

# The Question

By Jonathon Waterman

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Fourth Edition

June 2018

ISBN 978-1-304-09353-0

Cover artwork was created by Miguel Nash

## Dedications

This edition of The Question is dedicated to my deceased father, the man who was the true “John Pontiac” in my life.

“Thanks Dad, for being the best father you could possibly be.”

J.W.

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## Chapter One - The Question

RESERVATIONS CONFIRMED!

“Paul,” Mrs. Pontiac said, peering over the top of her laptop into the living room where her young teenage son was lounging across their couch, watching “The Jetsons” on TV Land like he normally did most Saturday mornings. “How would you like to go with me to visit your brother in High Point for a couple of weeks?”

*My brother? High Point? For two whole weeks? Heaven forbid! Every time Jack gets near me he acts like an overgrown butt head. No, thank you! I'd prefer to stay right here at home in Hollywood, Florida. That way, I could either hang out with my friends, swim in our pool, or stop by the horse ranch and ride Half Pint.*

“Do I have to go?” he asked, dragging the word “go” for a couple of seconds.

“No. Not if you really don't want to. But since I reserved a couple of airline tickets, I thought you'd be interested.”

“Airline tickets?” Paul immediately jerked himself upright. *Whoa. That's different.*

“Would that mean we'd fly to North Carolina, instead of driving like we normally do?”

“That's right,” Ellen confirmed, giving her son a broad smile.

“Hmm. Summer vacation has just started, but...” Paul paused, clearly mesmerized by the idea of boarding an airliner for the first time in his life. “One question. If I do go with you to North Carolina, how soon would we be leaving?”

“Monday morning.”

“Cool. But what about Half Pint? She'll need to be fed and groomed.”

“She'll be okay. Your dad can take care of her.”

A prevalent crease quickly appeared in the middle of Paul's forehead and he frowned.

*With the way Dad's drinking has gotten steadily worse these past few months, I wouldn't be too sure about that.*

“Mom, are you sure we could depend on him? You know how he's been recently. I'd die if anything happened to her.”

“I know. But I can assure you, there's nothing to worry about.”

Though she tried to sound positive, Ellen shared her son's concern. After all, it was just last night her husband, had again come home drunk. He then proceeded to yell about something he blamed on her and Paul.

Soon thereafter, he passed out on the couch.

"Your father knows Half Pint means a lot to you and I'm sure he'd take good care of her. But if it would make feel better, you can always ask Tim if he'd keep an eye on her while we're gone."

"That sounds like a better idea," Paul said with a nod, before noticing the time stamp in the bottom right-hand corner of their 50-inch 4K TV.

"And since we're talking about her. Isn't it about time we head over to the horse ranch? Yesterday I told Tim I would meet him no later than 9:30 this morning inside of the stables and it's nine already. ... he's probably already waiting for me."

Ellen instinctively glanced at her wrist and her watch concurred with what her youngest said. "We'll leave soon. But before we go, I want you to eat some breakfast."

Paul rolled his eyes and frustratingly exhaled. "Okay. If you insist." *Geez! The things I must do to keep Mom happy.*

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Sliding himself on top of one of the stools in front of the breakfast bar, Paul grabbed a box of Sugar Pops and proceeded to fill his bowl.

*I'm going to have to ask Tim to keep an eye on Half Pint, he thought, while reaching for the milk. It's the only way I can be sure Half Pint would be taken care.*

A few minutes later, after he had finished his breakfast in the fewest number of gulps possible, he skid through his bedroom door, snatched everything he might need during the next 24 hours, and dashed toward the living room.

"Gee, I wish you could get ready that fast when it's a school day," Ellen remarked while standing next to the front door, arms crossed and tapping her foot.

Paul replied with a glance and smiled.

*Well. How about that?* he thought as he started down the walkway toward their blue Chevrolet Impala. *I guess there are a few things in life parents will never understand.*

## Chapter Two - Horse Ranch

Stuck between the metropolis of Hollywood and the dense aquatic jungle known as the Florida Everglades, stood a three-hundred-acre horse ranch which laid about as flat as a slab of freshly poured concrete. Its barn, where the horse stalls were located, was a gray, natural wood structure which could hold at least thirty horses – fifteen on the north side and fifteen on the south.

A three-tier wooden rail fence surrounding the barn and the outer pastures kept the almost a hundred Quarter horses, Appaloosas and other breeds residing there inside.

Among the collection, always pretty much sticking together, was Paul's beloved companion, Half Pint, and her best friend, Brave Boy.

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Paul immediately set out to locate Tim Hegler upon arriving at Southern Pastures, and after not being able to find his best friend, began to stroll past the rather long line of stalls that ran along both sides of the rustic-style barn.

*Hmm. Still no, Tim,* he thought after examining his surroundings.

He then decided to check the gray metallic lockers, where everybody who owned a horse was required to store his or her supplies. They were located at the far end of the building.

*I wonder what the best way would be to approach Tim about taking care of Half Pint while I'm gone? he wondered while reaching to unfasten the small, brass Master lock that secured his locker. Not to mention, should I even go to visit Jack and his family? ... Heaven knows, if it weren't for the chance to fly there, I wouldn't.*

Suddenly, even before he had a chance to seriously contemplate his dilemma, a creaking sound from a nearby door opening echoed throughout the building, and soon after, a boy his age, displaying fiery red hair and a face full of freckles, stepped out from around the corner.

"Hey, Paul," the boy shouted, as an ear-to-ear smile rapidly spread across his face. "When did you arrive?"

"A couple minutes ago," Paul replied, noticing Tim was wearing his usual horse-riding attire – tan sandals, bib overalls, but no T-shirt or socks. "Have you fed Brave Boy yet?"

"Naw. He's still in the pasture. I was waiting for you to show up before I got him."

"Really? Sorry I took so long," Paul said, snatching Half Pint's halter from the side of his locker. "But Mom wouldn't bring me out here until I ate breakfast."



“That’s no surprise. It sounds exactly like something my mother pull.” Tim said. “So, did you get a chance to ask her if you could spend the night at my place?”

“Yeah, last night. Just before I went to bed. ... At first, Mom acted like she didn’t want to. But with the way my dad’s been coming home drunk, I was able to convince her I really could use a break.”

“ALL RIGHT!” Tim yelled, giving Paul an exuberant high five.

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Minutes later, after crossing the ranch’s black asphalt-covered parking lot, the boys approached the front pasture’s five-foot steel gate and began to search for their horses.

Tim’s was a proud, reddish-brown sorrel, who stood fifteen hands high, while Paul owned a twelve-hands-high quarter horse. It sported a distinctive, dark, diamond-shaped spot in the center of her forehead. Not to mention, Half Pint’s white and brown coat always appeared to be gleaming.

Upon seeing their four-legged companions standing next to each other several acres away near the ranch’s back property line, both Paul and Tim put their hands around their mouth and began to holler, “Half Pint. Brave Boy.”

Almost at once, two sets of furry ears perked up, and soon afterward, a dust cloud began to ascend into the heavens above.

“Tim,” Paul said, setting his foot on top of the bottom rail of the sun-bleached wooden fence. “I’ll bet Half Pint makes it to the gate before Brave Boy.”

Tim gazed at his friend and chuckled. “There’s absolutely no way, Paul. He’s already over a length ahead of her,” he said, as the two horses continued their one-on-one race toward them. “And we both know Brave Boy’s a lot faster than your old nag.”

“Oh, yeah?” Paul narrowed his eyes. “If you’re so sure about that, how would you like to place a small wager?”

“Sure. Be glad too. But you know you’re going to lose,” Tim said with a grin as he reached for one of the crumpled dollar bills he had carelessly stashed inside his overalls front pocket earlier that morning. “Whoever’s horse comes in loses has to buy the winner a Coke. Okay?”

Paul nodded. “You’re on.”

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While the boys continued to keep a steady eye on both horses, Brave Boy, not unexpectedly, increased his early lead, repeatedly pounding each of his black hoofs into the flat sandy soil as he held his tail high.

However, things quickly changed when they approached the front gate. For an unexpected reason, Half Pint suddenly lowered her head and before one could whistle the first few two bars of “Camptown Races,” she was already next to Brave Boy’s side.

Then with a bit under fifty yards to go, Half Pint, instantly exploded with such an unbelievable speed, it looked as if her four-legged champion had been standing still.

“I won. I won,” Paul shouted, waving his arms high above his head.

Tim hurled his blue and white “Intel Rules” baseball cap to the ground. “I can’t believe it. I just can’t believe it, Paul. During most of the race, Brave Boy was a good two lengths ahead of her.”

Paul exhibited a huge smile, then unhooked the front gate and pulled it wide open.

“Well. What do you expect, Tim? I keep telling you that even though Half Pint’s only twelve hands high, she’s fast. You just won’t believe me.”

Tim glanced at his friend and snorted, and began to lead Brave Boy toward the ranch’s white and red, thirty stall barn.

Thirty minutes later – after both horses had been fed, groomed, and were ready for the day’s activities, Paul gently removed Half Pint’s rope halter and replaced it with her tan leather bridle. He then did a quick 180-degree scan to make sure nothing would be in the way when he was ready to back her out of her stall.

That’s when he noticed neither Tim nor Brave Boy was in the stall next to theirs.

*Oh. There they are,* he thought, upon finding the two of them waiting near the stable’s entranceway. *I wonder if this would be a good time to ask Tim about taking care of Half Pint?*

Unconsciously shrugging his shoulders as a reply to his question, he proceeded to gather Half Pint’s numerous combs, brushes, and other grooming supplies so he could stash them inside his locker.

“So where do you want to go this afternoon?” Paul asked, the moment he guided Half Pint up to Brave Boy’s side.

“How about the lake?”

“Driftwood Lake?” Paul turned and gazed across the southern horizon. “Hm-m-m. That’s not too far away, only about three miles from here. And after we’re done swimming, we could stop by Pete’s Sandwich Shop since it’d be only a stone’s throw away.”

“That’s true. And I don’t know about you, but I want to get a few hours of rodeo practice in this afternoon. Before you know it, the Fourth of July will be on top of us.”

“You’re right. And this time, I want both of us walking away with our hands full of blue ribbons.”

Tim looked at his friend and grinned, while a vision of one of his bedroom walls completely enshrouded with countless First Place ribbons instantaneously flashed before his hazel-green eyes. “That sounds like a winning idea. Let’s go for it.”

“All right,” Paul agreed while displaying a toothy grin. “Let’s go.”

Completely forgetting about North Carolina and what he planned to ask his friend, he promptly climbed onto Half Pint’s back and gently tapped his heels against her side.

## **Chapter Three - Explicit Data Execution**

Though aggressively stretching its bright orange tentacles into the prevailing gray horizon, the evening sun said its final good-bye to the multicultural, suburban residents below.

Soon, another warm, fun-filled, South Florida day would be coming to an end.

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Arriving at his locker so he could get some feed for Half Pint's supper, Paul yanked open its rusty green door and proceeded to scoop the molasses-coated oat, corn, wheat, and rye mixture into the five-gallon, stainless steel bucket his mother given him the day Half Pint first came into his life. And amazingly enough, deep inside his mind, he could still recall his mother's smile and the joy he felt the day she gave him both Half Pint and the brand-new feed bucket.

However, multiple years had passed since that joyous moment and recently he had been longing to see his mother's broad smile again. The fact that recently it was rarely displayed deeply saddened him.

No doubt, Paul loved his father very much. But with his dad was making life difficult, more and more he would find his mother all alone in the living room – sitting in her rocker, either reading her scriptures or in quiet meditation.

Feeling curious about this new trend, one day, he inquired about why she spent so much time doing that. She answered by informing him it was because she felt it helped increase her spiritual strength – and encouraged him to start doing the same.

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While pouring a third scoop of grain into Half Pint's feed bucket, an unexpected metallic squeak not only brought Paul back into the present, it also triggered a neigh from Half Pint. She, obviously, was getting tired of waiting for him.

"I'm coming!" Paul hollered as he turned toward her stall. "Just give me a minute. Okay?"

Half Pint replied by banging one of her front hooves against the hard-concrete floor.

Seconds later, when Paul started to pour the feed into his horse's old, creaky bin, Half Pint forcefully shoved her nose into the wooden box as if she hadn't been fed for at least the past five years.

He then stood nearby and displayed a small grin for a second. *“Hopefully, the grain would keep her busy long enough until I can get a fresh bale of hay.”*

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“Hey, Paul. Mom’s here,” Tim announced from the far corner of Brave Boy’s stall.

“Okay, Tim. Could you tell her I’ll be ready in about...”

He then saw Mary Lou standing less than three feet in front of him. “Oh. Hi, Mrs. Hegler.”

Mary Lou smiled at him like a proverbial Cheshire cat. “Why, hello Paul,” she formally greeted. “Did you and Tim have fun this afternoon?”

“Yes, ma’am,” he said, trying to be as polite as humanly possible for someone his age.

Mary Lou grinned, then took a quick gaze in her son’s direction and promptly proceeded towards Brave Boy’s stall.

Upon seeing her leave, Paul loaded the bay of hay he recently grabbed into Half Pint’s feed bin and proceeded to start grooming her.

With Mrs. Hegler already inside the stables, Paul knew he was going to have to perform his brushing and hoof cleaning activities at a faster than normal pace since Tim’s Mom wasn’t known for being patient when she was ready to go.

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Twenty minutes later, when he had finished grooming his four-legged companion, the only task left to perform was to drop her combs, brushes, and hoof picks into the stainless-steel feed bucket and stick them inside his locker.

*I guess the moment I’ve been trying to put off has finally arrived. And there’s no doubt, it’s going to be rough. ... I just hope she won’t take it too bad, ‘cause I need to talk to Tim as well.*

“Half Pint,” he began, wrapping his arms around his mare’s neck as inner sorrow began to rapidly course through each vein and artery inside him. “I need you to be a good girl for the next couple of weeks ‘cause ... well ... I’m going out of town. But don’t worry. My dad will be taking care of you.”

