to let you go with just a minor slap on the hand.”

John then stopped to let what he had just said sink in.

“In view of recent events, the prosecuting attorney is willing to offer you a plea bargain.”

“A plea bargain?” Butch’s face rapidly transformed into a scowl. “What kind of plea bargain? I’d make a bet it’s one where I get the shaft.”

John gazed into his client’s dark-brown eyes and slightly nodded.

“Butch,” he began as he mentally reviewed how to say what needed to be said. “You cannot almost kill someone and expect the law to tell you ‘You were a bad boy. Now go home and please don’t do it again’. Therefore, in recognizing your past legal history and what you did to your victim in order to get the original charge, accepting an eight to ten-year Attempted Manslaughter sentence is a heck of a good deal.”

Butch turned and stared at John, as if mummified.

“Eight to ten years,” he whispered after several seconds had passed.

“Eight to ten,” John solemnly repeated.

Butch sat frozen as he mentally watched his whole world, his life as he used to know it, come to a sadistic end. Then suddenly, something inside snapped.

“Eight to ten friggin’ years!” he wailed, leaping to his feet. The commotion created was so loud, Deputy Evans instinctively dashed inside to apprehend him.

Mr. McKinney smiled a sad smile as the officer proceeded to wrap a pair of handcuffs around Butch’s wrists.

“It’s okay, deputy. There’s no need.”

Officer Evans stopped, still holding Butch’s arms behind his back.

“Are you sure, Mr. McKinney? Butch has a reputation of occasionally being violent.”

“I’m well aware of that,” John affirmed, reaching and raising a document from inside his opened case. “I have a copy of his record, right here, in front of me.”

Evans gazed at the public defender and shook his head, before letting Butch’s arms drop to his side. “Okay. But if there’s another outburst like...”

“I know,” John stated, giving Butch a hard stare. “I don’t think there will be any more trouble. Butch just got a bit upset over the news I had to give him.”

Evans intensely gazed at Butch as if he was ready to sic a few K-9’s on him, before turning to head back to the edge of the small office’s doorway.

John waited a second so Butch could settle himself in his seat. “So. Are you now ready to talk... as one man to another?”

Although his expression remained grimacing, and his eyes reminded John of the eerie yellow glow of a pair of cat's eyes reflecting moonlight in the darkness of night, Butch nodded his willingness.

“Okay then,” John stated, taking on a business-like tone. “You basically have two options, Mr. McGuire. One – you can accept the Prosecution’s plea bargain, and all other charges will be dropped. Or, we can turn the deal down and fight the case.”

“And if we fight it?” Butch scornfully asked.

“Not only would you be facing assault and battery, most likely, prosecution will go for an attempted first-degree murder charge, Butch. You could end up doing at least fifteen to twenty years.”

Butch snorted, before leaning his tan plastic chair back.

“It seems like either way, my life might as well be over. ... So what do I have to lose?”



# The Acquisition

## Chapter Twenty-Seven

Noticing the red and black icon at the bottom right corner of his computer screen flashing, his eyes automatically slid slightly left – to the Caller Id box, where the name of the person trying to reach him would be displayed. In reading it, a malicious smile gradually spread across his lips.

*Well. Well. Well, Mr. Thompson,* Phillip Cuttingham mentally said to himself while grabbing his wireless mouse, so he could click on the Accept Call button. *Apparently, you ARE the dolt I took you for. You actually believed Krypton's threat. ... How can you be so dumb, Carl? Didn't you realize the odds of anyone caring about the contents of a picture or video of you taken at Woodstock would be close to slim and none? Gee. You must be gullible.*

As the Accept Call button on his monitor transcended from a bright yellow to an “I wish my lawn was this color” green, Phillip couldn't help but let out a short laugh.

“Phillip Cuttingham's office,” he announced soon after turning his headset's mic on. “What can I do for you today, Mr. Thompson?”

“You could let me off the hook, Mr. Cuttingham,” Carl snarled over the receiver. “What you and your company are trying to do isn't right, Phillip ... and all of you corporate yahoos at Krypton Software know it.”

Phillip initiated a computer search for his copy of the Woodstock video that featured Carl Thompson as a nude, carefree flower child and upon locating it, instructed Windows Media Player to play it.

“Yes. I could, Mr. Thompson,” he said with a nod even though it was virtually impossible for Carl to see him. “However, even if I agreed to do what you've asked it wouldn't do you any good. My boss also has a copy of these files, and he's not about to let this issue drop – until you give us what we want.”

Carl paused as if contemplating his reply. “And what exactly is your company going to do if I refuse?”

Phillip leaned backwards in his black simulated leather office chair. “Are you sure you want to know Mr. Thompson?”

“Yes.”

Phillip chortled at anguish within his victim's voice. “Okay. Since you insist.”

Bringing up a Google listing of all the local TV stations in the Triad, NC area, “Mr. Thompson, have you ever heard of a TV station called WFMY? It appears to be located either in or near downtown Greensboro?”

“Of course I have,” Carl said, clearly irritated.

“Good. Because they would be the first media outlet we would send this incriminating material to, just before providing the Guilford County School Board and your school’s principal a copy. ... What’s his name, Raymond Skinner?”

“Yeah, that’s him.” Carl said nothing more for several seconds afterwards. “Would you Krypton guys really do all that? What are you trying to do, totally destroy me?”

“No. Not really.” Phillip nonchalantly responded reaching over the side of his desk and grabbing the white and blue Krypton Software mug sitting next to his keyboard before taking a long sip of an Auld Lang Syne flavored coffee. “All you have to do, Carl, is tell us what we need in order to get the latest beta of the computer club’s game. After that, you won’t have anything to worry about. The moment we verify we’ve obtained a working copy of Plutonium’s Revenge; we’ll delete every incriminating picture and video on file, and you’ll never hear from any of us again.”

“Yeah. Right,” Carl sarcastically retorted. “Until the next time Krypton wants something else ...”

“No. It won’t be that way at all, Mr. Thompson,” Phillip assured him, fully aware that his victim had spoken the truth. “When I say you will never hear from us again. I really mean it. You’re going to have to trust me, Carl.”

Placing his hand across his phone’s mouthpiece, Carl gazed at the handset and pressed its oval-shaped mute button.

“I swear,” he silently muttered. “Phillip must think I’m an idiot or something. But what can I do? If I don’t give Krypton what they want, they’ll ruin me. Yet, if I do release the access codes to the kid’s game, I’d make an even bet they’ll be on my case again the instant Paul or Tim create another one.”

Shaking his head in frustration, Carl frowned and pressed the oval button again to un-mute his phone. “So you really think I should trust you, Phillip?”

“Yes, you should. But even if you don’t, what choice do you have, Carl? It’s either give us what we want, or you can kiss your job, career, and mostly likely, your family good-bye.”

Carl grimaced, knowing his adversary was right. “Okay, Phillip. You win. But I hope if Krypton ever gets caught because of their misdeeds, people like yourself will at least have the decency not to reveal where they got their information.”

*Decency?* Phillip mentally cackled. “I promise we won’t say a word, Carl. Like I said, within a couple of days of obtaining a copy of Plutonium’s Revenge, we’ll erase every record within our files, which indicates we ever contacted you.”

“Okay. . . I just hope you’re actually telling the truth.”

Pulling up the computer file where all of his sensitive data was stored, Carl felt his stomach muscles involuntarily tighten, and an internal voice bluntly reminded him that not only what he was about to do was wrong – at some point in time it would probably come back to bite him.

“Are you ready for the name of the Gibsonville’s Computer Club website and all the codes you’re going to need?”

“Yes.” Phillip beamed from ear-to-ear as he grabbed a pen and yellow Post-It note. “Let’s have them.”

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Standing next to Krypton’s dark-gray plexiglas external wall, Ray Sizemore carelessly gazed across the forest-covered slopes of the eastern Appalachian Mountains before stopping to glance at his diamond-studded Rolex. *Hmmph. It’s already five past four. Phillip’s late again. . . I wonder what excuse he’s going to use this time?*

A metallic rap then resounded from his office doorway, and Mr. Cuttingham walked in wearing his usual business attire: tan slacks, white shirt, and brightly-colored flora necktie – something similar to what a tourist might wear while vacationing in southern Florida.

“You’re late,” Ray said, making an exaggerated display of looking at his watch while his subordinate took a seat.

“I know.” Phillip briefly stared at the carpeted floor below him. “But before I came here, I wanted to verify with Mike that the software we got was fully operational.”

Ray Sizemore’s right eye narrowed. “And?”

“It’s a good copy,” Phillip stated, though his grin revealed his lack of self-confidence. “Plutonium’s Revenge fired right up – no problems at all.”

“Hmm.” Ray pursed his lips. “There weren’t any passwords that needed decoding or any other security measures in place?”

“No, sir. Once we entered the Computer Club’s website using the codes Mr. Thompson provided, locating the game and making a copy of it was no problem at all. In fact, it was almost too easy.”

Ray grimaced, then abruptly grabbed a red, white, and blue aluminum can from the top of his desk, took a quick sip, and slammed it down so aggressively, a couple of drops of soda jetted out of its lid like a pair of liquid rockets.