Almost at once, Half Pint slammed her foot against the hardened floor and proceeded to give him a frozen gaze which loudly proclaimed that she deemed this announcement as nothing short of being an unexpected betrayal.

“I understand how you feel, girl,” Paul said as he tried to comfort her by rubbing the top of her nose. “And believe me, I don’t like the idea of having to leave you. But Half Pint, I really don’t have a choice. Can’t you understand?”

Half Pint immediately shook her head “no” and resumed munching on her hay.

Paul, in turn, gazed at his beloved companion and frowned. *I was afraid she was going to take it this way.*

So, grabbing his bucket, he began to head toward his locker. ... His heart, though still pounding, felt like it had transformed into a hundred-pound weight which could not sink any lower.

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When he reached the back of the barn not long thereafter, “I still haven’t told Tim about the trip and how I’ll probably need him to keep an eye on her,” Paul mumbled to himself. “However, with the way Half Pint took the news, it would be probably better if I wait until sometime tonight.”

“Are you and Half Pint about ready?” Tim’s voice said, echoing from the stable’s front entranceway.

“Almost,” Paul yelled. “Half Pint should be finished any minute now.”

“Well. You need to hurry. Brave Boy’s ready to head back to the pasture and Mom’s already in the car, waiting for us.”

Quickly returning to where his mare was standing, Paul reached over and gave the bottom of her halter a small jerk.

“That’s going to have to be all for tonight, Half Pint,” he said, speaking in a tone that was a bit louder than normal. “We’ve got to go. If I don’t hurry up and get you back in the pasture, Tim’s mom might leave without me.”

Half Pint turned and looked him, before replying with a disgruntled snort.

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Tim watched as Paul and Half Pint gradually made their way towards the barn’s entranceway and began to tap his foot. *Any time now Mom’s going to get impatient, and that’s something I don’t need to happen.*

When Paul’s small procession finally arrived at the stable’s door, both he and Brave Boy joined them, and they proceeded toward the ranch’s six-foot stainless-steel gate which opened into the ranch’s flat multi-acre pasture. The instant they unlatched it, out of nowhere, a jagged streak of lightning abruptly flashed across the distant western horizon.

Paul intently stared at nature's wonder for a couple seconds, then proceeded to lead both Half Pint and Brave Boy inside.

When Tim firmly re-latched the gate after they entered, he removed Half Pint's halter and began to pat his four-legged companion an emotion-filled good-bye.

"What's wrong?" Tim asked Paul, after the two of them had climbed back over the three-rail wooden fence and were heading toward the barn.

"Nothing really." Paul answered, not wanting to reveal his inner feelings. "Why?"

"You seem kind of sad."

Not knowing what to say, Paul remained silent as they continued walking toward the horses' stalls.

"Come on, boys. It's time to go," Mary Lou abruptly yelled from across the parking lot as she impatiently watched them lumber toward the barn as if they had all the time in the world. "I don't have all day. There are things at home which need to get done."

"Yes, mother," Tim replied. "Just give us a couple more minutes. Okay?"

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Later that evening after the two of them finished watching one of their favorite episodes of Star Trek – The Next Generation on the Hegler's TV, both Tim and Paul grabbed a soda and shuffled towards Tim's bedroom.

The time had arrived to start participating in one of their favorite activities, putting their joint programming skills to use on the latest video game they had been creating the past few weeks – Clash of the BattleStars.

"Are you sure this is going to work?" Tim asked, after three hours had passed since they sat down in front of his computer.

"Of course it will, Tim," Paul answered while typing the last line of code in the sub-routine he was working on. He then reached out and touched his friend's monitor.

"At this section of the program, we usually have two or more micro processing cores maxed out as they try to fetch data from both the computer's ram memory and its hard drives, and then try to shoot the display part to the graphic cards in time to keep the game's action scene running smoothly. Correct?"

Tim nodded.

“So, let’s try to make some programming changes to improve the system’s performance.”

“Okay,” Tim replied. “But, how is using this newfangled way of grouping computer instructions together going to speed things up?”

Paul gazed at his friend and loudly heaved a sigh. “That’s what I’m about to explain. . . . Data and the instructions which operate on them are theoretically scattered about inside the memory. Right? . . . By compiling our source code into a form consisting of statically allocated hyperblocks containing hundreds or thousands of individual instructions, these hyperblocks can then be scheduled dynamically by the CPU.”

Huge question marks instantly appeared deep within Tim’s dark blue pupils.

“I hear what you’re saying, Paul. But I just don’t get it. Would you mind repeating everything you just said all over again – but this time in English?”

“This isn’t all that complicated, Tim,” Paul impatiently said, before stopping to take a sip of Coke. In setting the plastic bottle down a little harder than he intended, a few drops accidentally flew out of the top of the bottle and landed on Tim’s desk. “Take this...”

“Hey boys,” Joe Hegler’s voice yelled, interrupting their conversation when he walked into his son’s bedroom.

At once, Tim whirled his chair around and an ear-to-ear smile instantly swept across his face. “Hi, Dad. Did you just get home?”

“Sure did, son,” Joe replied while reaching to loosen his necktie. “What are you two working on?”

“We’re creating a new game,” Tim said, pointing to one of the ships on the computer screen. “We’re calling it, ‘Clash of the BattleStars’.”

“Oh?” Mr. Hegler raised a single eyebrow, and a broad grin acknowledged his approval of what the boys were doing. “That’s a good title. Not only is it catchy, it makes the game sound interesting.”

“It will be,” Tim excitedly replied. “Except I can’t figure out this new type of programming architecture Paul wants to use.”

“Really? Let me look at it.” Joe then turned toward his son’s computer screen and proceeded to study the boys’ programming code.

“What are you trying to do here, Paul?” he asked a few minutes later while pointing to an arrangement of commands he didn’t recognize.



“Mr. Hegler,” Paul responded, repositioning his chair so he could face both him and Tim’s monitor. “I know you work with computers, but are you familiar with Explicit Data Graph Execution? It’s an instructional set architecture used to improve computer performance.”

“Only vaguely.” Joe raised his hand and began to scratch his forehead just above his right eyebrow. “I’ve read a couple of articles about it, but that’s about all.”

“Well, you see, Mr. Hegler,” Paul resumed. “Explicit Data Graph Execution is a new kind of programming designed specifically for computers with multi-core processors. Not only can it be used to help computers process multiple types of information at the same time, but it can also be used to teach the processors how to respond to specific data patterns.”

“You don’t say.” Joe’s said, clearly revealing that he found this bit of information to be interesting.

Paul smiled, then continued to explain the intimate details of how Data Graph Execution processing worked and how he wanted to implement it within the game.

“You know, Paul,” Joe stated after the teen had finished. “It sounds like this idea of yours just might work. Where did you find your information?”

“EDGE technology was mentioned on a high tech show I watched the other day, so I decided to look it up on the Internet.”

“Interesting.”

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After watching the two kids resume their programming for a few additional minutes, Joe took a couple of steps toward the doorway, before stopping and turning around. “I do hate to say this, boys. But, you two are going to have to call it a night soon. It’s almost ten o’clock.”

“We will, Dad,” Tim replied, letting his father’s words enter one ear and exit out the other.

Paul watched as Mr. Hegler continued his journey toward the living room.

*Gee. ... I sure wish my dad was as nice as Tim’s always is.*

## **Chapter Four - Planning And Scheming**

“NO. NO! You can’t do that,” Tim shouted from inside the living room as he frantically twisted and turned the wireless game controller he held tightly in his hands.

“STOP! TURN LEFT! TURN LEFT! OH, NO! IT’S TOO LATE. IT’S GOING TO HIT US!”

K-A BOOM!

“OH, MAN!”

Tim sighed as he sat his gamepad on the top of his desk, and watched blue flames furiously engulfed the remains of his metallic white battleship before it exploded into billions of sub-atomic particles.

*Man. Two hours of ferocious battling ... all for nothing.*

Taking a moment to stretch the stiffened muscles in his legs, he rose to his feet and proceeded to shuffle toward his bedroom. Once inside, he detected that Paul was still dead asleep, lying underneath the guest bed’s dark blue cotton bedspread. It seemed like his friend hadn’t moved an inch all morning.

“Paul?” Tim said as his friend lazily roll over onto his left side. “Aren’t you ready to get up yet? It’s almost lunchtime.”

Paul blinked and a puzzled expression soon appeared on his face.

“Huh! What are you talking about, Tim?” he groggily asked, before releasing a loud yawn. “What time is it?”

“I just told you. It’s noon. You know, as in time to get your skinny ass out of bed so you’ll be ready when Mom calls us for lunch.”

“N-O-O-N?” Paul frowned in disbelief. “It can’t be.”

“Oh, yes it can,” Tim said, plopping on the edge of his maple-framed bed. “Look at the clock. ... I’ve been up for over two hours. ... Since we stayed up till four working on Clash of the BattleStars, Mom insisted I let you sleep.”

“She did?” Paul glanced at Tim’s digital clock and grimaced. “You still should have woke me up, Tim. Now we’re not going to have much time together before I have to leave.”

Tim shook his head and beamed a large smile. “I hate to tell you, but you’re wrong. We’ve got all day.”

“All day? Are you crazy, Tim? No, we don’t. Did you forget me telling you my mother was going to pick me up at noon today? I suspect she’ll be here any minute now.”

“No, she won’t.” Tim answered, displaying confident smile. “Shortly after I got up, the phone rang and it was your Mom on the line. She wanted to know if you could stay another night.”

“Cool,” Paul replied and twisted his torso around so he could hang his feet off the side of the bed. “But why would she do that? It’s not like her to let me be gone two nights in a row.”

Tim hesitated as his expression turned serious. “I’ve got a good suspicion about why. But I really don’t think I should be the one to tell you, Paul.”

“Oh?” Paul replied before jumping to his feet. “If it’s something important, don’t you think I need to know.”

“You do, but…” Tim paused, why trying to figure out the best way to share the bad news. “Well. After I handed the phone over to my mom, I pretended to be doing some work on the computer in the living room so I could overhear what was being said. And after our moms had been talking for a while, I heard the word ‘divorce’.”

“Divorce?” Paul’s countenance immediately became solemn and he remained stationary, without speaking a word.

*Could this mean what I think it does? Did Dad finally go too far and now Mom’s going to dump him? I surely hope not. I know Dad’s been a real pain in the butt recently, but he’s the only father I have.*

“My Mom washed your shirt and pants this morning so you’d have something clean,” Tim stated in an attempt to change the subject.

“Thanks. Do you really think my mom is considering getting a divorce?”

Tim’s lips formed a weak smile and nodded yes. “From what I overheard, it sounds like your dad got drunk again last night, and it resulted in your parents getting into one heck of a fight.”

“They did?”

“Uh huh. And while I can’t say what might have happened after that, I do know this morning your mother asked mine if you could remain here until the two of you fly to North Carolina tomorrow morning.”

“Oh? So you know about my trip?” Paul’s cheeks turned multi-shades of crimson since he had forgotten tell Tim about it.

“I do now. According to my mom, you’re going to be staying at your older brother’s place for the next couple of weeks at some hick town called High Point.”

“I know.” Paul replied even though the thought depressed him. “I meant to tell you yesterday, but I kept forgetting. Do you think your mom could talk mine out of making me go? I really don’t want to.”

Tim shook his head. “I doubt it. Anyway, even if she could, why shouldn’t you go?”

“I hate being around my brother. The guy always acts like a butt hole whenever he’s around. Not to mention, who’s going to take care of Half Pint? I certainly can’t depend on my dad. He’ll probably stay drunk the whole time we’re gone.”

“I can do it. And, think about this. How often do you get a chance to fly somewhere? Opportunities like this don’t happen every day. Wouldn’t that make the trip worthwhile?”

“No. Not really, Tim,” Paul said shortly before bending down to tie his shoelaces. “Besides my brother being a Class A, Number One, jerk – being at his house is so boring, even watching paint dry would be more entertaining. The guy doesn’t even own a video game system.

Tim’s mouth dropped and his eyes rolled. “You’re kidding? That’s unbelievable. No wonder you don’t want to go. Your brother must think he lives in the Stone Age.”

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From the end of the hallway, Mrs. Hegler’s voice began to echo into Tim’s bedroom. “Paul. Tim. Are you two ready to eat?”

“That sounds like Mom,” Tim said. “Lunch must be ready.”

Paul nodded and at once, the two of them scrambled through Tim’s bedroom door like a couple of racehorses competing in the Belmont Sweepstakes.

Upon reaching the midpoint of the Hegler’s narrow hallway, Paul appeared to be in the lead. Until ...

A-H-H-H-H ... WHOMP!

“Are you okay, Paul?” Mary Lou asked, glancing at the carpet next to her feet, where a five-foot pile of skin-covered bones unexpectedly came to a crashing halt.

“Yes, I think so,” Paul said and began to rub the now pinkish tip of his nose.

Tim casually walked up beside him. "So. What were you trying to do, Paul? Kill yourself?"

Paul gave his friend an evil smirk. "Yeah. That's right. Right here, in the middle of your living room. ... You are so very funny, Tim. A true lark, sometimes."

Mrs. Hegler watched as her son helped Paul get onto his feet. "You know you two boys shouldn't be running inside the house. Next time, one of you may seriously hurt yourself."

Paul forced himself to smile.

*Now she tells me. ... How in the world was I supposed to know they recently placed a throw rug in front of their aquarium?*

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Returning to Tim's bedroom when lunch was finished, both boys lackadaisically flopped on Tim's bed and began to do some serious thinking.

"So, what do you want to do this afternoon?" Tim asked, picking up a wad of scrap paper and tossing it inside a garbage can he had placed in the corner of the room. "Just hanging around here could get boring mighty quick."

"I know. If I only had my spider bike here," Paul replied, while proceeding to find something he could use to match his friend's two points. "Then I'd say, let's head over to the mall."

"The one on Hollywood Boulevard?"

"Yeah. I've noticed there's a huge sign directly above the entrance of the Sears store."

"So?" Tim appeared to be mystified as he scooted backward so he could lean his back against the wall.

"Well, if we're careful, we could hide behind it and drop water balloons as people passed underneath. What do you think?"

"That sounds like fun. But, there's no way to get there. We don't have enough bikes unless we borrowed one."

"True. But isn't there someone we know around here that might have an extra one?"

"Harold does, and if we let him join us, we might be able to convince him to let us borrow it. It belongs to his brother."

Paul firmly grasped his chin. "Hmm. Harold is a good friend. But are you sure having him around isn't going to cause more trouble than it's worth?"

"W-e-l-l," Tim slowly replied. "You know Harold. There's always a risk."

“A risk?” Paul rapidly turned to face him. “You’re joking, aren’t you? Friend or not, Harold is sometimes so unpredictable, he’s literally a walking time bomb. Have you forgotten how he almost got us locked up when he decided to moon a cop during our Halloween escapade?”

“No.” Tim replied as he sniggered at the memory. “But bringing him along is the only way we’re going to get you a bike.”

Tim then paused. “So, is Harold in? Or would you rather spend the afternoon around here until it’s time to head to the horse ranch?”

“Well ... if we have to, then I guess we will,” Paul said, getting to his feet. “I do need a bike. By the way, do you have any balloons we could use or are we going to have to buy some?”

“I think I have some,” Tim said, hopping off his bed and heading toward his dresser. “I believe I put a pack in my drawer a few days ago.”

Paul grinned and hit a balled fist into his left hand.

Reaching into his top dresser drawer, Tim shuffled a few papers and after several seconds, yanked out a fresh, unopened pack of party balloons. Soon afterward, the two of them made a beeline for the water spigot behind Tim’s garage.

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“Do you think thirty will be enough?” Tim asked, setting another about-to-burst balloon down on some Bermuda grass.

“It should be,” Paul said, double-checking the last balloon Tim filled to make sure the end was tied tight. “Counting this one – that’ll give us ten apiece. Any more than this, we’ll risk having the mall’s security people all over us.”

A semi-panic expression suddenly covered Tim’s face and he turned to face his friend. “You know,” he said, leaving his mouth partly open. “I totally forgot all about them.”

“About who?”

“The mall’s security guards.”

Paul frowned and set the red balloon that in his hands onto the ground. “You ARE a fast runner, aren’t you, Tim?”

“Yes,” Tim answered, with his eyes widened so wide, the whites around his pupils began to show.

“Okay then. You can jump off the roof of the mall if you needed to, couldn’t you?”

“Yes. But.” From the way Tim’s eyebrows had narrowed, it was apparent he was starting to have some serious concerns.

Paul deliberately ignored his friend’s outward almost-panicking expression. “So what’s the problem? Most likely, we’ll be long gone before the guards even realize what we’re up to.”

“I guess there isn’t any, except ...”

“Except what?”

“Well. How are we going to carry all these balloons to the mall?”

Paul gazed at his friend, and then toward the balloons. “H-m-m. I hadn’t thought about that.”

Turning to gawp across the yard toward the coconut tree located in the corner of Tim’s property, Paul began to look for something which could hold thirty balloons.

After not finding anything, he rotated toward Tim and asked, “Doesn’t your mom keep some plastic grocery bags around the house?”

“Sometimes. But it’s going take one heck of an excuse to get any. She prefers to recycle them.”

“That shouldn’t be a problem,” Paul said, grabbing a balloon. “We’re bound to come up with something.”

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After carrying each water-filled balloon inside the garage and sitting it on the floor, the boys carefully stashed them under a worn U.S. Army tarp located inside of an old, rusty footlocker someone stored under Mr. Hegler’s workbench.

“Have you figured out what we’re going to tell my mom, yet?” Tim asked as they passed through the entranceway between the garage and kitchen.

Paul smiled a mischievous smile. “How about this? Why don’t we tell her we need them because we’d like to collect some aluminum cans to recycle?”

Tim stopped for a moment and thought about it.

“You know,” he eventually said as the corners of his mouth turned upward, “... it just might work since she’s big time into going green.”

\*\*\*\*\*

After finding his mother sitting in front of the large, mahogany desk located inside her private office, “Hey, Mom. What’s ya doing?” Tim shouted, noticing she appeared to be busy typing something on her computer.

“What does it look like?” Mary Lou asked, turning her swivel chair so she could face him.

“I don’t know. Were you were paying bills online again?”

“Not at the moment, Tim. I’ve been working on my latest manuscript,” she said while tapping a few keys on her wireless keyboard. “What do you two want? I’m in a hurry. My editor wants me to have my novel finished by the end of the month, so hopefully, it will get published in time for the Christmas shopping season.”

“Can we borrow a few of your plastic grocery bags?” Tim asked, while trying to seem innocent of any potential wrongdoing.

Mary Lou stared at her son and frowned. “What do you need them for? You know it’s way too early to start making Halloween masks.”

Tim sighed, then shook his head and grimaced. “Very funny, Mom. Paul and I thought we would try to find some aluminum cans to recycle.”

Mary Lou stopped to gaze at Tim and Paul, while she mentally analyzed her son’s reply.

“I guess so, if that’s the real reason you want them,” she said, giving them an additional good look over. “They’re in a box inside of the kitchen cabinet, underneath the sink. Just make sure the two of you are back in time for supper.”

“We will,” Tim replied, concealing a large grin. “Thanks, Mom.”

“You’re welcome. And by the way – Paul?”

“Yes ma’am?” he answered, while taking a step backwards.

“If you would ever like to talk either to Joe or myself about anything, you do know either one of us would be glad to listen. Both you and your mother are good friends of our family and I understand how this must be a difficult time for both of you. Therefore, if we can help in any way...”

Sadness immediately proceeded to gush through Paul’s narrow veins at the speed of a lethal potion.

“Ah-h. Thanks, Mrs. Hegler,” he gulped. “But there isn’t really anything I need to discuss at the moment.”

Mary Lou silently stared at him for a brief second, before giving him a sad smile – it caused Paul to wonder what exactly his mother told her.

Whatever it was, he was glad when Mary Lou turned back toward her monitor and resumed working since it seemed like she wanted to question him about things he really didn’t care to talk about. At least, not right now.



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Quickly leaving Mrs. Hegler's office before she had a chance to change her mind, both Tim and Paul snatched a handful of plastic grocery bags from underneath the kitchen cabinet and headed for the garage. Once there, they filled each of them with the balloons they previously stored and hurried out of the house.

"That was easy enough," Paul said as they started their trek towards Harold's.

"No kidding," Tim agreed. "It must have been because she was busy. Normally she would have asked a million questions."

Tim then deliberately changed his voice so he could imitate her. "What do you boys need my grocery bags for?"

## **Chapter Five - Bombs Away**

Just moments after entering Hollywood Mall's parking lot, Tim, Harold, and Paul parked their multi-speed Schwinn bikes precisely two feet away from the dumpsters since, at this specific locale, they would be only five feet away from the maintenance shop. Its exterior happened to have a built-in ladder leading to the mall's roof.

No doubt, parking anywhere else could potentially waste valuable time, which in turn, could end up being disastrous.

Soon after batting his borrowed bike's kickstand, Paul gazed at his fellow conspirators.

"Now remember men. The second your foot hits the roof, you're going to need to scramble toward the center of the building. ... Once there, then quietly run south. ... We'll regroup behind the Sears sign. ... Any questions?"

"Just one," Harold said, raising his hand. "What if we need to use the bathroom?"

Tim forcefully released a sigh and shook his head in disbelief. "You must be kidding!"

"I just thought I'd ask," Harold squeaked, while defensively positioning his arms in front of his chest.

"Listen," Paul said, interrupting the one-on-one taking place between his comrades. "If either of you needs to pee, you better do it now. You're not going to get a chance to do it later."

Harold frowned. "But I can't do it right now," he whined.

"Why not?" Tim asked, his eyes focusing in Harold's direction like a couple of glazed spears.

"Because you'll be watching me."

Tim chuckled. "I seriously doubt that. But if we did, would it really matter? Do you have something we don't?"

Harold gazed downward towards his zipper. "No."

"Then go stand in the gap between the dumpsters and do what you need to," Paul instructed. "And I'll promise, neither Tim nor I will watch."

Harold nodded and began to head toward the dumpsters. Meanwhile, Tim and Paul began to review their plans one last time.

When Harold eventually returned, the three of them climbed up the ladder and dashed across the mall's tar-and-stone-covered roof.

"We're safe for the moment," Paul said, trying to catch his breath as he scanned the asphalt parking lot for signs of any security personnel.

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After carefully removing the water balloons from the plastic bags and gently placing them on the roof, all three boys kept a constant eye on Sears's main entrance as minute after minute continued to steadily tick.

"Hey, Paul," Harold suddenly whispered, turning to face his co-conspirators.

"Yeah."

"Isn't that our principal, Old Man McFarrelly, with his wife and kids getting out of the clunker over there?" Harold said, pointing to a Ford SUV.

Paul shifted and took a glance. "Yeah. I believe it is," he said with a malevolence grin.

"You know, because of the way he was constantly giving me detention last year for one thing or another," Harold began. "I'd love to drop one of these beauties on top of him."

Tim's lips formed a crooked grin and he reached for the balloon sitting closest to him. "Yeah. Let's do it. It would serve him right."

Paul nodded his agreement and the three of them slid to the edge of the roof like a pack of wild cats getting ready to pounce on a trapped mouse.

"Bombs away!" Paul yelled seconds later when the McFarrelly family strolled within firing range. And simultaneously, all three released their water-filled WMDs. (Weapons of Massive Dampness)

K-E-R-S-P-L-A-T-!-

"What the heck?" Principle McFarrelly bellowed as a bright red water balloon exploded across the front of his face, completely soaking his gaudy pink Sanford shirt.

Then suddenly, a strange male voice yelled from beneath the Sear's entranceway. "Hey, you hooligans. Get down from there. I need to have a word with you."

“Make us!” Harold shouted back with the furiousness of an untamed lion. And before Paul could identify who the voice screaming at them belonged to, Harold snatched a green balloon and threw it.

“Heaven forbid!” Paul roared the instant he identified the thoroughly soaked person as being a Hollywood Mall security officer. “What in God’s name were you thinking, Harold? Didn’t you realize who it was?”

“I sure did.” Harold nodded while displaying a smug look.

“Then why in world did you do it? Didn’t you realize hitting a security guard would get us in big trouble?”

Harold paused, while still displaying a confident smirk. “I didn’t like his attitude.”

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As the boys continued to watch the officer below, Paul noticed the guy had yanked a two-way radio off his wide black leather belt, and apparently was calling for backup.

“Tim. Harold. Let’s get out of here, and fast!”

And at once, the three boys scrambled to their feet and made a dash for the ladder.

Heading across the roof and scurrying down the ladder wasn’t a problem. However, the second the three of them hit the asphalt, all four of Hollywood Mall’s side doors burst open and a group of burly security guards began to streak toward them.

“Grab your bike, everyone, and let’s get out of here,” Paul yelled as he swung his leg over the red, two-wheeled racer he borrowed from Harold’s brother. “And no matter what happens, don’t even think about stopping – until you reach you know where.”

Instantly, dirt and gravel haphazardly flew into the air as Tim’s rear tire burnt rubber. However, when Paul was about to follow, a metallic clanking sound coming from just a short distance away abruptly interrupted him.

“Uh. Oh. Where’s Harold?”

In noticing the chain on Harold’s bike had somehow popped off the main sprocket, Paul’s mouth involuntarily dropped and he felt his heart jumped into the base of his throat. Unless precise defensive action was immediately taken, the security guards chasing the three of them would soon be all over him.

“Get off your bike and run with it,” Paul hollered in Harold’s direction, as his foot slammed on his brakes and he bent over to reach for a handful of gravel from around his feet. He then

commenced to ride in wide circles around the guards – in a very deliberate, and hopefully, intimidating manner.

“Hey, officers! Eat this!” he shouted while throwing the jagged stones when they tried to grab him. He then slammed his twelve-speed into high gear and peeled out of the parking lot as fast as his two legs could pump.

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“Whew. That was close,” Harold exclaimed between gasping breaths, several minutes later as he leaned his bike against the side of the main building in David’s Park.

“You got that right,” Paul agreed, hitting the brakes so he could park his.

“Now, don’t everyone get too relaxed, guys,” Tim interrupted. “We’re going to have to hurry up and get Harold’s chain back on. Those uniformed mall pansies might have called for reinforcements.”

Paul nodded, while noticing Tim’s face was turning a deathly pale. Obviously, he wasn’t the only one who thought the security guards might have called the police. And if those yahoos did, all three of them needed to get away from there fast since David’s Park was only a couple blocks away.

“Grab the chain guard and pull it to the right, out of my way, Tim,” Paul commanded, soon thereafter. “It will make it a lot easier to get the chain on.”

As Tim followed the instructions given him, Paul carefully guided the chain over the main gear, and then gave the pedals a quick turn.

“Harold’s bike should be as good as new,” he stated.

“You know, guys,” Harold began, as Tim was setting his twelve-speed back onto its wheels. “This adventure has ended up being a lot more dangerous than I prefer, and we easily could have gotten ourselves into big trouble. ... I don’t think I want to throw water balloons off the mall’s roof anymore.”