“That was exactly what I was afraid of, Phillip.”

Cuttingham's lips parted. “What do you mean, Sir?”

“What I mean is...,” Ray began to growl in a low tone. “Paul Pontiac and Timothy Hegler may be just a couple of teenage kids, but they’re certainly not idiots. ... One cannot help but wonder – Why in the world would they have a copy of Plutonium’s Revenge where it could be easily accessed? It wouldn’t make sense.”

Phillip squirmed in his chair like a grade-school kid overly eager to answer his teacher’s question.

“But the game wasn’t totally unprotected, Mr. Sizemore. Not only did we have to use the password Mr. Thompson supplied in order to access the computer club’s website, the game itself was also password-protected – Not to mention, encrypted.”

“It was encrypted?” The crease in the middle of Ray Sizemore’s forehead deepened.

“Yes, Sir. It took Mike Furror’s software-development personnel over two hours to decrypt it, even with using the key Mr. Thompson provided.”

“Two hours?” Ray frowned deeply with puzzlement. “Why so long?”

“Well. According to what Mike told me, when his team tried to decrypt Plutonium’s Revenge, they discovered it had been encrypted using something called a 384-bit Blowfish algorithm. It’s supposed to be stronger than a standard military encryption.”

“384-bit, you say?” A smirk formed on Ray Sizemore’s face as if he was impressed. “Now that sounds like something Tim and Paul would do. ... All right!”

“So them doing that makes everything okay?” Phillip asked while a few of his fingers continued to twitch.

Ray presented an affirming nod, before rising to his feet and walking toward the plexiglas wall.

“Phillip,” he said, before stopping to watch a chicken hawk haphazardly sail over some distant foothills. “For once in your life you did good. And after our version of the game hits the market, I’ll see you’ll finally get that raise and promotion you’ve been bugging me about.”

Phillip grinned as he thanked him, then shook his boss’s hand and proceeded toward the door.

*Thank god; you're such a stupid dolt, Mr. Thompson,* he mentally shouted as he started down the hallway toward his cubicle. And because you are, I'm finally going to get what I truly deserve.

# The McGuire Deal

## Chapter Twenty-Eight

Wearing his gang's colors – bib overalls, and a black, white, and gray plaid short-sleeve shirt, Stan Ramirez repeatedly tapped his tan work boot as he waited near the bottom of the rusty black metallic staircase.

*Those stupid computer geeks. They should have left the gym by now. What could be taking Tim and Paul so long? P.E. class is over and the end of sixth period bell rang a good five minutes ago.*

A moment later, a number of freshmen left the high school extension of the K-12 school on their way toward their assigned bus and instinctively Stan turned toward them and frowned. Apparently, none of them was the one he was seeking.

When Cathy Skinner stepped off the bottom step of the staircase a couple of minutes later, it looked like she was about to head toward the gym.

“Hey, Stan,” she greeted just before passing. “Is there a particular reason you’re hanging around here? Perhaps you’d like to join me? We’re going to have a computer club meeting in just a few minutes.”

At first, Stan grimaced, then he quickly changed it to a fallacious smile – even though deep inside his pencil-thin abdomen, he could feel his washboard muscles tightening.

“No thanks, Cathy. I think I’ll pass,” he said while in the back of his mind he was thinking, *I swear, if anyone else would have asked me something stupid like that I would have beaten the living crap out of them. But, since she’s the principal’s daughter...* “I’m only interested in playing games, not programming them. By the way, have you seen Paul Pontiac? I really need to have a word or two with him.”

Cathy gazed at the acting gang leader, displaying a scowl. “It all depends. What do you want to talk to him about?”

“Does it matter?” Stan almost snarled at the five-foot-ten blond standing next to him. “If I need to see him, then I need to see him. What the two of us need to discuss isn’t really any of your business.”

“But I’m making it my business, Stan,” Cathy stated with a determined smile. “Do you think I’ve forgotten what Butch did to him a few weeks ago? And since Paul’s my boyfriend, I’m not about to let you or that worthless gang of yours have another shot at him ... at least if I can help it.”

“What? You’re Paul’s assigned body guard now?” Stan chuckled. “That’s a real hoot.”

Cathy glared at the self-righteous smart aleck standing in front of her as if somehow he had miraculously transformed into a vampire, and she was ready to drive a silver stake through his ghoulish heart.

“Paul Pontiac really doesn’t need a body guard. I have no doubt that he can take care of himself,” she hissed while gazing into his yellowish-brown eyes. “But that doesn’t mean I’m not going to look after him.”

Stan could see a rage building in her, and it reminded him of a wild tigress. He had never seen that side of her and admired it.

“Butch McGuire needs Paul's help,” he admitted. “That's why I need to talk to him.”

Cathy tilted her head as if what Stan had spoken was inconceivable. “You’re kidding, aren’t you? Paul was Butch’s victim. He literally beat the snot out of him. And you now want Paul to help Butch? ... Are you losing your mind, Stan? ”

Stan glanced downward at the loose gravel surrounding his worn boots.

“Listen. I know what Butch did was wrong. And because of the beating he gave Paul, he’s facing some really serious charges ... some that could send him to prison for the rest of his life.”

“So?” Cathy said displaying a small grin. “The moron’s finally going to get what he deserves.”

“I know. And a lot of people would agree with you,” Stan confessed, even though his eyes involuntarily hardened. “But you don’t really know Butch the way I do Cathy. You’ve only seen his rough side.”

“There’s another side to him?” She couldn’t help but let loose a small laugh. “I certainly haven’t seen it.”

Stan nodded his understanding and became solemn. “Yeah, I'm afraid there is, Cathy. But he would never show it ‘cause ... and please don’t repeat this. ... he’s afraid others wouldn’t accept him if they knew the tortured person he really is. You know, deep inside.”

Doubt flashed across Cathy’s face, yet something told her this definitely wasn’t the time to verbalize it. “What do you mean?”

Stan hesitated. “Do you promise you’ll never reveal to anyone what I’m about to tell you? I need to know ‘cause if Butch ever found out I told someone he’d kill me.”

Cathy watched as fear crept across Stan’s face like a malevolent mask... and then promised.

First taking an in-depth examination of everything surrounding them, Stan cleared his throat, then took a second scan, so he could be assured that no one besides Cathy would ever hear the forbidden words he was about to speak.

“I don’t know exactly how much you know about Butch’s past Cathy. And we’re talking about the things that occurred before he and his mother moved to Gibsonville,” Stan began as his eyes nervously flickered. “But those times certainly weren’t pretty, and I sometimes wonder how Butch manages to survive as well as he does.”

“Oh?” Cathy raised an eyebrow and a tragic scene from one of Dicken’s tales began to mentally manifest itself.

“Yeah.” Stan then unexpectedly stopped and glanced upward as if for an indistinct reason, he was perplexed.

“Let’s start with this,” he continued a moment later. “You know George McGuire, who is doing time at the Guilford County Prison farm because of a shoplifting charge, isn’t Butch’s real dad – don’t you? ... He’s only Butch’s stepfather.”

“No. I didn’t,” Cathy said looking puzzled. “The two of them sure look alike.”

“I know. But ask Reverend Graham, the preacher at your church. He’ll tell you. George McGuire is actually Butch’s stepfather. And even though the guy has a natural knack for getting himself into legal trouble, he’s been a heck of a lot better father than Butch’s real Dad.”

Cathy gazed at Stan as if she had dubieties. “How’s so?”

“Well.” Stan paused so he could get the words in the right order. “According to what Butch told me, not only was his real father a no-good worthless drug addict, he was also extremely abusive.”

Cathy’s pupils instantly widened. “Abusive as in ...?”

“You got it,” Stan said with a nod. “Not only was the man verbally and physically abusive in the worse way imaginable ever since Butch was four years old, he also prostituted him in order to get the money needed to cover his addiction.”

“Oh my gawd!” Cathy yelped as her palms unconsciously partially tightened into a fist. “That’s unbelievable, Stan. Didn’t Butch’s mother do anything to stop it?”

“Eventually she did. ... But it took several years for her to build up the nerve ‘cause the monster she married was not only physically and verbally abusing her as well; he repeatedly threatened to kill her if she dared to tell anyone about what he was doing. And believe me; from the way Butch described his real dad, the man was more than big enough to easily do it.”



“I see,” Cathy said after taking a second to absorb what she had just been told. “So what finally changed?”

“One day the guy made a mistake and ended up in jail on some drug charges. And while he was incarcerated, she somehow found the courage to file charges.”

“Did they stick?” Cathy looked tense.

“Yeah. The state gave him twenty years with no chance of parole. And a few months afterwards when the jerk was finally sent to prison, the two of them moved to Gibsonville, and she divorced him.”

“Wow,” Cathy caught herself saying. “It’s no wonder ...”

Stan grinned a subtle grin and proceeded to scan the parking lot, once again.

After a short period of time had passed, “So do you think you could help me find Paul, so I can try to convince him to help get Butch’s charges reduced? If he’d be willing, my gang’s thinking about making him an offer that could make both him and Tim a couple of Gibsonville School heroes.”

“Gibsonville School heroes?” Cathy’s narrowed eyes revealed her bewilderment. “How could that be?”