Paul raised an eyebrow in disbelief and hopped on the seat of his bike. “You consider this escapade too dangerous, Harold? Then why in heaven’s name didn’t you think about that before you hit the guard with the water balloon? If you hadn’t had done it, we could have easily gotten off the mall roof long before they located us.”

“I know,” Harold admitted, looking a bit contrite. “I just didn’t think.”

For a short moment, Tim remained quiet, as if in silent agreement with his best friend. However, soon thereafter, “Actually Paul,” he said, interrupting just before they started the five-mile journey back toward his house. “Harold’s right. While it’s good to have fun. I think we need to start doing it in a way that’s a bit safer.”

Paul stopped and looked at Tim, then shrugged his shoulders – shortly before making a right turn toward Polk Street.

## **Chapter Six -The Next Morning**

During the darkness of the early morn, dense white fog had rolled into South Florida, creating a moisture-laden, cotton blanket so thick, it obscured all remnants of humanity's existence.

All primary streets and highways, which normally would have been filled with commuters by this time of the morning, at the moment, were nothing more than long, vacant, asphalt ribbons which reflected an orange reflection from the streetlights above.

Yet, on the top branch of a solitary coconut tree located in the far rear corner of a resident's yard, a small, gray turtledove cooed a melody of peace and harmony even though no one at this early hour of the morning was willing to take a moment to stop and listen.

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"Paul. Wake up!" Mrs. Hegler bellowed as she rushed into Tim's bedroom. "You've overslept and your mother is already here. You need to hurry so the two of you won't miss your flight."

Paul yawned and involuntarily glanced out the window. The only thing visible was a dark, foggy soup. "You've got to be kidding? It's not even daylight."

"No, she's not kidding," Paul heard Ellen holler from down the hallway. "Now get a move on, son. We need to leave in five minutes."

"But, Mom!" Paul said as he slid both legs over the side of the bed. "What about breakfast?"

"Don't worry about it. We'll pick up something either at the airport or at a fast food drive-through along the way. Just hurry up and get ready. We need to go. Now!"

Not able to think of an excuse good enough to delay the unavoidable, Paul sighed and hastily threw on his "Save the Planet" T-shirt, a pair of denim jeans, and tennis shoes.

Soon afterward, in seeing Mary Lou standing next to his mother as he headed toward the front door, he thanked her for having him over, then gave Tim a sad goodbye.

"Do I really have to go, Mom?" he asked as his mother backed her Impala out of the Hegler's driveway. "I'd prefer to stay here and have fun with Tim."

“I know, son,” Ellen said as she placed the transmission into Drive. “But, you’re going to enjoy this trip. Every time we go on vacation, at first, you always complain. But, once we actually get away, you start to enjoy it and this year shouldn’t be any different.”

“That’s normally true, Mom,” Paul quietly replied. “However, something keeps telling me this isn’t going to be one of our usual run-of-the-mill trips to North Carolina.”

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As Paul watched cars, buildings and houses silently approach before eventually passing by, he maintained a steady gaze out of the passenger side window. Unfortunately though, it was hard to ignore what he deemed was nothing more than an unrelenting, insignificant chatter coming from the other side of the vehicle. It kept continually flowing like a non-stop talk show while the two of them continued toward the airport.

“Paul. Are you listening to me?” Ellen suddenly asked after several minutes of strictly one-way conversation transpired.

“Yes, ma’am,” Paul said, deliberately stretching each word of his reply as long as he could without being obtrusively rude.

His mother shook her head and frowned. “Then where do you want to stop for breakfast?”

“Actually, Mom. I’m not hungry,” Paul said before diverting his attention back to the tropical scenery outside the four-wheel, mobile jail he felt was rapidly whisking him away from everything he loved or cared about.

“Oh?” A puzzled expression flashed across Ellen’s face. “Since when? You’re always hungry.”

Paul responded with silence. By not talking he hoped his lack of a response would emphasize the point he had been trying to make all morning. Though he might have enjoyed going on a vacation with her in the past, because of everything which transpired recently involving his father and the possibility his parents might be getting a divorce, this was one trip he did not want to be on.

Heaven knew, the last thing he would ever want was to end up living close to where Jack resided. *No, sir. No longer being able to live in South Florida in itself would be a never-ending nightmare. But having to live close to my older brother. It would be inhumane.*

“Half Pint will be okay,” Ellen said, interrupting his thoughts. “I do believe John will take good care of her.”

“That would be a first,” Paul replied, turning to face her. “Dad doesn’t even take care of us anymore, so why should he take care of her?”

There was no response to his rhetorical question, so he resumed.



“It doesn’t really matter anyway because yesterday I asked Tim to keep an eye on her.”

“That’s good,” Ellen replied. “So, if you are not worried about Half Pint. What’s bugging you?”

“Several things. One of them is the fact I’m having to leave my friends just to spend time with Jack. Not only is the guy a self-righteous jerk, his wife, Sarah, is downright boring, and Allen’s too young to have any fun with.”

Ellen glanced in her son’s direction and displayed a half-smile. “Okay. I can understand how someone your age you wouldn’t like to be away from their friends. And, it’s true that Allen is quite young. So it makes sense that the combination of the two might justify your being a bit unhappy. ... But, what if we shorten the trip to just one week? Would it make a difference?”

Ellen then paused and gave Paul a small grin.

“That way, time would pass so fast, it’ll be time to come home before you realized it.”

Paul hesitated before he verbalized his reply. *I don’t know why, but I’m not surprised you would come up with something like that.*

“Well. Okay,” he grudgingly said. “I’ll quit complaining if the trip is only going to last a week.”

Settling back into his seat, he began to wonder about why his mother decided so quickly they would be gone for a week, instead of the two she originally planned? *Has she been making plans without telling me and could it be that it was only going to take a week to implement them? And what if she had booked the airlines tickets for only a one-week trip originally, but was making things look like she was making a compromise just to try to appease me? This whole scenario certainly doesn’t seem to be very kosher.*

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Pulling into the long-term lot, Ellen didn’t waste any time in parking their vehicle into the closest available parking. And soon after the car came to a halt, she reached forward and pressed its trunk release button.

Paul headed toward the back, so he could retrieve their luggage.

*Man. It’s going to be at least a two-mile walk before we reach the main entrance,* he thought as he lowered both of their cases to the ground. *Thank goodness our suitcases have rollers on them.*

When they began to approach the halfway point, “Let’s see,” Ellen said as she started to read the flashing overhead signs, which announced the names of the various airlines. “There’s Delta over there, Northwest, U.S. Airlines, and ...”

After naming at least five other airlines, she eventually located the one labeled United. It was located at the furthest end of the terminal. Of course, that meant the two of them had a lot walking ahead of them.

With so many airlines having gone bankrupt, Paul couldn't help but wonder about how many his mother named were still in business.

"Aren't you getting excited?" Ellen asked as the two of them approached United Airlines' entranceway. "You should be since you've never flown before."

Paul shrugged his shoulders.

*Sure. This is exciting. In fact, I'm so excited, I think I'm going to puke. Can't we just hurry up, Mom, and get to the ticket counter?*

"Yes, Mom. This is exciting," he said, in a perfect monotone.

Ellen instinctively looked down and gave her son a dirty look. *Paul is displaying an attitude today. However, considering everything which is going on, his indifference wasn't worth getting into an argument about. After all, an argument might cause me to accidentally reveal more than what I wanted him to know.*

*The next few weeks are going to be rough for us and the longer I can delay Paul's suffering, the better. Therefore, it's far better we continue our walk toward the ticket counter in complete silence, then to accidentally open Pandora's Box.*

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After standing in line for what seemed to be ages, both Paul and Ellen approached the check-in counter, where a twenty-something-year-old female was waiting to serve them.

Her long, multicolored hair, which appeared to have been flung over her shoulders like a piece of unraveled tie-dye rug, seemed so ghastly he couldn't help but conclude it had to be one of those "Made in Korea" wigs someone might find at a beauty store outlet.

"Can I help you, Ma'am?" the attendant said, giving them an abnormally large, ear-to-ear smile.

"Yes," Ellen said, stepping closer to the counter. "We have reservations for your morning flight to Greensboro."

"Your name, please?"

*Good grief. Paul thought. Couldn't the attendant figure it out on her own. I mean, how many people would be wanting to go to North Carolina, anyhow? Two. Maybe, three at the most. If that many.*

“Mom,” he said a second later, tugging on Ellen’s sleeve as she waited for their reservations to be located in the computer. “Why did you tell her we’re going to Greensboro? Jack lives in High Point.”

“I know he does, son. But to get to High Point, you have to fly to Greensboro.”

“Oh.” Paul grimaced. *I should have known that.*

Diverting his thoughts toward their destination, *I guess I shouldn’t be surprised. In comparison to Hollywood, High Point is nothing more than a dinky, one-horse town consisting of a main drag that runs down the center of it. And of course, the local sheriff must roll up the pavement every night, just after sunset. Otherwise, it would get worn out too quickly and heaven knows the city wouldn’t be able to afford to replace it. ... Geez. It’s no wonder the town doesn’t have its own airport!*

“Are you ready to go?” his mother said, turning to face him as she placed their tickets inside her black leather handbag.

“Go where?” Paul asked, gazing into her eyes. “To the boarding gate?”

“No. Not quite yet,” Ellen said as they began walking toward a huge entranceway which contained a U.S. Home Security approved a metal detector – it included an X-ray viewing screen built into its main console. “Our flight won’t be leaving for another forty-five minutes. So I thought after we’re done with being inspected, we would try to get a Danish and some hot chocolate before boarding the plane.”

*Danish and hot chocolate?* Paul beamed an artificial smile. *Gee, do I look like I’m still five years old?*

“Sounds good, Mom.”

“Great. Now let’s see how fast we can get through Airport Security.”

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“Just place your bag in this basket, ma’am,” the dark gray, uniformed man standing behind the metal detector said nonchalantly as he pointed to a small, white plastic, box-shaped container.

After Mrs. Pontiac complied, he asked, “Are you wearing or carrying any metallic objects?”

“No,” Ellen responded.

“Please walk on through then.”

Noticing the security officer’s hand signal for him to stay put, Paul watched as his mother proceeded through the detection unit’s narrow aisle. A green light located on the top of the unit popped on, milliseconds before she exited the other side.

*Hmm. It doesn't seem so bad. No bells, whistles or sirens went off. I might be able to do this.*

However, soon after he casually walked down the same aisle his mother non-eventfully traveled, not only did the metal bar over his head start flashing alternating red and blue lights, a police siren loud enough to be heard ten miles away began to howl.

Paul instantly froze in his tracks.

“Son,” the guard said in an extremely serious tone as two other security personnel rapidly walked up to the counter. “What’s the metal object in your back pocket?”

“My back pocket?” Paul said. *The guy must be nuts.* “I don’t have anything in my back pocket.”

“What’s the problem, officer?” Ellen asked, interrupting the conversation.

“Your son is carrying a metallic object inside of his back pocket, Ma’am. And I highly suspect it’s a weapon of some kind,” the officer said, turning to face her.

“You’ve got to be kidding?” Ellen chuckled while giving her son a quick head-to-toe look over. “Paul’s only a young teenager, officer. He would never be carrying anything like that.”

“I’m sorry, Ma’am. When our detectors go off, we don’t joke around,” the officer stated, before turning to face Paul. “Now son, would you please remove whatever it is you have stashed inside of your jeans and place it on top of the counter?”

“Ah-h-h, sure.” Paul nodded.

Confidently reaching into the back of his jeans, he was positive there wasn’t going to be anything back there. However ...

“Uh oh,” he unexpectedly gulped. “I forgot about that.”

*That shouldn't be any big deal though.*

Placing a closed pocketknife on the laminated counter in front of him, as requested, he waited for the security guard to ask him to walk through the detector again.

“Is this yours?” the officer asked, giving him a cold stare as he opened both of its blades.

“Yes,” Paul croaked, and his skin abruptly changed from a nice golden tan into a very pale ghostly white.

“Don’t you realize, son, Federal law strictly prohibits airline passengers from carrying weapons onto an airplane?” the officer growled.

“No. How would I? I’ve never flown before. Besides that, what are you talking about? It’s only a pocketknife. And a dull one at that.”

The officer ignored Paul's comments as if they were irrelevant and turned to face his mother. "Ma'am, are you aware pocketknives are strictly prohibited on a commercial airliner?"

"Yes. Of course, I am," she answered. "But I didn't you were carrying one."

"I see," the officer said, staring intently into the pupils of the soon-to-be-convicted, teenage terrorist currently standing in front of him as he began to twist the closed pocketknife between his thumb and middle fingers. "So, your son doesn't own a knife."

"W-H-A-T?" Paul rolled his eyes in disbelief.

"That's not what I meant," Ellen said, crossing her arms. "Paul does own a pocket knife. I just wasn't aware he had it with him."

"Oh?" The officer tapped his forefinger on the counter. "So-o-o. You knew your son owned a knife, however, he doesn't carry it with him on a daily basis."

The guy then paused.

"Was there any particular reason your son would be carrying it today, especially since he knew he would be boarding a plane this morning?"

Ellen turned in the direction of her understandably frightened son. "No. None I'm aware of."

"Okay," the officer said, pointing to a location, which would keep them in direct view of an overhead camera. "Since that's the case, I would like the two of you to wait here a few moments. My supervisor is going to have some questions he will want to ask both of you. ... As things currently stand, Ma'am, your son appears to be guilty of Illegal Possession of a Lethal Weapon, Attempted Transport with a Lethal Weapon, and Attempted Hijacking of a Commercial Airliner. Furthermore, since he's is a minor, you could also be easily considered as an Accessory to the Fact."

At once, Ellen closed her arms in front of her chest. Her shocked facial expression clearly revealed her appalled feelings. "You must be joking!"

"Sorry," the officer said in a serious tone. "After what happened on 9-11, Ma'am, this is no joke."

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After standing in the small four-by-four square of floor he and his mother had been assigned to for slightly over five minutes, a tall, bald gentleman wearing a black suit and tie, white shirt, and wing-tip shoes caught Paul's attention. He seemed to be heading in the direction of the metal detector officer.

Moments later, he motioned for Paul and his mother to follow him to his office, which was in a such a remote section of the airport, Paul readily surmised most people had no idea it existed.

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After walking down a maze of hallways for several minutes, Paul and his mother arrived at the designated security headquarters and the officer signaled for them to take a seat in one of the many hard, black plastic chairs lined up against the wall.

“Ma’am,” he said, straightening his tie after taking a seat behind his four-by-six, Formica-topped desk. “Let me introduce myself. I’m Captain John Hanes with airport security. And your name is?”

“I’m Ellen Pontiac and this is my son, Paul.” Mrs. Pontiac said, setting her purse in the center of her lap.

“I see,” Captain Hanes said, giving her a perfunctory smile before forming a steeple with his fingers. “Mrs. Pontiac. As you are aware, our equipment detected your son was carrying an object which some may consider a lethal weapon.”

He then paused – as if for effect.

“Now, I’m sure that in all probability, after both of you have answered a few questions, we’ll be able to determine this incident is nothing more than the result of him making a minor mistake this morning.”

“I should hope so,” Ellen said, straightening her back to an upright position.

The questioning then began. And after forty-five minutes and what seemed to be a thousand and one questions later, Captain Hanes felt reasonably secure that in accordance with Federal Home Security guidelines, Paul and his mother weren’t trying to cover up any ma-li-cious acts against the United States of America. However, for governmental security purposes, he did confiscate the pocketknife.

Needless to say, Paul wasn’t too pleased, but at least he and his mother were finally able to head toward United’s boarding gate Number 5 and start their vacation.

Unfortunately though, upon their arrival, they discovered the boarding area completely empty – with the exception of a single, young female airline employee standing behind a podium near what was supposed to have been their gate.

She appeared to be busy filling out some paperwork.

“Excuse me,” Ellen said, strolling up to the attendant. “We were supposed to board Flight 61 for Greensboro.”

The young lady looked at her and gave Ellen a polite, but sheepish grin. "I'm sorry, ma'am. That flight took off just a few minutes ago."

Ellen immediately looked down at Paul and stared. And if a stare could bore a hole through the middle of an adolescent's forehead, this one would have if it had been physically possible. "Isn't this just great! See what your negligence has done."

"Ma'am," the attendant said, trying to politely interrupt. "If you'll take your tickets back to the front counter, I'm sure one of our reservationists could book you on Flight 32. It's scheduled to leave for Greensboro at 11."

Paul instinctively took a quick gaze at his wristwatch and realized this would mean he and his mother would have to hang around the Ft. Lauderdale airport for an additional four hours.

"Mom," he said, glancing up at her. "Do you think we'll have enough time to get the Danish and hot chocolate you talked about earlier this morning?"

If looks could have killed - with the way Mrs. Pontiac gazed upon him, he would have instantaneously died ... still standing upright inside in the pair of Converse he was wearing.

## **Chapter Seven - High Point**

For Paul Pontiac, flying was now the only way to travel.

Looking out the window once the plane had reached 30,000 feet, he could see things in a way never before possible.

Automobiles looked as if they were motorized toys. Humans seemed to be just like ants, and the cities they flew over reminded him of scenes within a flight simulation game.

While checking out the inside of the aircraft, he noticed not only was the cabin air-conditioned, it even had comfortable, dark gray, cloth-covered seats, which reclined. And in front of his knees, a collection of magazines rested in a plastic holder, should anyone have a desire to look at them. However, on this trip, they wouldn't be touched.

Neither would the 12-inch LCD monitor built into the back of the seat in front of him, despite the fact, it provided an opportunity for Paul to watch today's featured movie.

Sadly enough, regardless of all the positive things about this flight, there was a prevalent troubling issue and it was placing a predominate shadow over what possibly could have been a utopian ambiance.

Ever since he and his mother stepped inside the aircraft and taken their seats, not a single word had passed between them. And it was also a fact, the only time Ellen even glanced in his direction was when a steward tried to hand them a mid-flight snack.

*Wow. If Mom is this upset with me, Paul thought as the pilot announced they would soon be landing. I can only imagine how Jack is going to act. ... Two to one, Mom told him I caused our flight delay.*

Silently, Paul frowned.

*How was I supposed to know a pocketknife wasn't allowed? Mom certainly didn't tell me.*

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After circling Piedmont Triad International airport, which was located on the outskirts of Greensboro, North Carolina, a couple of times – the plane finally descended and eventually came to a halt next to what appeared to be a relatively new terminal.

“This airport is a bit bigger than I expected,” Paul said under his breath as he unbuckled his seatbelt. “But it still has a way to go before it matches the one in Fort Lauderdale.”



Subsequent to exiting the plane, Paul followed his mother as they began to make their way toward the lower level baggage area.

That's when he caught sight of this older brother, Jack, waiting near a huge, metallic turntable where the passengers on United's Flight 32 would pick up their luggage. And, he didn't seem to be very happy.

"How was your flight, Mom?" Jack asked, giving his mother a large smile as he affectionately wrapped his arms around her midsection.

"It was fine," Ellen said, returning his hug.

Paul waited by his mother's side as Jack and his mother began to converse, figuring that sooner or later, he would be recognized. When it never occurred, he decided to proceed toward the turntable and wait for their luggage.

"Well. I guess I was right. Because of the incident at the Ft. Lauderdale airport, not only is Mom not speaking to me, but Jack's acting like I'm invisible."

A large mechanical rumble commenced to echo throughout the room as various pieces of luggage started to spew from the top of the conveyor located in the center of the stainless-steel turntable.

Soon afterward, Paul found himself being squeezed forward by some much larger adult. However, he soon discovered by turning his torso sideways and extending his arm as far as possible, there was a way to retrieve both his and his mother suitcases without getting smothered.

Once they were obtained, the only major obstacle he would need to overcome was the large crowd. It currently blocked the pathway back to his mother's side.

The moment Paul finally managed to return with both suitcases, Jack glanced downward at him and grimaced. Without uttering even a single word, his brother's expression said it all.

"Let's get this straight from the get-go. You are nothing more than a totally worthless piece of flesh I hate to have around."

His brother then motioned for him to follow, and the three of them proceeded toward the short-term parking lot where Jack's Ford Fusion was waiting for them.

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Not long after the airport disappeared from Paul sight, he overheard his brother say they were going to take the “scenic route” back to High Point since it would take just under an hour, and he was sure their mother would enjoy it since she had been raised on a several-hundred-acre farm.

In hearing this, Paul, in turn, decided he might as well open one of the side windows and do some sightseeing – since it was obvious he was going to be stuck in the back seat without having anything to do or someone he could talk with.

“Paul. Would you mind closing your window?” Ellen asked, interrupting the lively conversation she was having with her oldest.

Paul faced his mother. “Why? We could use a nice breeze. And I can see the outside scenery better this way.”

Jack frowned. “You don’t need to see any better,” he loudly interjected. “And I’ve just turned on the air conditioner so you should be feeling cool in a few minutes.”

Paul scowled and crossed his arms in front of him. “This isn’t fair. All I wanted to do is to get a good view of what’s outside. Besides, there’s not even the slightest hint of cool breeze back here.”

“Just close your window, son,” Ellen commanded, using an unusually harsh tone.

Paul stared at her and sighed.

“O-K,” he said, shrugging a shoulder. “If you insist.”

In the process of doing what he had been asked, Paul soon concluded he really didn’t need the stupid window opened anyhow. He still could gaze out of it and he might as well continue to do so. *After all, you never knew when a pure miracle might occur and something worth looking at would appear – like a good-looking, teenage girl wearing a bikini and sunbathing in her front yard.*

Unfortunately, the odds of it happening were against him and it never came about.

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The instant Jack pulled his automobile into the driveway of his colonial-style, brick and mortar home, both his wife and blond-haired son surrounded Ellen and began what appeared to be some type of massive family huggie-kissie thing.

Needless to say, Paul wasn’t included, so he stood to one side and watched from a distance. Eventually, Jack opened the trunk and ordered him to carry their mother’s luggage to the guest bedroom.

Upon lifting it, Paul couldn't help but wonder what she might have packed. *Whatever it is, her travel case feels like it weighs a bit over two tons.* And once again, he was thankful their suitcases had built-in rollers.

"I thought Mom said we were only going to be here a week," Paul said under his breath when he dropped the handlebar of her case onto the floor of the guest bedroom. "There must be enough stuff inside this thing to last a month."

He then took a deep breath and made his way back to the living room. Not surprisingly, not a single person even glanced in his direction when he took a seat in a nearby tan-colored lounge chair.

"Jack," Paul said, interrupting the adults several minutes later when he detected a small break in their conversation. "Where do you want me to put my suitcase?"

At once, his brother displayed a nasty sneer and pointed toward a doorway at the far end of the hall. "You're going to be sharing Allen's room while you're here. Inside you'll find a sleeping bag you can use by his closet door."

Nodding, Paul got up so he could check out his sleeping quarters. However, as he was about to enter, a Sesame Street poster taped to the front of his nephew's door caught his attention.

He stopped and stared at it for a moment, and sighed, before opening the wooden door.

"You'll like my bedroom, Uncle Paul," Allen declared with a childish delight the minute he stepped inside. "I've got all kinds of neat toys we can play with."

*Toys. Me? Paul mentally questioned. Heaven forbid! At my age! ... Am I really going to have to share a bedroom with a four-year-old? ... God. Please help me.*

Paul's frustration level was rapidly rising toward its peak due to everything which occurred earlier that morning. And, not only did he feel like turning around and walking out the door, he was also willing to do whatever it might take to catch a flight back to Hollywood.

However, soon after observing his nephew's pure innocent glow staring back at him, he couldn't deny that, for some unknown reason – not only did the youngster love him, the kid idolized him. Thus, Paul remained frozen in his tracks.

*How's a person supposed to react to this show of affection?*

In his heart, Paul still wanted to leave since it would be a lot easier than putting up with the abuse he knew his brother would dish out over the next few days. Yet, as he continued to gaze into his nephew's dark blue eyes, he just didn't have the heart to burst the boy's bubble.

“Come on, Uncle Paul. Let’s go get your suitcase,” Allen suggested, jumping up and down like an Easter bunny on steroids as he tugged on his uncle’s right forefinger. “I want to show you my new toy tractor. It’s a shiny green one. And you can even plow with it.”

Paul shook his head in disbelief as the excited four-year-old energetically scrambled toward the bedroom door. “I’m coming. I’m coming.”

Later that afternoon during the time his nephew was taking a nap, Paul decided he might as well head back over to where the old folks were conversing. Hopefully, while there, he might find something fun to do, like play a few video games.

However, when he entered the living room, it soon became obvious that nothing had changed since the last time he and his mother visited. It was like drifting into a deep space wormhole which eventually ended inside a 1960’s time warp.

Jack currently was sitting in a reclined position inside of a medium gray-colored lounge chair – while his wife, Sarah, and his mother, Ellen, had found a seat on a worn-out, plaid colored couch.

The whole scene looked like it might have been a lost remnant of an ancient My Three Sons episode.

All three adults appeared to be engaged in a frivolous conversation about what each of them had been doing since the last time they saw each other, while glasses of ice tea were occasionally raised and sipped.

Paul, taking no interest in what they were doing, decided it would be best to just ignore them and try to find something interesting to play with.

*What? Still no PS4?* he thought as he stared at his brother’s old-fashion, analog, color TV, and not seeing what he hoped would be located there. *No Xbox either. Shoot. There’s not even ancient Nintendo Wii around here. This place is as bad as ever!*

“Hey, Jack,” Paul said, turning to face him as he interrupted the adult’s conversation. “Doesn’t Allen have a video game player, yet?”

Jack abruptly stopped in mid-sentence and began to stare at younger brother as if the young teen had suddenly turned into some type of absolute moron. “No. And he’s never going to get one. We don’t allow such nonsense items inside our home.”

*Jack’s never going to allow his son to own any type of video game! ... What’s wrong with this guy? Is he a space alien or something?*

Frowning, Paul changed his focus to what seemed to be an antique from the 1950’s, or perhaps even earlier.

“Jack,” he said, pointing to a black, rotary dial telephone. “Does this thing still work?”

“Yes, Paul,” Jack curtly replied, before resuming the conversation he was trying to maintain with his mother.

“W-O-W! That’s amazing,” Paul exclaimed, before moving a bit closer so he could begin a thorough examination. “You do, however, have a wireless phone like most people use to make a call with. Don’t you, Jack?”

“No. That’s the only one in our house,” Jack said through narrowed eyes.

With the way his older brother scrunched his eyes and forehead, Paul got the impression Jack was getting a bit more than just slightly irritated. Therefore, he quickly decided this might be an opportune time to move to the front of the living room and turn on his brother’s TV. It was old fashioned, 32” Sony Trinitron with a black, digital conversion box resting on top of it.

*Hmm. A talk show, Paul thought, viewing the picture which appeared, before, once again, hitting the channel button on the rectangle-shaped remote. Let me change the channel ... No ... that doesn’t seem worth watching, either.*

After viewing every station possible, “Ah-h-h, Jack,” he said, interrupting the adults’ conversation an additional time. “I think your cable or satellite connection must be broken. I can only find about a half-dozen TV stations. And, not only were they all local channels, a couple of them wouldn’t even come in clear.”

Jack stared at his brother with his mouth wide open and his cheeks turned a blazing red. “We don’t have Cablevision or satellite TV,” he spat between gritted teeth. “Do you have any other questions or comments?”

Paul diverted his eyes from the cold fixation his brother was giving him. “I guess not.”