“Do you recall how the Regional football trophy disappeared from the school’s display case during last year’s Christmas holiday?”

Cathy gestured that she did.

“Well, if Paul were willing to help Butch. I believe my gang could arrange it so he and Tim would ‘accidentally’ find the trophy and return it.”

“Thus making them heroes,” Cathy spat as if each word spoken had been coated in garlic.

Stan affirmatively nodded.

## Alien Warfare

### Chapter Twenty-Nine

As Daniel E. Whitehouse the Third sat patiently waiting in front of the black deco computer desk, Tim Hegler gazed at the forty-two plasma to the back wall of his bedroom and grabbed its rectangular-shaped remote before strategically placing his forefinger across the top of one of its buttons. Two months had passed since Krypton Software had stolen a copy of their game.

“Is everyone ready?” he questioned, first looking at Daniel, then Paul Pontiac, who was sitting on the floor with his back against the side of Tim’s bed – and eventually young Nathan, who had positioned his wheelchair beside his older brother.

Each of the boys nodded and almost simultaneously lowered their wrist, so they could grasp a pair of black “active” multidimensional glasses resting nearby.

“Okay, gentleman,” Tim continued when all eyes were covered. “It’s time. Daniel, hit my desktop’s start button, and I’ll flick on the TV. Then we’ll let the show begin.”

A red-lettered digital clock hanging on Tim’s wall automatically ticked off another minute and soon afterwards, its sultry female voice said, “The time is now one p.m.”

Daniel glanced in its direction and could not help but break into a grin. He then proceeded to do what Tim instructed while everyone else in the twenty by thirty-five-foot bedroom kept their eyes glued on the large flat screen monitor in front of them.

In less time than it would take someone to shout, “Welcome to Microsoft Windows Version 9,” the monitor’s darkened screen burst to life and an enormous red, blue, yellow, and green Window’s flag began to soar toward them.

Surrounding it directly above and below, the words Microsoft Midori sizzled like a 3-D firework display in bold gold-colored letters while the brightly colored flag waved, as if blown by a gusty ten to fifteen mph breeze.

“Wow! That’s amazing,” Nathan exclaimed, unable to contain himself as the logo of the yet unreleased version of Windows fluttered in full glory. “But what’s Midori and how did you get a copy of this Tim?”

Tim turned to face Paul's handicapped brother, and his lips formed a grin. However, before he answered him, he noticed his best friend's concerned expression and deliberately chose to remain quiet – at least for a second.

“Have you forgotten that my dad is the head of Titan Industries Software Division?” Tim eventually said, more statement-like than in asking a question. “He happens to have a friend who works on Microsoft's Windows Development Team. And what you are seeing my friends is a pre-beta copy of Windows 9. ... Titan Industries through the help of my dad's friend was selected as one of few companies that get to preview this upcoming operating system, so they can start developing multidimensional games for it.”

“This new software's fantastic,” Nathan yelled, his voice echoing throughout the room.

Tim glanced at him and briefly chuckled, then pushed the necessary buttons that would guide the unfamiliar desktop to a square, blue-colored box containing Microsoft's redesigned Internet Explorer logo. Moments later, when the browser application appeared full screen, he brought up a website called Tech TV. At present, it was showing a live newscast taking place at Krypton Software's headquarters in Hidden Valley, Tennessee.

“Will you take a look at that,” Paul said, raising an eyebrow upon seeing how Krypton had transformed their dark-gray plexiglas exterior to an oversized simulated screen. “They must have spent a small fortune on that special effect.”

Tim laughed a single laugh, then shook his head in disagreement. “Nope. You're wrong, Paul. What you're seeing is old-school technology and probably only cost them a few hundred bucks. ... If they would have transformed their exterior wall into a giant multidimensional screen which didn't require special viewing glasses, then that would have been both expensive and remarkable.”

Daniel nodded his agreement before grabbing a bright-red aluminum soda can he had earlier set on Tim's desk, and taking a sip.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” a dark suited gentleman standing on a raised platform located near the middle of the TV screen began to announce while a semi-gray haired executive approached the center stage. “At this time I am proud to introduce to you Mr. Allen Sharp, Krypton Software's beloved CEO.”

Instantly, the hundreds present at the software company's flamboyant affair rose to their feet and began to repeatedly clap.

Tim and Daniel watched as the CEO took his bows, and a defiant smirk began to emerge on Tim's face.

However, unlike the others around the room who seemed entertained with what looked like was going to be a never-ending applause, Nathan quickly got bored and began to shift in his seat. Then a microsecond later, a prolonged high-pitch whistle-like fart flatulently escaped from the bottom of his chair.

At once, Paul's face turned a bright shade of red, and he covered his mouth as he turned toward his brother. Tim silently observed his friend's action and proceeded to wonder if Paul was going to yell at Nathan or burst out laughing.

"Man, you sure are crude, Nathan," Daniel loudly exclaimed, exhibiting a frown as he turned to give the eight-year-old a disapproving stare.

Nathan faced him displaying a clownish grin, and extended both arms wide open. "I'm sorry, everyone. I couldn't help it. It just happened. I didn't mean to ..."

"I know you didn't," Tim interrupted, beaming from ear-to-ear. "You're a kid and sometimes things like that happen. Which reminds me, all of you do know that if Paul's Golden Rule Trojan has gone undetected, what Nathan has just said is similar to what a few Krypton Software engineers are going to be saying a few weeks from now."

"Oh?" Nathan exclaimed.

Tim nodded. "Gee. I don't know what's causing the game to do this boss," his mocking voice squeaked in a falsetto as if he were one of their employees. "It just happens."

Immediately, everyone sitting inside Tim's bedroom rolled in laughter.

Soon afterwards, Allen Sharp completed his opening remarks and turned to face his company's multistory plexiglas complex. Then in the precise amount of time it would take to push a round button on a remote, the gigantic Krypton Software name being displayed against the building's exterior instantly disappeared, and the words Alien Warfare began to radiate in twenty feet high, ghoulish-green letters. Directly behind it, a two-dimensional background appeared featuring blinding yellow phaser bolts that seared across a darkened galaxy – while mankind-created starships engaged in a fearless battle against numerous monstrous-shaped UFOs.

Amplified "Wows" and "Ahs" soon filled Hidden Valley's arena, and Tom Steel, Mike Furrow, Ray Sizemore, and George Witherspoon smiled since they could mentally visualize the mega-dollars, which would be subsequently rolling in.

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"So. How many copies do you expect will sell today?" Mike Furrow asked, turning to face his coworker.

George Witherspoon, like a German shepherd who was handed a fresh two-foot long rawhide bone for Christmas, instantly grinned. “According to the initial orders we filled the last couple of weeks, I would guess at least a couple million.”

## W.W.J.D.?

### Chapter Thirty

Having finished washing the pots and dishes from their evening meal, Ellen Pontiac stopped for a moment to gaze through an eastward facing window.

“Ah-h,” she sighed, viewing a natural yet miraculous scene above the Hegler’s farm. It was, no doubt, one some might consider picture perfect.

Apparently, with the combination of a shower, which had just passed, and the setting sun (being at the precise angle needed), a rainbow developed. And it was currently shining in full glory, displaying multi-shades of yellows, reds, blues and greens for all residing in the Triad community to see.

Ellen looked at it and smiled before glancing at her watch. It was now 8 PM, and soon Reverend Graham would be arriving. Earlier that afternoon, he had phoned and asked to see her and Paul – saying it regarded something very important. Thus, regretting having to leave the remarkable view, she headed toward the kitchen landline to tell Paul to come home.

*Heaven knows, how much he’s going to complain about having to leave Tim.*

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“Mom. I’m home,” Paul announced several minutes later, letting the screened kitchen door slam behind him.

Ellen noticed the sweat across his brow and his panting on his way to their refrigerator, *Paul must have run all the way home.* “Hi son.”

“So what does Reverend Graham want to see us about?” Paul asked, while yanking a gallon-size container of ice tea out of the refrigerator and pouring himself a glass. “I’m not in any trouble, am I?”

Ellen shook her head. “No. Not this time, Paul. The Reverend said he had something he wanted to discuss with ...”

Outside, Midnight (Paul’s dog) unexpectedly started to bark – causing Ellen to stop mid-sentence. ... When she turned to see what was disturbing him, she noticed a blue Chevrolet was cruising up their driveway.

Immediately recognizing this particular vehicle, she sprinted toward the nearest mirror available in order to check her makeup.

“Good evening, minister,” she greeted a moment later as Paul headed for the living room couch. “It’s always good to see you.”

Reverend John Graham presented her with a heart-warming smile, and the two of them shook hands. “Why, thank you Mrs. Pontiac. I’m so busy I rarely get a chance to come over. I see you made a few improvements since the last time I was here.”

Ellen immediately glanced at the patch of land his left hand was pointing to. “Oh? You must be talking about our garden. Paul and I have spent several hours working in it these past few weeks, and we’re hoping to get some fresh veggies this year.”

“By the looks of it, I have no doubt you will,” The reverend said with a smile before stepping inside.

Moments later when the two of them approached the living room, Ellen motioned for him to take a seat in their light-blue rocker. That way, she reasoned, everyone could maintain good eye contact as they discussed the matter at hand.

She then moved an afghan she had been working on into the large hand knitted bag sitting beside her wooden rocker and took her seat. “You mentioned over the phone Reverend that you wanted us to discuss Butch McGuire.”

“That’s correct,” John answered while noting Paul’s grimace. “I realize what the two of you ... well actually the three of you counting young Nathan recently experienced and ...”

“Well what?” Paul vehemently spat. “The son-of-a ... Ah, I mean ... the jerk literally tried to kill me and from what I understand ... this coming Wednesday, he’s going to trial and finally going to get what he deserves.”

Ellen quickly turned and scowled at the expression her son almost used. However, in understanding Paul’s feelings, didn’t say anything.

“Would anybody like a cup of coffee or some tea?” she asked both her son and Reverend Graham a second later, as if nothing had occurred.

“A cup of coffee would be nice,” John answered.

“And I’d appreciate a refill, Mom,” Paul added, holding up his glass. “If you don’t mind?”

After watching his mother head towards the kitchen, Paul shifted backwards in his seat. ... It definitely would not have taken a genius to figure out that he was feeling a tad nervous being alone with the minister and Reverend Graham couldn't help but silently chuckle as he watched him.

"So where's Nathan?" the minister asked in an attempt to break the silence.

Paul automatically glanced over his shoulder toward his younger brother's bedroom and then shifted so he could gaze through their kitchen doorway.

"I don't know," he said, shrugging his shoulders. He then turned again toward the kitchen and shouted, "Mom. Do you know where Nathan is? Reverend Graham wants to know, and you didn't tell me."

"He's at a friend's house," Ellen's voice echoed across their dining room. "Since it's a Friday night, I'm letting him sleep over."

"Oh," Paul said so quietly it would have been hard for anyone to hear him. "He's at a friend's house."

"I see," the reverend replied, and an awkward pause seemed to, once again, fill the living room. "Did Cathy ever tell you Paul what Stan told her in the bus parking lot the other day?"

Paul affirmatively nodded. "Yeah. But, do you actually believe that cra... ah, stuff? I sure don't. Both Tim and I talked about it, and we think it was something his gang made up to try to make us feel sorry for him. After all, if it was really real, do you think they would offer to tell us where they hid the regional football trophy ... just so we could return it and come out looking like heroes? ... Naw. I'm sorry, Reverend Graham, Sir. We're not buying it."

John's natural smile rapidly faded and when he looked at Paul, his countenance changed to one of concern. "I'm sorry to hear that. I was hoping you boys would react to this situation closer to the way Jesus did in his time of trial."

"What do you mean?" Paul asked as his mother entered the room with a metallic tray and handed him the refill he requested.

John paused, so he could take the cup of coffee Ellen offered, and then watched her return to her rocker. "If you recall Paul, even while on the cross Jesus asked for forgiveness of those who were persecuting him."

"True," Paul replied, shifting uncomfortably. "But that was because Jesus knew both the Romans and Jewish leaders did not realize who he was. Not to mention, wasn't his crucifixion our Heavenly Father's plan all along – so mankind would not die in sin?"

Reverend Graham smiled. "I see you have been paying attention in Sunday School."



“Yes, Sir. I have,” Paul said with an ear-to-ear grin. “I have to. Every Sunday on our way home from church, not only does my mother ask what was taught that morning ... after I tell her the topic, she asks a few specific questions just to see if I learned anything.”

“Good job, Ellen!” John beamed. “I wish I had at least a dozen more mothers like you. ... Unfortunately though, most parents in Ossipee Baptist don’t take an interest in what their kids are learning.”

“I try,” Ellen began. “But ...”

“There’s no buts about it, Mom,” Paul interrupted, now facing her. “As much as you’re on me about living the way Jesus would want me to and studying God’s Word, I swear, when it comes my time to go – if I don’t get to spend eternity in Heaven, it’s definitely not going to be your fault.”

“Which brings me back to what I would like to discuss with you and your mother,” John interjected. He then paused so everyone, especially Paul, could think about what was just said about living the way Jesus would want one to. “You see, Paul. What Butch did to you was completely wrong. There is no doubt about it. However, even though I don’t believe for one second the story Stan told both Cathy and I recently, I do know Butch’s past and unfortunately, it has not been an easy one.”

“So you want Mom and me to go to the prosecuting attorney and ask him to let Butch off the hook with Probation or something? And in return, let his gang tell me where the school’s trophy is so Tim and I can return it?”

John’s eyes sparkled as he observed Paul’s frown and the corners of his mouth began to turn upward.

“You have a plan. Don’t you Reverend?” Ellen asked as she leaned back in her rocker.

John broke into a broad smile. “You know me too well Ellen. ... Not only do I believe I have a way to, using the cliché, hit two birds with one stone. It would also be something I believe would make our Savior proud.”

“Oh? Let’s hear it,” Paul said, moving forward in his seat.

“Okay. But before I begin let’s first pause for a word of prayer.”

## And The Winner Is?

### Chapter Thirty-One

Wherever a few feet of space happened to become available inside of Titan Industries Software Division's auditorium, camera crews from all the major TV networks, high tech cable channels, and countless Internet high tech websites quickly filled it.

For Joe Hegler, the software division's President, the overflowing crowd seemed similar to the colony of ants he recently saw in his back yard after someone had dropped some potato chips.

However, despite the resemblance, this afternoon's circus-like environment was justified. For today was the day he would make the announcement that not only hundreds of high schools throughout the United States was waiting for, many retailers and others with interest in the PC Gaming World were wanting to hear, as well.

In just a matter of minutes, the three top winners and an "honorable mentioned" of Titan's annual High School Computer Clubs Software Contest was going to be announced. The First Place prize consisted of a \$100,000 grant, which was required to be used for the advancement of computer literacy. Additionally, every member of the winning school's computer club would receive a full college scholarship to a state-owned university of their choice within the state they resided.

The second-place prize was a \$50,000 grant, and the third-place winner would receive a \$25,000 grant. Whoever won "honorable-mentioned" would be awarded an attractive fourteen-carat gold-plated plaque that could be placed in the winning school's trophy case.

Near the elevated stage located at the front of Titan's grandiose auditorium, four Computer Club faculty advisers from various schools around the country nervously sat, fidgeting as they waited for the upcoming announcement.

Mr. Carl Thompson from Gibsonville – the computer club adviser from an 800-student K-12 school, literally sat with a plastered grin across his face that could have reminded anyone sitting nearby of Bozo the Circus Clown.

*Wow. I can't believe it,* Carl thought while various executive-type gentlemen took their assigned seats on the stage in front of him.

Soon afterwards, loud festive-type music began to play.

*This is amazing. Gibsonville School is finally going to receive a major recognition. Maybe even First prize. ... I can only imagine how this is going to help my career. ... Wow! Thanks Paul and Tim.*

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Meanwhile, back at Gibsonville School the End of Fifth Period bell was scheduled to ring when unexpectedly their PA proceeded to blare.

“Attention all students. I repeat. Attention all students. Would the members of Gibsonville’s Computer Club please report to the Office Skills classroom instead of your regularly scheduled sixth period class. Thank You.”

Instantly, grins stretched from ear-to-ear on Paul’s, Tim’s, and Daniel’s faces as they turned in their seats and shared a high-five. Apparently, Mr. Skinner had approved their petition, which requested that they would be allowed to watch Titan’s Award Ceremony since today was the last day of school.

“Can you believe it?” Tim said, taking a quick glance in Paul’s direction as he stuffed his Advanced Algebra book inside of his backpack. “The man actually has a heart.”

Paul glanced backwards so he could see his friend and smiled.

“A heart?” Cathy interrupted as she came up beside them. “It’s more like, he’s got a daughter.”

“A daughter?” the boys repeated. They seemed to be puzzled.

“Why of course, silly boys,” Cathy continued, giving them a grin. “Don’t you think a girl knows how to get what they want from their father, especially when she’s a prominent member of the computer club?”

Both Tim and Paul laughed.

“You do have a point,” Paul commented as the four of them headed down the hallway. “They do have a way of securely wrapping their dads around their little finger. ... I sure wish I could do that with my mother, life would become so much easier.”

A few minutes later when the four of them entered the Office Skills classroom, one of the first things they noticed before taking a seat was Mr. Little. The vice principal had rolled an old-fashion analog TV into the classroom and was currently setting it up.

“Do analog TVs still receive anything?” Tim yelled in his direction. “I thought all TV stations were only transmitting in digital.”

Mr. Little, at first, ignored him and continued to plug a black rectangular device into an electrical outlet. “Not by themselves, they don’t, Tim,” he answered. “But this analog/digital converter should do the trick.”

He then turned the television on and set the channel for WFMY Channel 2. About five seconds afterwards, a live broadcast of Titan Industries’ awards ceremony appeared on the previously greenish colored screen.

“Do you think we’re going to win?” Daniel E. Whitehouse the Third asked anyone who might have been listening, as one of Titan’s executives approached at the podium and began to ramble about what a great year the past twelve months had been for the game software industry. “You all know how much work we put into it.”

“You got that right,” a Russian foreign exchange student acknowledged while the other computer club members only nodded.