“Good,” Jack said and then paused. “Don’t you think, Paul, it’s time you left the adults alone.”

*He’s right.* Paul nodded, before getting to his feet. *This is probably a good time to go outside.*

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Seeing her youngest starting to stir, Ellen intervened, “Paul. Instead of leaving, why don’t you check out some of the books in your brother’s bookshelf? You may find something interesting and it would be a good way to pass the time.”

*Excuse me, Mom. Are you suggesting that me, of all people, should sit down and read?* Paul gave his mother a quizzical expression. *I don’t think so.*

“Ah-h-h. Okay, Mom,” he said, before starting to step toward what appeared to be a walnut bookshelf.

*Maybe if I wasted a couple of minutes in front of this thing, she'd leave me alone.*

With taking a seat, Indian-style, in front of what was a three-shelf, artificially colored, fiberboard bookcase, Paul took several minutes pretending to try to find a good book.

“Let’s see,” he said quietly to himself while reaching for a dust-covered, green-colored hardback. “Here’s Moby Dick. . . . Gee. That sounds kind of fishy.” He then stretched toward a blue-covered one. “Let’s see this one,” he mumbled, glancing at its cover. “Paradise Lost, . . . Wow. I wonder if its story is about this place?”

Finally pulling out a rusty-colored book whose faded titled claimed it was called, Huckleberry Finn, “Hmm. I wonder what this is all about?”

Opening the novel’s front cover, Paul began to read its first few pages. *Wow. This story seems to be about a kid, just like me. Except Huckleberry Finn lived a long time ago, and of course, I’m still alive.*

Unconsciously sticking the novel underneath his left arm, Paul got to his feet and strolled out the back door. Seconds later, he took a seat on his four-year-old nephew’s tire swing.

It seemed sturdy enough, even though it hung off a limb from a type of tree he couldn’t identify. Whatever kind of tree this was, it was so huge, Paul figured it must have started growing around the time Columbus supposedly discovered America.

After several minutes passed spent reading, he got to thinking. *You know. It isn’t cool for a person my age to be seen doing something so ultimately geeky, like reading a book. But, he continued to think while displaying a small smile as he turned a page. Way out here in no man’s land, how would anybody I know ever see me? So why shouldn’t I read this? Huckleberry seems to me like he was really one cool dude. And you never know, I might even learn a thing or two from him.*

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Becoming totally emerged in the story in front of him, in what seemed no time at all, Paul found himself being interrupted by the crashing sound of a nearby back door being slammed.

“Uncle Paul. Uncle Paul,” a young voice repeatedly shouted.

“What’s up, Allen?” Paul said, taking a second to glance over the top of the book at the child who had come to a screeching halt in front of him.

“What’s-ya-doin’, Uncle Paul?” Allen displayed a wide, toothy grin as he skirted up to his uncle’s side in hopes of seeing inside the book he was holding.

“I’m reading a book,” Paul answered, hoping his nephew would soon run off and play.

“Oh? Is it a good book?” Allen asked, before attempting an additional time to scoot a little closer to his uncle.

*Did I somehow, unknowingly fall into a hundred-and-one-question vortex?*

“Yes, Allen.”

“Oh, goody!” Allen said, jumping up and down, while clapping. “Will you read it to me?”

*Now wait a minute! I’m not no schoolteacher. And I certainly don’t want to start being a babysitter, either.*

Just as he was about to tell his nephew no, he unexpectedly looked into Allen’s deep blue eyes and discovered there was something about the way his nephew continued to gaze at him which gave him the strangest feeling. It was almost as if his nephew was causing a small voice deep inside his mind say, “If you go ahead and do what Allen wants, it might be the absolute greatest gift you could ever give him.”

“Oh well,” Paul conceded. “Why not?”

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Several minutes afterward, when he finished reading the first chapter to Allen, not only was Paul’s throat getting dry, he was starting to get tired of reading aloud. Therefore, in an attempt to get his nephew interested in something else, he looked at him and said, “Allen, didn’t you tell me earlier there was something outside you wanted to show me?”

Immediately, a quizzed look flashed over his face and the four-year-old grasped his chin and began to act as if he was in deep thought. It was almost as if Allen was able to recall something he did want to share with Paul, but just couldn’t remember what it was.

First, a moment went by. Then two moments passed. Then three.

“Now I remember!” Allen said, erupting like a volcano in full fury. “I wanted to show you my tools.”

*His tools? Paul looked at this young nephew and shook his head. All of this just because he wanted to show me his tools. You’ve got to be kidding?*

“Come, Uncle Paul,” Allen said, grabbing a fingertip from his uncle’s right hand as he tried to pull him out of the tire swing. “You need to see my tools. They are real good tools – the best in the world. My daddy bought them for me.” He then ran towards his father’s wooden shed and pulled open one of its four-by-six-foot, plywood doors.

When Paul glanced inside, he saw what he believed was a child-size, stainless steel garden shovel, a bright red hoe, and a yellow plastic garden rake, hanging against a tarnished pegboard. Above the hook on which each tool hung, an embossed label stated each individual’s tool’s name, so someone (namely Allen) would be able to return it to its designated location.

“Do you like them, Uncle Paul?” the youngster asked, intensely studying his uncle’s eyes.

“Ah-h-h, yeah,” Paul said, choosing his words carefully. “They’re really nice.”

*Apparently, my brother’s trying to get his son interested in gardening.*

“I would take them down and show them to you,” Allen said. “But I’m not allowed to. Daddy has to tell me when it’s okay to touch them.”

“Oh?” Paul detected the distinct seriousness within his nephew’s voice.

“A while back I lost one,” Allen said, bowing his head. “When Daddy got home, he got real mad and yelled at me. And I had to stay in my bedroom for a long, long time.”

*How very unsurprising. I always knew Jack was a jerk.*

Not wanting to continue this topic, Paul stepped out of the tool shed and began to look for something to divert his nephew’s interest. That’s when he spotted a four-wheel, metallic object, which had a two-stroke engine attached to the rear of it. “Hey! What’s this?”

“That’s my go-cart,” Allen answered, running up to it as fast as his legs would carry him.

“Oh really? Does it run?”

Allen nodded.

Paul quickly moved in closer so he could see it better, and upon doing so, noted the cart was a dual passenger model complete with a gas pedal, foot brakes, modified rack and pinion steering, and a five horsepower Briggs and Stratton engine.

“My daddy likes to ride in it.” Allen beamed. “And sometimes he takes me with him.”

“I’m sure you like that,” Paul said as he bent over to brush some dust which had accumulated on its black leather seat.

“I sure do. Daddy makes it go real fast. I like that.”

“Do you think your dad would mind if I took it for a ride?” Paul asked, straightening himself.

“I don’t know. Let me go ask,” Allen said, before dashing toward the back porch.

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With his nephew now gone, Paul decided he might as well check to see if the go-cart had any gas in it. And after finding its tank half-full, “Cool. I wonder if it’ll start up?”



He then yanked the starter cord.

Unfortunately, the engine only sputtered. So Paul tried it again. And again.

*Hm-m-m. Let's see. I wonder what could be keeping this thing from starting?*

During his inspection, Paul didn't notice anything unusual. So he decided to examine it a little closer.

"Ah-h-h, that's the problem," he said, upon discovering the spark plug wire had come loose.

After re-attaching it, he tugged on the cord one more time.

DA DUM ... DA DUM

*It almost started ... Let's try it again.*

DA DUM ... DA DUM

*Hmm. That's strange. Maybe if I pressed the gas pedal a couple times.*

"Okay, go-cart," Paul commanded, seconds later. "It's now or never."

DA DUM. DA DUM. WA-A-A-A-A!

"A-L-L R-I-G-H-T!"

Quickly jumping inside, Paul began to zoom around his brother's backyard.

Ninety-degree curves. And dirt was flying so high behind him, it was like a dust storm which constantly followed no matter where he went.

"C-o-o-l!" Paul screamed at the top of his lungs. "I wonder how fast this thing would go on asphalt."

Making a beeline for the street, he flew around the house like a NASCAR racer who just seen the green flag waving.

*Hopefully, Sarah, he thought, when he finally reached the black pavement. Won't be to upset when she discovers I accidentally run over her flowerbed.*

He then shoved his right foot forward so he could floor the gas pedal.

WA-A-A-A-A-A-A-A-A-A-A

“Ya-hoo!” Paul yelled so loud, people a mile away could have heard him.

Burning rubber, he roared up one side of the street and down the other. Up and down. And up and down again. Over and over and over.

*Wow! This thing is great,* he thought. Until...

Standing at the end of his driveway like an unmovable concrete statue, Jack unexpectedly appeared. And not only were his arms crossed, every single vein in his forehead was red and bulging.

At once, Paul headed toward him and killed the cart’s engine – right next to his older brother’s feet.

“What in the Hell do you think you’re doing?” Jack asked, spitting each word between his gritted teeth.

“What did it look like?” Paul asked as if nothing was wrong. “I got bored, so I was giving your go-cart a spin up and down the street.”

“I can see that,” Jack said, furiously shaking his head. “But who gave you permission.”

Paul gazed downward, then slowly met his older brother’s squinted eyes. “Ah-h. No one. I guess,” he said, before pausing. “But I did send Allen to ask you if I could.”

“You sent a four-year-old?” Jack yelled in disbelief.

Figuring it would probably be best not to say anything else, Paul shrugged his shoulders and began to stare at a dust spot located on top of one of his tennis shoes.

“Are you aware one of our neighbors just called?” Jack growled. “He said he told you to stop driving Allen’s go-cart in front of his house. And in reply, you gave him the middle finger.”

“I was just trying to tell him he was number one,” Paul said with a slight grin. He hoped a small joke might lighten the situation. But unfortunately, it didn’t.

“You were trying to DO WHAT?” Jack’s face turned at least a hundred shades of crimson and Paul thought for a moment his brother’s head was going to explode into a thousand-million, micro-bit cloud.

“First,” Jack said, in a cold, but calm furious tone. “I want you to push my go-cart to EXACTLY where you found it, next to the shed. Then afterward, I want you to get that small,

smart-alecky butt of yours inside the house. ... With any luck, Mom will finally give you the belting you've been deserving ever since you set foot in her car this morning."

## Chapter Eight - Ol' McDonald Had A Farm

With his buttocks still sore from the whipping his mother administered the previous afternoon, the last thing Paul wanted to do this morning was to spend the day sitting in the back seat of a car - just because everyone else wanted to go look at farmland.

“Allen will enjoy it,” his mother kept repeating.

*Great. Then let Allen go. I already know what a cow and other farm animals look like. Not to mention, Jack's wife isn't going, so why should I?*

Deep inside, Paul wanted to verbalize how he felt. However, not only would it have been a waste of time, most likely, it also would have gotten him in trouble again.

The bottom line was, he didn't have a choice.

The instant he seated himself at the kitchen table this morning, she distinctly pointed out, like it or not, he was going to have to go. End of discussion.

Therefore, in seeing that he was trying to avoid any potential conflict, he responded with a nod.

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A half hour later when they climbed inside his brother's Ford, Paul concluded perhaps it was probably a good thing Sarah had decided not to go. Most cars these days were built to comfortably seat four and she would have been a fifth.

However, regardless of that fact regarding the number of people who could comfortably fit in his brother's car, the matter became moot when they arrived in Greensboro and met Mr. Henderson.

Soon after they parked, their touring guide insisted they take his car and what a car it was. It was huge!

*WOW! White with gold trim. And a convertible, too!!!*

Since Paul had never been a car buff, he didn't have the slightest idea what year the realtor's Cadillac was. However, he did know enough about automobiles to recognize this was something someone would expect to find at an antique car show and couldn't believe Mr. Henderson was going to let them climb inside.

*With a ride like this, it's a shame we couldn't be doing something else besides sightseeing.*

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*Eight farms*, he thought several hours later, after looking at his watch and seeing it was four o'clock. *Can you believe it? This guy has already shown us eight different farms. What is he trying to do, show us every piece of property being used for agricultural purposes within the county?*

Not only was Paul currently exhausted, he was also so tired of viewing barns, tractors, and farm animals - he was starting to believe that playing Chutes and Ladders with Allen would have been more fun.

"I only have one more place I would like to show you this afternoon," Paul overheard Mr. Henderson say as he leaned against the back of the front seat so he could face Ellen. "This place," the realtor continued, before taking an abnormally long pause, "... is literally located at the dropping off place of the world."

*Whoa. If that's the case, why would we want to go?* Paul wondered as he listened to the Cadillac's eight-cylinder engine roar with pulsating, cast iron power as its three hundred and seventy-five horses instantly fired.

While heading northeast, they passed a small community named McLeansville, and soon afterward as they continued their journey – Paul saw a road sign stating they were heading toward some hick town called Gibsonville.

Paul didn't have the slightest idea what a Gibsonville might be like, but he was starting to believe if the devil himself would have been riding with them that afternoon, even he would have been lost.

Soon after turning off Frieden Church Road onto a road called State Road 2768, the Cadillac made another left and a small, white, rectangle-shaped sign appeared.

It informed everyone they were now heading west on a two-lane called Highway 61.

Seconds later, a faded gray, two-story frame house located right smack in the middle of what seemed to be a soybean field caught Paul's attention.

Its metal roof, when brand new might have reflected the sun's powerful rays, was completely rusted. He also noticed that not only was every pane of glass in each of the abandoned home's numerous windows broken, its front door was missing, and what seemed used to be a decorative stone driveway, was now only a mud-covered, semi-crushed gravel pathway.

*That's a shame.*

Within Paul's mind, he could picture what the driveway might have looked like when it was new – beautifully lined with a mixture of wild flowers, which proudly lifted their bright-multicolored heads toward the deep Carolina blue sky above.