“I still even dream about working on it,” a black student said, whirling around to face him.

“You, too?” another student added.

Tim twisted in his seat, so he could face who was speaking. “Well. To be honest folks,” he began as if he knew what was what. “According to my Dad, even though he chose not to be one of Titan’s contest judges because I’m a member of this club ... he said Titan Industries received quite a few really good entries this year. So there’s a possibly Gibsonville might not win.”

“You kidding?” Paul immediately blurted while folding his arms across his chest and leaning back in his seat. “Someone else actually submitted a game that could be better than ours?”

“I wish I was,” Tim retorted, looking straight at his best friend. “I know that everyone here, especially you, me, Cathy and Daniel, have literally worked our butts off in order to make the game a work of perfection. However, there are a lot of kids in much larger schools all over the U.S., who have been able to take computer programming courses ever since the sixth grade, and they know how to get a job done right.”

A Mexican student quickly raised an eyebrow upon hearing this. “Really? Back in the small town of Delicias where I came from, I didn’t even know how to turn a computer on until I started middle school.”

“Wow!” another student replied.

Cathy looked like she was about to comment, when suddenly everyone in the classroom noticed clapping coming from the TV. It appeared that Mr. Hegler was returning to the podium.

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Carl Thompson first shifted in his seat and then focused straight ahead while he rubbed his sweaty palms together.

“Thank you ... Thank you ... Thank you,” Joe Hegler kept repeating as the audience prolonged their standing ovation. “If you would now please take your seat, we’ll proceed with today’s announcements. ... And believe me, I’d like to see who is going to win just as much as you would,” he added with a smile and friendly wave of his hand.

As the lights in the room commenced to dim, the audience began to take their seats. And a millisecond later, a ten by twenty foot LED screen lowered a couple of feet behind and to the right of where Mr. Hegler was standing.

In respond, everyone in the room automatically lifted the inexpensive pair of passive 3-D glasses they were previously given.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” Mr. Hegler’s voice started to roar through the semi-darkness, which now filled the auditorium. “Let me introduce to you – this year’s top four entries.”

Instantly, a blinding yellow and white nuclear explosion filled the center of the screen, and an accompanying deafening roar followed – Seconds before multicolored solar-like flares simultaneously formed the words “Titan Industries’ Top Four Entries,” both above and below.

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“Can you believe those graphics?” a Japanese Gibsonville Computer Club member remarked even though what everyone in the Office Skills classroom was viewing was only in 2-D. “That’s amazing.”

Paul momentarily gazed at him and raised his eyebrow. “You consider that amazing after what we recently completed? What Plutonium’s Revenge module did Cathy assign you to – the credit listings?”

Akio Chen cheeks rapidly turned a bright red, and his fellow students chuckled.

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“And this year’s third-place winner is ...” Mr. Hegler continued as he pointed toward the screen which was now displaying a blood spattered, greasily scene that could have come from the Vietnam War era. “Hell-Born Warriors ... which was submitted by Baden High School in San Francisco, California.”

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“Wow! That looks like it’d be a cool game,” Daniel said, staring at the TV screen as the audience within Titan’s auditorium clapped while a middle-age lady wearing an off-white business suit approached the stage and received her computer club’s trophy.

Tim turned and gave him a smile, while others nodded their agreement.

“I wonder what game is going to win second place?” Cathy asked, still focused on the twenty-inch screen before her.

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Within seconds, an enormous blaring sun radiated in the center of Titan’s spacious screen, and it seemed to be rapidly melting a gigantic iceberg below.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” Mr. Hegler announced as the name of the program suddenly appeared in front the demo in fifteen inch, 3-D letters. “Let me introduce our second-place winner, an extremely advance interactive game where one tries to survive in a swiftly changing global warming environment – The Nth Degree ... which was submitted by Coral Reef High School in Miami, Florida.”

“That’s unbelievable,” a red-haired female sophomore exclaimed as she continued to watch the demo. “A global warming game won second place. What is the PC gaming world coming to?”

Tim grinned as he turned to gaze at her. “Well, Sara. Some people really get into challenges like that,” he said before pausing. “After all, look how popular SimCity is.”

Sara displayed a pouty face, before answering, “I know, Tim. But it’s ridiculous. The game’s so boring you almost have O.D. yourself on caffeine pills just to stay awake.”

Paul laughed at the sophomore’s comment. However, his attention quickly changed when a demo of the remaining award winning PC games appeared side-by-side on Titan’s screen.

“PC Gamers everyone,” Mr. Hegler stated after a fellow executive handed him a three by five-inch index card. “Before you are both, Titan Industries’ National High School Computer Club Winner and our Honorable Mentioned.”

In front of each game, its name instantly appeared.

“On your left is the space-based warrior game, “Plutonium’s Revenge”... which was submitted by the Gibsonville School Computer Club, which is located in Gibsonville, NC – just a few miles east of here. ... And on the right side of the screen is “Total Fiasco”– a game where you’re the President of the United States. And it’s your job to create economic progress during a recessionary crisis, while working with a Democratically control Senate and a Republican-controlled House of Representatives. ... It was submitted by Roosevelt Senior High in Washington D.C.”

Mr. Hegler then paused as a recorded drum roll proceeded to play.

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“This is it. This is it!” Daniel shouted as all the students in the room kept their eyes glued onto the set in front of them. “We’re going to win!”

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“And the winner of this year’s contest is,” Joe continued with a large ear-to-ear smile before he, once again, paused for effect. “Total Fiasco!”

“Total Fiasco?” Paul repeated in disbelief, his mouth wide open as he slumped in his seat. “How did that happen? I was sure we had a winner.”

Tim gave his friend a conciliatory smile and patted him on the back. “I make a bet it had something to do with Krypton Software stealing our game and putting their modified version of it on the market.”

Paul looked at Tim and grimaced. “Yeah. You’re probably right.”

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The following day, which was a teacher’s workday since the school year for all students had ended, Gibsonville’s P.A. began to blare. “Attention all teachers ... Attention all teachers ... Mr. Carl Thompson. Please report to the principal's office. Thank you.”

When a knocking of the door resounded, Mr. Skinner took a deep breath, then grudgingly got up from behind his mahogany desk and slowly opened the door. *This definitely isn't going to be easy.*

“Mr. Thompson,” he said as his Office Skills teacher and computer club adviser entered the room. “Please come in and take a seat. We’ve got some business, which has to be discussed.”

“Okay,” Carl replied, noting the unusual formal manner his boss and friend had addressed him.

“Mr. Thompson,” Raymond said, crossing his arms in front of himself after the two of them had taken their seats. “I have known and worked with you for several years now ... and up to this point, have definitely held you in the highest regard. However, the report I received a couple of days ago from the Administration of Guilford County Schools is quite disturbing.”

“It is?” Carl’s eyes flashed wide open. “What report? And what does it say?”

Mr. Skinner smiled a very sad smile – as if he was about to lose an old friend.

“According to this report, Mr. Thompson ... and the info it contains has been verified by our authorities ... we have evidence that during this past school semester, you abused your position as Gibsonville School’s computer club adviser for your personal benefit.”

Carl stared at his friend and gulped. "But Ray," he stammered. "I didn't have a choice. Krypton Software blackmailed me. ... I had no alternative but to give them the information they wanted so they could steal a copy of the kids' game."

"Oh, really?" Raymond said, shaking his head while making a steeple with his fingers on top of his desk. "Didn't you ever consider coming to me about it, Carl? If you had, I could have helped you."

Carl Thompson sat, his mouth partly open as he gazed at his friend. "You're right. I should have, Ray. But I thought that my career was on the line, so I wasn't thinking too clearly. I just reacted."

"It's unfortunate you did. And in the worst way possible," Raymond replied, briefly glancing downward. "Carl. What you did is something the Guilford County School system would never look happily upon. However, instead of following their initial recommendation of firing you, I have managed to convince them that you are really a good instructor, and the school system should keep you."

"You have?" Carl said, barely upon a whisper while displaying a quivering smile.

"Yes. I have," Raymond confirmed with a subtle nod. "However, because of this incident you will no longer be employed at Gibsonville School."

Carl Thompson frowned and Mr. Skinner deliberately paused to let the words he had spoken sink in.

"Mr. Thompson, my friend," Raymond continued. "Starting this upcoming Fall semester, your new position will be the Distributive Education instructor at Grimsley High School in downtown Greensboro. ... Unfortunately, your days of teaching computer-related courses in Guilford County are now over. But on the bright side, my friend, you're still going to have a job."

Carl smiled a perfunctorily smile. However, the glimmer, which seemed always present deep within his eyes, no longer was visible.



# The Trial

## Chapter Thirty-Two

Eight AM.

Above downtown Greensboro, the skies were a rich Carolina blue with only hints of puffy white cumulus clouds carelessly caressing the warm near-summer lower atmosphere, while numerous commuters below zigzagged their vehicles as if driving bumper cars at a county fair. Every parking lot surrounding Guilford County's fifty-year-old courthouse had reached full capacity over a half hour previous. Nevertheless, cars continued to pull into their entrances almost every five seconds in false hope that even the smallest of spaces would potentially be vacant.

Street meters lined along both sides of nearly every side street continued to tick. Most had been feed so many coins; the owner of the nearby-parked vehicle wouldn't have to worry about receiving a ticket for at least the next three hours. If lucky, before the meter's time expired and a dull red flag appeared, the vehicle's owner would have been able to see whoever they came downtown to meet and/or complete their dealings with one of the local state or federal judges.

Inside one of the largest multistory antique block and mortar buildings, each courtroom was not only full; it overflowed with patrons waiting to see a judge. Others currently occupying the too few wooden benches were only doing so because they had a vested interest in someone.

In the back left corner of one of the modest-sized, rectangular-shaped, second floor courtrooms, a collection of teenage youth waited. Approximately ten miles east of this locale, the kids had established the recognized title as being the Gibsonville School Gang.

Needless to say, today would not be the first time members of Butch McGuire's hood had visited a courtroom. Their leader usually was required to report to either the Alamance or Guilford County courthouse at least once every six months.

However, unlike the previous "visits," this particular one was extremely different from the rest. For the first time in Butch's short history, the odds of him being sentenced with something more than a small fine or ninety-day probationary sentence was definitely against him. For Stan Ramirez – the gang's second in command, just the thought of his comrade receiving ten to fifteen years of prison for an Attempt First-degree murder charge was enough to cause his spine to tingle.

*Could Butch survive in prison that long without getting himself killed? And what would happen to the gang if he were sentenced long-term?*

Feeling bored, Stan turned and began to gaze at a thin dark-haired officer standing by the door. He then frowned.

*Why didn't Butch listen to the rest of us? If he had, then he might have left Paul Pontiac alone and none of us would be in this mess. ... Oh well. At least it seems like Cathy, Paul, and that stupid Baptist minister believed the sad sap story we made up about Butch. And since I don't see any of them inside the courtroom, I would guess they're still talking to Butch's attorney or perhaps the prosecutor.*

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On the third floor of the courthouse, only a short distance from the public restrooms, an intensive meeting was in progress.

Charles Greenfield, one of Guilford County's prosecuting attorneys, was currently sitting behind a badly scratched walnut desk inside one of the normally empty offices. And from the way the corners of his mouth turned downward, it seemed like he wasn't extremely happy. It had taken him years to build notoriety for being ruthless against gang members, arsonists, wife beaters, and others, society considered to be lowlife. Yet, on this particular day – a collection of people, none whom he expected to see outside of the courtroom, wanted him to go easy on someone.

*It's eight AM, and I should be making final preparations for Butch McGuire's court appearance, he thought as he reviewed those sitting in the wooden chairs which lined the rearmost wall in front of him. These people ought to be in the courtroom, not waiting in this office, wanting to discuss Gibsonville School's gang leader's case. ... It just doesn't make sense. John McKinney knows I have solid evidence proving Mr. McGuire's guilt. And what kind of victim is Paul Pontiac that he wouldn't want a hoodlum like Butch to be sent to prison for a long long time?*

In an attempt to clear his throat before he resumed their conversation, he reached for the five-dollar espresso he picked up at Starbucks on his way to work and took a prolonged drink. *At least my coffee's still warm.*

Among those waiting for him to start this meeting was Pastor Graham. To his right, Ellen and Paul Pontiac, Cathy Skinner and Tim Hegler had taken a seat beside him. On his left Butch's Defense Attorney, Mr. John McKinney – wearing his usual gray suit, white shirt and maroon colored tie, fidgeted.

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“So, what do you think, Mr. Greenfield? Do we have a deal or not?” Mr. McKinney asked, revealing a hint of impatience in his voice. “Earlier this week I discussed with my client what the Pontiacs and Pastor Graham were wanting, and needless to say, after considering the alternative, Butch is willing to accept the proposed offer.”

For a second or two, Mr. Greenfield stared directly into John's eyes and then veered his line of sight, so he could gaze out the window – before returning his attention to the small crowd in

front of him and shaking his head. “I don’t really see how I could agree to this Mr. McKinney. In reading over the proposal you have given me, justice definitely would not be served.”

“It wouldn’t?” Pastor Graham’s mouth formed a question as an eyebrow raised.

“No, it wouldn’t,” Charles confirmed, banging his fist on the top of the desk. “After committing an act worthy of one being charged with Attempt First-degree murder and in all right should have permanently killed his victim, Butch needs to do some serious prison time. Not only do I consider the punk to be a major threat to society. I’m hoping after doing at least ten years in prison, he’d have second thoughts before attempting anything like this again.”

Pastor Graham laughed a very serious but hearty laugh. “Do you actually believe the words you just spoke?”

Charles Greenfield grimaced. “Of course, I do. I’ve been practicing law for over twenty years and have learned that giving someone like this a harsh sentence is best thing you can do. It’s the only way lowlifes like Butch McGuire ever learn anything.”

“Oh really?” Pastor Graham took a deep breath and folded his arms across his chest, before giving the prosecutor a smile. “Mr. Greenfield, have you ever set foot inside a North Carolina prison?”

Charles hesitated. “No. I can’t say I have. However, I’ve been inside of our local county jail and would imagine things aren’t much different.”

Pastor Graham loudly exhaled and shook his head in disbelief. “I’m afraid you’re badly mistaken, Mr. Greenfield. Not only have I personally visited a fair number of our state’s juvenile prisons. I’ve work with a right good number of youth who’s done serious time in them. I can assure you that today’s prison environment is not only notorious for being breeding grounds for rapes and murder, over 95% of those who manage to survive come out as angry non-rehabilitated beings that get little or no help upon their release and usually end up committing another crime within their first twelve months of freedom.”

“They do?” Greenfield mouthed, exhibiting a mock surprise.

“Of course, they do.” The pastor’s pupils widened in anger. “Are you trying to tell me as one of the leading prosecutors for the Guilford County legal system, you are ignorant of these facts?”

“Actually, I’m not,” Greenfield admitted. “I’m very aware of them. And as far as I am concerned, they’re kind of security blanket. As long as inmates never get rehabilitated, they’ll continue to commit crimes, and I’m guaranteed employment.”

Instantly, everyone in sitting in the line of wooden seats before him jaw dropped.

“You must be kidding?” Mrs. Pontiac exclaimed after a gasp. “Are you really that heartless and self-serving, Mr. Greenfield? We’re talking about people’s lives here, not some dumb animals’.”

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Approximately two hours when court resumed, after taking a lunch break, Butch McGuire, handcuffed and wearing a bright orange jumpsuit, entered the still overflowing courtroom via a secured doorway and was led to the defense attorney's table. An armed guard, Mr. Perkins, stood waiting, less than five feet away.

"State of North Carolina versus Butch Edward McGuire. Docket number 9654374," a Clerk of Court standing near the judge's bench loudly announced.

"Mr. McGuire," Supreme Court Judge Sandra Atkins said after giving him a brief, but thorough look-over. "According to these documents, you have been charged with one count Attempted First-degree murder and one count of Assault and Battery – on a fellow high-school student, a Mr. Paul Michael Pontiac. This incident supposedly occurred almost a full six months ago on Monday, January 3rd, the first day of the Guilford County School's spring semester. "How do you plea, sir?"

At once, Butch's attorney rose from his seat. "In light of the plea bargain reached this morning between the Prosecutor Mr. Greenfield and myself, my client has authorized me to plead guilty, your Honor."

"I see," the judge said shuffling her papers. She then took a few seconds to read one before focusing her attention directly at the gang leader sitting behind the defense table. "Mr. McGuire, please rise."

Butch politely and contritely responded.

"Mr. McGuire," the judge repeated, taking on a solemn demeanor. "You have been in my courtroom a number of times during the past three years for a number of incidents, and each one has been a bit more serious than the previous. ... Now, you are standing before me with a charge, which could easily cost you up to fifteen years in prison. Have you not paid attention to any of the advice I have been providing you all this time?"

Butch's cheeks blushed bright crimson. "Ah. ... No, ma'am. ... ah ... I mean, yes, ma'am ... ah ... well, sort of."

The judge gazed at him and smiled. "You really don't know what to say. Do you, Mr. McGuire?"

"No, ma'am," Butch admitted, glancing downward. "I try to stay out of trouble, ma'am – at least serious trouble. But being the leader of ..."

"Yes, I know what you are," Sandra completed for him as she turned to view his fellow gang members sitting in the corner. "And my question is, why can't your ... ah ... group, let's say ... transform into one that does something worthwhile for the Gibsonville community. You know, one

that does community service – instead of participating in activities you know will cause you to end up in trouble, Mr. McGuire? ... Do you really want to spend a major portion of your life in state or federal prison?"

Butch vigorously shook his head. "No, ma'am. And I promise if you approve the plea bargain my attorney got for me ... I promise I'll do right from now on."

Sandra Atkins grimaced and then read over the negotiated plea bargain, once again. "I really don't know what to do with you, Mr. McGuire. ... Every time you come into my courtroom, you smile and give me a song and a dance. Then a few months later, here you are again."

"Well ... I." Forming a perfect "o," Butch's mouth remained open. Yet, no words seemed to be able to come out.

"Don't say a word, Mr. McGuire. You know I'm right. Now, it's just a matter of deciding what to do with you."