Now sensing Mr. Henderson's car beginning to slow, "I hope we're not going to be pull in there," Paul whispered, under his breath. "There's no way this raggedy, abandoned shack could be a farm."

Fortunately, he was correct. Just before Mr. Henderson's Cadillac approached the old shanty's driveway, it made a right turn onto a nearby dirt-and-gravel road named, Summerdale.

"W-h-e-w," Paul stated, letting out a sigh of relief and wiping his brow with the fingertips of his right hand as he shook his head. "That was close."

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Observing the broad gray cloud now towering behind the convertible's rear bumper like a long, twelve-foot wide dust storm, Paul guessed the Cadillac must have been traveling at least twenty to thirty miles per hour. And even though many people in society would consider Mr. Henderson's four-wheeled antique as being huge, as it tried to maneuver down this ruddy, two-lane pathway at this relatively slow pace, the ride anything but smooth.

The car kept jerking and bouncing around just as if it was playing a never-ending game of Hopscotch.

Paul concluded, either accidentally or maybe even on purpose, Mr. Henderson must be hitting every bump and dip the country road possessed.

Several minutes later, when he thought they had traveled about as far as humanly possible on the gravel highway to hell they were on, another unpaved road instantly appeared, along with a ragweed surrounded, green, horizontal sign. Apparently, this newly discovered alleyway was named Ludgate.

*Oh, Man! Where are we going now? There is no way there can be anything worth seeing way out here.*

While gazing out both sides of the car as they headed down this new road, the only thing Paul could see was acre after acre of two-foot high, dark green tobacco plants.

Then suddenly, out of the blue, two houses appeared up on the left. However, before Paul had a chance to get a good look at them, Mr. Henderson turned right onto a third gravel road.

*Flowers Road? Where is this place Mr. Henderson wants to show us? ... It truly must be in the middle of no man's land.*

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After determining this neck twisting, back wrenching, forest-infected back road would never come to an end, it suddenly did.

“Oh, my gawd! What is this place?” Paul said in horror as he gawked to his left.

“It’s a farm,” Ellen replied while viewing the same barren field.

“It surely doesn’t look like any farm I’ve ever seen!” Paul said, his mouth gaping so wide open a horse fly could have easily flown in.

Mr. Henderson ignored the mother-son conversation and turned his vehicle into a two-wheel, bare dirt pathway Paul guessed might have been a driveway sometime in the distant past.

Whatever it was, it was leading them toward a large, decrepit, white, single-story, wooden frame house with a gray, leaf-covered roof and soaring six-foot wide oak tree proudly standing in front of it.

Paul stared in disbelief at what seemed to be a ten-acre field that was filled with nothing but an assortment of dead, dried-up sticks and weeds.

“Does anybody live here?”

“No,” Mr. Henderson answered as he turned off the car’s engine. “The owners moved about a year ago.”

“Oh? Then why are we here?” Paul asked as Mr. Henderson opened the driver’s side door and began to gaze at the two-foot wide limbs of the massive oak he parked his car under. “This is stupid. Why should I have to waste time looking at a farm nobody runs anymore?”

That’s when everybody either instantly became either deaf or had consciously decided to ignore him.

In less than five seconds, not only was the car completely empty, but the echoed sound of slamming car doors began to fade across the sprawling countryside.

“Uncle Paul. Aren’t you going to get out?” Allen asked, walking up to the passenger side door a couple of minutes later.

*Oh jeez. Do I have to? Paul thought, displaying his displeasure. I guess I could keep Allen entertained since the adults have apparently decided to look around.*

“I guess so.”

Opening the car door Paul pulled out his left foot and then his right.

“Come on, Uncle Paul,” Allen said, tapping his right foot against the bare, hardened black soil. “I wanna go see everything. And Daddy said you have to be with me.”

*Ha! Out of the mouths of babes. The truth has finally come out. The real reason Mom wanted me to go with them was, they wanted me to babysit Allen.*

Grasping his nephew’s small hand, the two of them began to walk toward the empty ten-acre field he previously viewed.

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“Weeds. ... Rocks and weeds. ... There’s nothing in this field but a bunch of rocks and weeds,” Paul muttered to himself. “And none of them are even alive. They’re all dead and dried-up. ... What type of farm is this?”

By the time both boys arrived in the middle of the field, there was no doubt within Paul’s mind, his first impression of this place was correct. The only thing the land around here was good for is for growing dead weeds.

After additional minutes had passed, he caught sight of a greenish-yellow creature crawling along the hardened ground next to a clump of dead weeds. It seemed to have a thousand-billion legs that moved at the same time.

*Cool.*

“Hey, Allen,” Paul hollered, pointing his forefinger toward his latest discovery. “Come look at this bug.”

“Where is it?” Allen said, excitedly running over to the spot where his uncle was pointing.

“It’s right there. On the ground. About six feet in front of you.”

“There?” Allen pointed a forefinger directly at it.

“Yeah. That’s the one.” Paul said with a smile, before straightening his back.

Allen only stared at it and frowned. “What about it?”

*Hmm. Allen must have seen a bug like this before.* “Why don’t you get a rock and try to hit it?” Paul suggested, displaying a semi-evil grin.

Allen nodded in reply. “Okay. That might be fun.”



Bending his knees, Allen began to search the ground for the perfect rock. After all, when one is about to do some serious hunting, there is no possible way an ordinary piece of granite would do.

“Will this one work?” he asked after a while, showing his uncle an average-size, solid black, round-shaped stone.

Paul gazed at it before sticking a hand inside the pocket of his jeans. “It should.” He then continued to watch as his nephew took aim at the multi-legged target in front of him.

Allen silently drew his left arm as far back as it possibly could reach, then tossed the stone with all the ferocity his child-sized muscles could muster.

“Did I get it?”

“I don’t think so,” Paul said, shaking his head as the piece of granite sailed behind a clump of weeds located several feet away.

Allen puckered his cheeks, chin, and lips and grimaced. “Let me try that again.”

Paul indicated okay while restraining a slight chuckle.

This time, after selecting a stone about twice the size of his first one, Allen decided that maybe he hadn’t aimed properly. Therefore, this time he decided to take a few extra seconds to make sure his arm was in the most effective position - before initiating the throw.

“How was that?” Allen asked with a semi-smile.

“You’re getting better,” Paul said, affirmatively shaking his head. “You only missed it by a few inches this time.”

Once again, Allen frowned.

*It must be the rock, he concluded. If I could only find a good one.*

Examining every square inch of ground within a half-acre area of where they were standing, Allen repeatedly would reach and pick up a stone, examine it, and then toss it to the ground. This continued for at least ten minutes as Paul watched his nephew repeat this procedure.

Eventually, Allen picked up a rock that was at least a foot across and must have weighed at least five pounds. He then turned and gave his uncle a horrific, wicked-looking smile.

“This one should work!”

Carrying his new weapon to the spot where the bug was last seen, Allen patiently scanned the ground to locate his yellowish-green target, and within seconds he located the small, multi-legged creature futilely attempting to escape from the satanic giant hovering above him.

KA-SPLAT!!!

“Did I get it this time?” Allen asked, revealing a hardened gaze of pure determination.

“Yes, Allen,” Paul said, leaning over to examine the small collection of flattened, multicolor, spattered goo plastered against the grayish-brown dusty soil. “I think it’s safe to say you did.”

Allen small hands immediately began to clap and a smile infectiously spread across his face. “Oh, goody, Uncle Paul. Let’s do it again.”

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As the adults continued to examine the specifics of the abandoned twenty-seven-acre farm, Allen and Paul continued to tromp through the field and throw rocks at the various bugs found. And even after both boys had been playing for well over an hour, it seemed like only a few minutes had transpired when they unexpectedly heard Ellen hollering that it was time to get back in Mr. Henderson’s car.

“Did you boys have a good time?” Ellen asked the moment the two of them jumped into the Cadillac’s white, leather rear seat.

“We had lots of fun,” Allen said, barely able to contain his youthful excitement.

“What about you, Paul?” Ellen asked, her eyes intensely gazing at her youngest.

“Sure did,” he said, still gasping after his run from the furthestmost end of the property’s ten-acre field.

“That’s good, Son,” Ellen said, folding her arms in front of her. “Do you think you would enjoy living at a place like this?”

Without even beginning to think about the potential life-changing ramifications his off-hand response might have. “I sure would,” Paul said and gave her a bright teenage grin.

“I’m glad to hear that.”

An ear-to-ear smile began to migrate across Ellen’s face, and she winked at the brown hair adolescent now resting in the back seat.

*That was the answer to **THE QUESTION**, I wanted to hear.*

## **Chapter Nine - Putt Putt**

Just as Mrs. Pontiac predicted, the week spent at Jack's house passed very quickly. However, Jack did get upset one additional time because Paul taught Allen how to make farting sounds by placing his hand under his armpit. Initially, Paul thought Allen would get a kick out of it and it would be something entertaining to watch. However, soon after his nephew learned this trick, the four-year-old continued repeating it all around the house, non-stop.

*Oh well, Paul thought. Maybe someday he'll learn too much of a good thing can turn out bad.*

When the day arrived for Paul and his mother to fly back to Florida, in contrast to the exuberant feeling he was expecting to feel when he could finally go home and be with his friends, he found himself feeling sorry for his nephew.

During the week he had been in High Point, the two of them spent countless hours playing with Allen's toys and games. And to Paul's surprise, around midweek Jack agreed to let the two of them go alone on go-cart rides. However, as each day passed, Paul began to get the feeling one of the main reasons his nephew enjoyed having him around so much was because there weren't any kids Allen's age living in the neighborhood.

*What a shame, Paul thought, multiple times throughout the week. The poor kid doesn't have anyone he can play with.*

Eventually, the time to leave finally arrived – and shortly before they headed to the airport, Paul loaded both his and his mother's luggage into the trunk of Jack's Fusion, without even mumbling a single complaint.

Afterward, during the drive, he spent the few remaining moments he had left in NC, playing Auto Bingo with his nephew.

Overall, things seemed to be going great – until they reached the metal detectors inside the airport's main entranceway and Allen saw everybody starting to say their goodbyes. Instantly, his eyes welled up and his lips began to quiver.

Managing to wrap his arms around Paul and his grandmother, he gave each of them a big hug and kiss. But afterward, as he stood next to his father - tightly clutching his dad's fingers, large tears began to flow and he repeatedly waved and yelled goodbye.

Paul's heart broke in two. And even though he was just a teenager, he knew right then and there he was going to miss having the youngster around. Unfortunately though, this was just another instance where his only option was to accept what he knew was something he couldn't change.

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Soon after arriving in Hollywood, Paul's routine quickly returned to its-summertime-and-I-don't-have-to-go-to-school-today normal. Each morning, he would do his chores, then take care of Half Pint. And every afternoon, he was out having fun with his friends. This summer was turning out to be a great one, until ...

One steamy August evening while Paul was in his bedroom playing one of his favorite video games, he noticed an unusual noise coming from outside the front of the house. It sounded like a large delivery truck.

*Gee. Did Mom or Dad order something and have it shipped via UPS or FedEx?*

Feeling curious, he stepped into the living room and began to stare out its jalousie windows. To his surprise, a large white and orange six-axle vehicle was backing into their driveway.

*Why would a truck like that be pulling in here?* Paul thought, recognizing the name, U - Haul, which was printed in large bold letters across all four of the truck's sides. *Are we moving?*

Feeling puzzled, he turned to see if his mother was nearby.

Unfortunately, she wasn't.

"No. That can't be right," Paul said to himself as he diverted his attention back to the truck. "Mom knows how much I love living here, so there's no way she'd consider leaving. ... Hmm. ... Maybe my parents needed the truck to pick up something large. ... That must be it. Mom must be donating some furniture to the Salvation Army, just like she did last year."

He then noticed the truck's orange and white driver's side door opening and his father climb out.

*That must be it since Dad was driving,* Paul thought, releasing the breath he unconsciously had been holding.

Strangely enough though, soon after his father entered the living room, a Toyota Prius came to a halt in the grassy area in front of their sidewalk.

*Hmm. That looks just like.* Paul's eyes widen and his mouth dropped open. *Hey. It is!*

Sure enough. Not long after he recognized the car which parked, its passenger side door flew open and out came his best friend Tim.

“Hi, Paul. You ready to go?” Tim asked the second Paul yanked open the front door.

“Go where?” Paul asked, raising an eyebrow. “I was planning on staying home tonight and begin working on the next version of our game.”

Ellen immediately walked into the living room and interrupted the boy’s conversation.

“Oh, Paul,” she began. “I forgot to tell you. Your dad and I are going to be busy loading stuff into the U-Haul tonight, so I didn’t think you’d mind if Mary Lou took you and Tim to the new Monster Madness miniature golf course on Plantation Drive this evening. The you two seemed to enjoy playing the various putt-putt courses around here, therefore, I figured since this was a brand new one, you boys would want to try it out.”

“Ah. Okay. Well. Thanks, Mom,” Paul said, looking perplexed. “How long can we be gone?”

“I told Mary Lou to have you home around ten. ... We’re going to be busy tomorrow morning so I can’t let you stay up too late.”

“Okay.”

Dashing to his bedroom, Paul slipped on his gray Nike T-shirt and tennis shoes.

*I wonder if anyone will mind that I’m wearing cut offs?*

He then stopped by the bathroom, combed his hair, and stuck his aqua green Miami Dolphins baseball cap on. Backward.

“Yeah. You look good,” Paul confidently assured himself as he glanced at the image in the mirror.

“Are you ready yet?” Tim yelled from the living room after a few minutes passed.

“I’m on my way,” Paul said, slapping a dab of his dad’s aftershave across his face before he stepped into the hallway.

*You just never know when a hot looking girl might show up.*

When he finally strolled back into the living room, Paul spotted Tim sitting in front of their computer, playing the video game the two of them finished programming the previous weekend, Clash of the BattleStars.