"What about the plea bargain?" John McKinney asked.

"Almost everyone deserves a second chance," Pastor Graham added, rising to his feet. "And I don't know about you, ma'am, but I'm willing to offer it to him."

"And you are, sir?" the judge asked, carefully eyeballing the suited gentleman who just spoken.

"I'm Pastor Graham, ma'am, from the Ossipee Baptist Church. ... And I've known Butch and his family ever since he was knee high to a grasshopper."

"You have?" Sandra leaned backwards in her seat. "Then you're fully aware of Butch and his gang's doings – and resulting criminal history."

Pastor Graham nodded affirmably. "Yes, ma'am. And my wife and I would like a chance to save the boy before it's too late. We both know what happens to kids when they're sent to prison."

Sandra Atkins paused, and a minute smile appeared upon her lips. "Yes Reverend, I do. If they survive, which is a miracle in itself, they become harden criminals who become trapped in a repeating cycle."

"That's correct, ma'am," John said with a wink.

Sandra glanced downward and re-read the document before her. She then stopped to gaze at various parties in front of her, and a smile formed across her lips as if she had been able to reach her decision.

"Do you have any qualms if I agree to the plea bargain your office has agreed to Mr. Greenfield? This sentence is far lighter than I would normally expect from you."

Charles displayed an expression that was something between a small smile and a grimace.  
“No, ma’am.”

“Okay then.” Sandra turned toward the defense table. “Mr. McKinney and Mr. McGuire, please rise for the sentencing. ... Mr. Butch Edward McGuire. I hereby charge you with one count of Assault and Battery and one count of Attempted First-degree murder. However, the sentence for the latter will be suspended.”

She then paused and took a deep breath.

“On the account of Assault and Battery – I am sentencing you six months jail time – time served. ... Upon your release, as agreed to in your plea bargain, you will be required to successfully complete a one-year Christian rehabilitation program at the About Face boot camp in Conover, North Carolina.”

Butch stared at the judge and involuntarily swallowed.

“Immediately after your release from boot camp, Mr. McGuire,” Sandra continued. “You will be placed in the custody of Pastor Graham and his wife for the following two years. ... And while there, you are court-ordered to abide by the rules of his household.”

Butch turned toward Pastor Graham and presented him with an expression, like he was about to panic.

“During the time you are residing with the Grahams, you will also be starting a five year probationary sentence. ... During this time you will be required to successfully complete 200 hours of unpaid community service.”

Sandra then paused, once again – so everything could sink in.

“Should the court find you in violation or noncompliance of any or all the above, a fifteen-year prison sentence with no opportunity for parole will be immediately activated. Do you agree to these terms, Mr. McGuire?”

Though still on his feet, Butch felt like a five hundred pound weight had instantly been placed upon him. Not only was his days of being the leader of Gibsonville School’s Gang obviously over, he knew he would have to change his ways or else. “I agree, your Honor.”

Sandra Atkins smiled. “Okay, Mr. McGuire. If that’s your response, I am now going to consider this case closed.” She then banged her gavel.

The Pontiacs, and both Cathy and Tim immediately rose to their feet and began to clap. Mr. McKinney reached out and shook his client’s hand and the two of them began to discuss Butch’s upcoming adventure.

# Plutonium's Revenge

## Chapter Thirty-Three

Inside the Davies' twenty by thirty-foot Mediterranean-style living room, a forty-two inch, 3-D, LED, flat screen blared. Tommy, age thirteen, had turned it on shortly after arriving home from his best friend's house. He was hoping he'd be able to watch this week's episode of Tech TV before supper was ready. However, before the flat screen had a chance to warm up, his cell phone rang.

*Mom's calling?* For a fraction of a second, Tommy held his iPhone in front of him and stared at the picture on its three-inch screen as if he were in a trance. *She should have been home by now. I wonder what's keeping her?*

Pressing the phone's circular answer button and its external speaker button, "Hi, Mom," he said, holding the screen close so he'd have a good view of her and possibly figure out where she was. "What's up? Why aren't you home yet?"

"I needed to make a quick stop on my way in," Carol replied with a slight smirk. "As if what I do and when I do it is really any of your concern. ... Is your father home?"

Tommy took a quick look around him and then rose from in front of the couch where he had been sitting, before heading toward the window so he could check the driveway. "Nope. I don't think so. I don't see his Prius."

"Hmm. I hope he didn't have to work late, after all today's ..." Carol then paused in mid-sentence as if she had remembered something. "Tommy. I know it's not your bedtime, but I need you to stop whatever you're doing and go take a shower."

"Take a shower? At this time of the day?" Tommy gazed at his mother like she had cursed at him. "Why, Mom?"

"Because I want you to be clean when we go out tonight. Have you forgotten what day today is, son?"

Tommy grinned from ear-to-ear. "No way. But I had no idea that you and Dad were planning to take me out. ... By the way, would you like to guess what Billy got me for my birthday?"

"I wouldn't have the slightest idea," Carol replied after a moment of dead silence. "A video game?"

Tommy looked at her and frowned. "Ah, Mom. You already knew. Didn't you? Did Mrs. Molinaro tell you?"

Carol laughed. “No. But I had a suspicion when she called a few days ago and asked what type of games you liked. So which one did she get you? I hope it wasn’t ...”

“Alien Warfare,” Tommy answered before his mother could finish.

“Alien Warfare? Shoot!” The raised tone Carol’s used clearly indicated she wasn’t happy. “I hope you haven’t opened it yet. Have you, Tommy? We need to exchange it. There is no way I want a son of mine playing a game like that. It’s way too gory and violent for kids your age. You don’t need that kind of negative influence. ... Why do you think we bought you Sim City last Christmas?”

Tommy shuddered at the memory. “Because I was still twelve? ... You do know, Mom; that game was so b-o-r-i-n-g that after playing twice, I deleted the stupid thing from my computer.”

“You deleted it?” A moment of silence transpired. “That’s odd. Your dad and I installed a copy of it on our PC soon after you installed it on yours, and we’re still playing it. Why would anyone want to delete it? It’s a fun game, and you learn a few good management skills.”

Tommy grimaced. “Mom, it’s mega-boring. There’s no action in it. All you do is set up a city and hope it grows instead of getting wiped out. ... Kids my age don’t care about stuff like that.”

“Okay,” Carol conceded. “I can see where someone your age might not find it interesting. So, did you and Billy play Alien Warfare yet?”

Tommy looked down, picked up its cardboard box and smiled while rereading its cover. “Sure did Mom. We played it over at his house until it was time to come home. It’s a seriously cool game. You get to fight some really weird-looking aliens and watch their ships blow apart during the space battles. ... You should see it, especially while wearing 3-D glasses. It’s unbelievable.”

Carol chuckled at her son’s enthusiasm, then noticed the flashing incoming call icon on her phone. “I can see you really like the game. Unfortunately son, I’m going to have to go now. Your father’s on the other line so I need to hang up. Just hurry up, take a shower, and get properly dressed so we can go to a decent restaurant – and I’m not talking about McDonald’s.”

“Aw Mom,” Tommy whined, reaching for the TV’s remote. “I like Mickey D’s. And since it’s my birthday, why can’t we go where I want to?”

“Believe me, you’ll like where we are going Tommy. I promise,” Carol replied. “Now get yourself ready and your Dad and I should be home shortly.”

Tommy’s phone then clicked and a screen showing the number of minutes he and his mother had conversed soon appeared.

“Parents!” he exclaimed, pushing the “off” button on the remote.



However, before the TV went dim. “And in today’s software news, Krypton Software is currently facing an extremely detrimental problem with their latest best-selling game, Alien Warfare. Apparently ....”

Hearing part of what the announcer said, Tommy quickly pressed the remote’s “On” button. However, since the TV screen had already turned black and it took a second for the set to come back on – by the time it did, the Tech TV announcer was finishing the news story with a final comment about Alien Warfare’s worldwide weekly sales. It had been exceeding one hundred thousand copies ever since its release.

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Along the eastern Appalachian slopes bordering Hidden Valley, Tennessee, a lone eagle glided in the sunny crystal clear blue skies – totally unaware that several hundred feet below in a dark plexiglas multistory building on the outer parameter of where he was carelessly sailing, top management had called an emergency meeting, and a major corporate hurricane was starting to brew.

“Are the reports true?” Allen Sharp, Krypton Software’s CEO asked, looking grimmer than a corpse when he rose to his feet the second Tom Steel, George Witherspoon, and Mike Furrow entered his penthouse-style office and took a seat. “If they are, our company could be ruined.”

Tom Steel, Krypton Software’s president, briefly fidgeted in his seat, before glancing at the two gentlemen who had followed him in. His lips, then slightly parted. However, not the slightest sound was uttered.

Mike Furrow, Krypton’s Software-Development Chief then answered, “I’m afraid they are. It seems like when we converted ...”

Mike then stopped speaking and turned to face Tom and George, who had turned pale.

“Converted?” Mr. Sharp’s eyebrows rose. “What specifically do you mean by ‘converted’, Mr. Furrow?”

Mike’s mouth opened as if he was surprised. “Converted? Did I say converted, Mr. Sharp? I’m sorry; I misspoke. I meant to say, when we coded Alien Warfare.”

A few wrinkles appeared on Allen’s forehead. “That is not what you said Mr. Furrow. You specifically used the word ‘converted.’” He then shifted backwards and commenced to stare at the three gents in front of him. “Would one of you please tell me exactly what is going on? I hope it’s surely not what I’m beginning to think it is.”

Tom gazed at his boss and began to sink inside his seat faster than a ship stuck in an inescapable whirlpool, while George proceeded to gaze at the perforated holes in the ceiling tiles.

Mike, not really knowing how best to respond, quickly glanced at his two cohorts and then started to whistle a funeral dirge.

“Gentlemen?” Allen said through narrowed eyes.

“Should I tell him?” Mike eventually asked. Uncertainty clearly showed in his face as he looked at Tom.

“I really don’t think we have a choice,” George Witherspoon, V. P. of Marketing, inserted before the company president replied.

For a moment, Tom stared at his fellow executives and then involuntary gulped, before turning to face Krypton’s CEO. The time for a full confession had unfortunately arrived. However, before it had a chance to be conveyed, Allen Sharp’s phone suddenly rang and the accompanying call waiting message on his phone’s gray screen was displaying the name of one of their corporate attorneys.

“Hello, Stan,” Allen said with a frown as he lifted the receiver to his right ear. “What possibly could be so important that you’ve decided to call me on my hotline?”

The answer was immediately given and within milliseconds, all blood on the surface of the CEO’s face drained. “A five billion-dollar class-action lawsuit. ... we’re history!”

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“Thanks for the swell dinner, Mom ... Dad,” Tommy exclaimed before entering the hallway which led into his bedroom. “We haven’t been to Chuck E. Cheese for so long, I had forgotten about the place. ... Thanks for taking me – and for the neat remote control airplane. I love it and can’t wait to try it out first thing tomorrow morning.”

Both Carol and Bob smiled as they observed the overwhelming glow radiating from their son’s face.

“You’re welcome,” Carol said with a smile.

Bob also displayed an ear-to-ear grin as he watched Tommy pass through his bedroom doorway and take a seat at his computer. Seconds later, his son could be seen placing his new Alien Warfare disk inside the system’s DVD player.

“Mom!” Tommy screamed in a blood-curling yelp from the far back bedroom as his clock stuck nine p.m. “We’ve got an emergency! Call 911. My computer’s on fire.”

“Your computer’s on fire?” Bob literally jumped out of his tan lounge chair and raced toward the oncoming smoke escaping from his son’s bedroom – only pausing long enough to grab the extinguisher Carol obtained from underneath their kitchen’s sink.

“Yes Dad, it is,” Tommy howled as if he was watching the “Twin Towers” when they were about to collapse. “Hurry. Get in here.”

The instant Bob entered Tommy’s bedroom; he noticed the unusual plastic and electronics burning type of smell and turned towards his son’s computer desk. Trails of wispy gray smoke were pouring out of every single crevice his son’s rectangular-shaped desktop computer had.

Within microseconds, Bob unplugged and coated it with a thick white fire retardant.

“So what exactly were you doing when your PC started smoking?” he asked several minutes later as he and Tommy proceeded to take the charred electronic remains outside.

“Nothing special Dad,” Tommy sheepishly replied. “While playing Alien Warfare, three alien ships had almost completely destroyed my battle cruiser, so I decided that if I was going to die – I would take them with me. So I hit the ship’s “Self Destruct” button. ... That’s when my computer instantly went crazy and burnt itself up.”

Bob turned and looked at his son, and his eyes burned with fury. *How dare someone sell such destructive software! They could have easily killed someone ... specifically, my son!*

## You Don't Say

### Chapter Thirty-Four

Over a month had passed since Paul and Tim's freshman year at Gibsonville had come to an end. However, instead of playing outside, riding their horses and enjoying the warm summer breeze blowing throughout the countryside, this peculiar afternoon both teenagers were sitting on the floor of Tim's bedroom, their backs against the side of Tim's bed, watching Tech TV - via the Internet.

"Can you believe it?" Tim said, clambering to his feet seconds after this week's episode concluded. "Krypton actually filed a Chapter 11."

"Yep." Paul grinned. "And hopefully after they reorganize, they'll think twice before they steal somebody's game and try to sell it as their own." He then slightly tilted his head. "But I do have to admit, Tim. I'm surprised that none of their programmers discovered my Golden Rule Trojan. I guess hiding it in the primary battleship's self-destruction module was a good way to fool them."

"I agree," Tim replied, taking a seat in front of his computer desk, so he could switch his computer's display settings to the system's monitor. "It was." He then selected the envelope-shaped icon designed to access Windows Live Mail. "My guess is ... they must have been in such a hurry to convert our game into Alien Warfare; they didn't examine its code close enough to realize that if a user selected the main battleship's self-destruct button, it would destroy the computer's memory, video card, system board and processor."

Paul laughed at the thought of Krypton's sudden surprise. "You know, Tim. I actually have you to thank for that idea."

"Oh?" Tim twisted his torso, so he could face him. "How's that?"

"Don't tell me you've forgotten the scheme you and my mother pulled last Christmas?"

"Oh, that?" Tim chuckled. "That was really cool. Before then, I had never tried to destroy a PC via WiFi. Who would have guessed it could have been done – especially since your computer didn't have an Internet connection yet?"

"I know." Paul briefly frowned, then got to his feet and strolled toward Tim's computer desk.

"You've Got Mail," All of a sudden blared from Tim's computer speakers.

Paul immediately looked at his friend as if puzzled. "Are you using AOL?"

"No." Tim replied with a shake of his head as he left-clicked his mouse, so he could open the email he had just received. "I use Windows Live Mail ... but I changed my system's mail notifier so it would use AOL's sound bite. By the way, look who this is from."

Paul leaned over his friend's shoulder and took a close look. "Who's that? I don't recognize the sender."

"It's Reverend Graham. Our Pastor," Tim answered. "And according to this, he just got back from Conover. Apparently, he drove over there to see how Butch's adjusting to boot camp."

Paul straightened himself up and then took a step backwards. "Oh? I would imagine he's doing okay."

Tim glanced at his friend, before resuming reading the Pastor's lengthy email. "No. Not according to this. Evidently, Butch doesn't like taking orders. And because of the trouble he's causing, the camp's director's about to kick him out unless he starts flying right."

"You're kidding? Doesn't Butch realize if he messes up, he'll get sent to prison?"

"I don't know. Maybe he's forgotten or just doesn't care. Either way, it seems like the adventures regarding our local gangster hasn't ended like we thought they had."

"Oh really?" Paul presented Tim with a look that expressed; he really didn't know what to say.

"By the way," Tim continued since his friend didn't seem to have anything to add. "Reverend Graham also mentioned that Stan and his gang kept their promise and brought him Gibsonville's football trophy. Now, our Pastor wants to know if we want to be the ones to return it or just let him to do it."

Paul hesitated. "I don't know. What do you think? I really couldn't care less about the fame. As long as it's back in the trophy case, I'm happy. Don't you agree?"

Tim nodded. "Fine with me. I'll go ahead and send a reply letting Reverend Graham know he can do it the next time he's in town."

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"Hey, boys," Joe Hegler greeted several minutes afterwards, upon entering his son's bedroom. "Did you hear the news about Krypton Software?"

"Sure have, Dad. But do you think they'll be out of business long?"

Joe frowned and shook his head. “No. They’ll probably be out of commission for only two or three months. Soon afterwards, they’ll be back in the software business again. ... However,” Joe then added, before pausing. “That’s not really what I came in here for.”

“You didn’t?” Tim lifted an eyebrow.

“No. I came here to see if you could get in touch with all the other computer club members.”

“I guess I could. But why should I? We’re not going to have anything to discuss until school starts.”

Raising a handful of official-looking documents he was holding his left hand, “Well, boys,” he said, smiling. “I have an announcement. Since Alien Warfare is permanently off the market and Krypton Software is temporarily out of business, Titan Industries has decided to use Plutonium’s Revenge as our top-selling game this upcoming holiday season. ... Therefore, I’m going to need all the Gibsonville School computer club members to stop by so we can sign some contracts.”

“Contracts?” Both Tim and Paul beamed. “So how much are we going to get off this one, Dad?”

Joe gazed at his son, and his lips transformed into an ear-to-ear grin as he placed his hand on top of Tim's shoulder. “That all depends, boys. But according to the figures in these documents, the person who has contributed the least will be walking home with no less than a cool fifty thousand dollars – and it only gets better from there.”

“Wow!”

## THE END

*Thanks for reading Plutonium's Revenge, and please keep watch for my future novels.*

*Also, for more information on items referenced, but not fully explained in this novel, please read Plutonium's Revenge prequel, The Question. It's available either FREE or at a low cost at a number of outlets like Amazon, Barnes and Nobel, and Lulu.com.*

*JW*

### **A Personal Request**

Today, most people determine if they are interested in a novel by reading the reviews others left.

If you enjoyed Plutonium's Revenge, please take a few minutes to stop by wherever you obtained this eBook and leave a review. Your sharing your positive opinion of this novel will be greatly appreciated.

*JW*