“How does this look?” Paul asked, walking up and placing a hand on his friend’s shoulder.

Tim gave his friend a backward glance, “You’re cool,” then shot his laser cannon directly at the warp engines of his enemy’s galaxy “C” class starship.

“Good. I’m ready to go then,” Paul said and began to head for the front door.

Tim hesitated for a moment as his cannon’s bright blue plasma ray slowly enveloped the outer structure of the enemy ship, just before dissolving it. “I’m ready, too,” he said, selecting the Windows shut down icon.

“Bye, Mom,” Paul yelled as he headed out the living room door. “Try not to work too hard tonight. Okay?”

“Yeah. Bye, Mrs. Pontiac,” Tim added, before starting a full out-and-out dash toward his mother’s car.

“So long, boys. You two have fun,” Ellen said, smiling.

Soon afterward, the front screen door slammed shut.

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When the two teens arrived at the new Monster Madness Putt-Putt course, the first thing Tim and Paul did was purchase a three-game discount ticket. Seconds later, they proceeded to the first of four different courses – and, the one they perceived to be the easiest, they left for the younger kids.

“So you think you’re going to do me in?” Paul asked, placing his bright red ball on the first hole’s green, tee-off mat.

“That’s a given,” Tim replied with a grin. “You haven’t forgotten what happened the last time we played, did you? Not only did I win two out of the three games, I won the last round by a solid seven strokes.”

“That’s true,” Paul said, just before striking the ball so it would bounce off the right wall midway down the green. “But, don’t forget, I had a sore toe that day.”

Tim both chuckled and snorted. “As if something like that would really affect your game.”

“It did!” Paul exclaimed, taking a second swing.

He then watched his ball cleared the two-inch-high center hump, bounce off the right wall, and begin to pick up speed as it rolled toward the final five-degree downslope.

“Plop”

“Ah ha! A hole in one. How’s that?”

“Beginner’s luck,” Tim replied, shrugging his shoulders as he stepped up to the square, green teeing off pad.

Watching his friend as he was about to swing, Paul knew how well Tim could play. Therefore, there was also absolutely no doubt that each of the three rounds of Putt-Putt they were about to engage in was going to be dog-eat-dog.

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About an hour later when they reached the eighteenth hole, the boys’ scores were tied.

Paul had led the first nine holes by ten strokes, but Tim made some amazing putts during the last eight holes, which resulted in a comeback.

“Okay bit-brain,” Paul said, trying to aggravate his friend as he set his red ball on the rubber tee-off mat. “I’ve got you exactly where I wanted.”

Looking at the putt-putt green, in front of him were two tunnels, three sloped curves, a bridge crossing a small stream, and a huge, orange, mechanical monster who stomped his foot every three seconds – thus effectively blocking the path to the hole should one’s timing be slightly off.

Paul in response, grasped his club so tightly, his knuckles became white as a ghost by the time he finally hit the ball.

“Yes!” he shouted as he leaped into the air.

Like a work of art, his ball easily flew past each of the eighteenth hole’s obstacles. The angle of the shot, the speed of the ball – everything seemed perfect.

Now watching his ball increase in speed as it headed for the foot stomping, eye blinking, fire-breathing dragon, Paul unconsciously held his breath.

*This has to be another hole in one. I can feel it.*

Then out-of-the-blue, the mechanical monstrous contraption gave an abrupt jerk and lowered its foot – and Paul’s red ball instantly came to a screeching halt.

“I can’t believe it!” he shouted, hurling his club toward the ground. “There’s no way my timing could have been off.”

Tim nodded. “But it was.”

“What do you mean?” Paul asked, bending down to grab the putter he tossed.

“You made a basic geometry error,” Tim said, gazing at his friend. “How many degrees do you believe is the slant of the downward slope belonging to the second tunnel?”

“Two degrees.”

“Nope. You’re wrong, Paul,” Tim said with a confident grin. “It’s actually a three-point-five-degree slope.”

Paul clenched his eyes and began to stare in anger. “And how exactly did you come to that conclusion, Mr. Spock?”

“It’s easy,” Tim said. “Considering the fact your ball missed clearing the monster’s foot by one-point-three seconds, you probably miscalculated the angle of the second tunnel. Its looks are quite deceiving.”

Paul briefly glanced at the tunnel and grimaced. “Tim. Have I ever told you, you sometimes sound just like a walking computer?”

“Thanks,” Tim said, displaying a smile as he raised a single eyebrow. I’ll take your comment as a compliment.”

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A few hours later, Paul completed the eighteenth hole of the third round of golf.

“I can’t believe it,” he said, still grasping his putter as he raised both arms in anger. “I lost all three games!”

“I’m not surprised,” Tim said as they advanced toward the booth where they were required to drop off their clubs. “With everything you probably have on your mind tonight, I was surprised you were able to play as well as you did. I know I couldn’t have if I were you. But be rest assured, there’s absolutely nothing to worry about. I’ll take real good care of Half Pint.”

Both Paul's mouth's dropped and his eyes widened as he twirled around so fast, he nearly tripped over his feet. “What in the world are you talking about Tim?”

“Uh, oh. You don’t know?” Tim said, placing his left arm across his friend’s shoulders.

“Know what?” Paul demanded as his face turned beet red.

Tim glanced downward at the pavement. “Ah-h-h, Paul,” he said, before deliberately pausing. “I hate to be the one to be telling you this. But, you’re moving tomorrow morning.”

“You’re kidding!”



“Unfortunately, I’m not. A couple of days ago your mom called and told us you two were moving to North Carolina. She then asked if I would be willing to take care of Half Pint for a while since the weather is so hot. She was afraid the two-day trip would kill her.”

Paul stomped his foot against the hard pavement as tears began to fill his eyes. “You’re kidding? This can’t be true! Please tell me this is a bad joke.”

“I’m sorry, Paul. I can’t.”

As the two best friends walked in silence toward the parking lot where Mary Lou was waiting, “There is something else I need to tell you before I forget,” Tim said. “My dad told me to be sure and thank you for telling him about the Explicit Data Graph Execution thing. Because of what he was able to do with it, his job has offered him a big promotion.”

## Chapter Ten - Moving Day

The next morning as Ellen and her son continued to head north on Interstate I-95 in the orange and white U-Haul, which was towing their Impala, Paul leaned his head across the top of the truck's bench seat and shut his eyes.

"You still angry?" Ellen asked, breaking the silence which prevailed like a thick fog ever since the two of them left Hollywood.

"Shouldn't I be?" Paul replied, spitting each word. "Without even bothering to ask what I wanted, you've managed to take away everything I ever cared about."

"I'm sorry, Son," Ellen said. "But I didn't have a choice. Things at home had reached the point where I had to take action."

Opening his mouth, Paul wanted to hash over the same thing he expressed the night before.

*No, Mom. Things don't have to be this way. You're just being selfish. The only reason you're only doing this just to satisfy your own personal motives. After all, weren't you the one who was raised on a farm and has always dreamed about living on one again?*

Yet, as he continued to gaze across the acres of orange trees bordering both sides of the interstate, he came to realize that everything he wanted to say, had already been discussed. Any additional words spent on this topic would be in vain.

"Mom," Paul said, after five minutes passed. "I know what you told me last night. But did we r-e-a-l-l-y have to leave Dad?"

Ellen turned and gave him a forlorn glance. "I told you, son. Your father couldn't get a job transfer."

"So when is he going to join us?" Paul asked, twisting around so he could face her.

"I don't know. Why?"

"I just thought there might be another reason for him not coming with us. You know, besides his job."

"What gave you that idea?" A crisp edginess distinctly prevailed within Ellen's voice.

"Do you remember the time I stayed overnight at Tim's house and you called to ask his mother if I could stay an extra night?"

“Yes,” Ellen said, sliding the U-Haul into the passing lane.

“While you were on the phone, Tim told me he overheard his mother say something about a lawyer.”

Ellen instinctively turned and glanced at him, then began to stare at the pavement in front of her.

In seeing the serious expression now showing on his mother’s face, Paul knew he hit the proverbial nail on its head. Unfortunately though, whatever the true reason was regarding his father wasn’t coming with them, it was something his mother didn’t want to talk about – at least not at the moment.

“It’s okay, Mom,” Paul said, minutes later, after reading an approaching sign which indicated if they wanted to head for Orlando, they would have to turn off the interstate at the next exit. “I’m old enough to be told if you and Dad are getting a divorce.”

“Divorce?” Ellen repeated, breaking her silence. “Who said anything about a divorce?”

“Well. Aren’t you getting one?”

“No,” Ellen denied, looking directly into her teenage son’s eyes. “We’re just...”

“Just what?”

Ellen turned once again to face the interstate and her face became cold and rigid.

“Son,” she eventually said in a low monotone. “I know how all of this might appear. But sometimes things are not always what they really seem.”

“Oh?” Paul wondered why his mother was now hitting him with some ancient Greek proverb. *Or was it Latin?*

“Just like you,” Ellen continued. “Despite how difficult life has been living with your father, I still love him very much. However, your father’s drinking has made him a very sick man. He needs help.”

“So you thought breaking up our family was going to help him?” Paul said, like he was accusing her of a crime.

“I’m hoping a temporary separation will cause him to wake up to the truth. Your father’s drinking was not only affecting us, it was also destroying him.”

Having heard all he wanted to hear, Paul leaned back into the corner of the cab. But before doing so, he couldn’t help but notice the single tear silently escaping his mother’s eye.

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After spending the night in Jacksonville, the following morning Paul's travels started just as boring and uneventful as they were the day before.

Sure, the scenery kept changing. But the routine he and his mother were following was the same. Stop for gas. Get a bite to eat. Use the restroom.

This trip was getting so painfully dreary, Paul was beginning to think they were going to North Carolina by way of Alaska. However, about the time he concluded dozing off might be more exciting, an extremely unusually designed billboard appeared.

Across its front stood a brightly colored Mexican aggressively pulling on the reins of a sitting donkey. And above it, in huge letters were the words, "No time for stopping now, señor. Only ten more miles to South of the Border."

*Hmm. South of the Border. That sounds like it might be a fun place.*

"Mom. Are we going to need gas pretty soon?"

"No. Not for about another hundred miles. Why? Do you need to use the restroom?"

Paul nodded, though he didn't really need to go.

"Okay. We'll stop at the next rest area we come to."

"Couldn't we stop at South of the Border instead? It'd be a lot closer."

Ellen smiled and it was obvious what she was thinking. *Yes, I know the real reason you would like us to stop.*

"If your need is really urgent, I guess we could."

"Thanks, Mom."

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As they got near the designated turn off, Paul discovered they were so close to the North Carolina-South Carolina state line, he probably could have thrown a stone across it. He then detected a subtle decrease in the U-Haul's eight-cylinder engine's roar.

His mother seemed to be slowing down so she could slide the truck onto the exit ramp when a thirty-foot sign of the Mexican called Pedro soon came into view with the words "South of the Border" boldly flashing underneath.

The moment Paul saw it, he could not help but smile.

Seconds later, to their right and a few feet beyond the exit, South of the Border appeared, looking like a small Mexican tourist village.

It consisted of a three-hundred-room motel, numerous gift shops, at least two large restaurants, tons of fast food shops, a miniature golf area with three different courses, various colored booths which sold fireworks, and best of all, a huge amusement park-like area.

Being mid-afternoon, it surprised Paul that not only was most of the rides in motion, each one of them had quite a few riders.

*Cool!*

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As soon as his mother came to a full stop at the end of the ramp, he was able to get a close-up view of the numerous tan-colored, stucco buildings with burnt-orange, Mexican-tiled roofs.

*Man. I definitely underestimated the size of this place and can't wait to start looking around.*

Unfortunate for Paul though, his newly founded excitement would soon meet an early death.

Cruising past the whole Mexican-looking complex, his mother had apparently decided to pull into a "BP" truck stop-style gas station instead. And ironically, the instant she parked in front of its gas pumps, Paul's bladder signaled he really did need to use the restroom.

Hanging his head, Paul sighed and waited for the "You-need-to-be-careful" speech he knew would soon be coming.

"Now Son," his mother began before he could reach the truck's passenger side door latch. "You know sometimes undesirable people come to a place like this. Therefore, I want you to make sure you go directly to the restroom and come directly back. No stopping for anything. Also, I don't want you to talk to anyone. I also..."

*Come on, Mom! If you don't hurry up telling me all your rules and regulations, you won't have to worry about me using the restroom. It'll be too late.*

"Yes, ma'am," Paul said, interrupting. "But if you don't mind, Mom, I r-e-a-l-l-y need to go. Now!"

"Okay then. Go on." Ellen frowned as she reached for the driver's side door. "But be careful! And don't forget what I just told you."

"Yes, Ma'am," Paul said, loudly slamming the door of the U-Haul on his way out.

*Restroom ... Restroom*, Paul thought as he entered the brightly lit building. *Where are the restrooms?*

Seeing the sign in the station's far left corner, "Ah-h. There they are."

After cutting across a couple of aisles of what he considered to be tourist junk, Paul did a quick left, then hurried down an aisle full of wooden clocks, dinner plates with various state emblems painted on the front of them, and an assortment of brightly decorated ashtrays.

*Now why in the world would someone spend five bucks for an ashtray just because it has "South of the Border" written on it?*

Making one more right as he reached the end of the aisle, Paul arrived in the front of the restrooms and proceeded to grab its stainless-steel door handle.

That's when he discovered the worst sign a person who really needs to go could ever find. OUT OF ORDER!

"Hey kid," a dark-haired, twenty-something, female store employee yelled from behind the cash register. "The men's room is closed."

*Well, duh! I can see that.*

"But we've got another one in the back you can use. It's next to the truckers' showers."

*Oh great!* Paul thought. *I'm sure Mom would be thrilled with me going there. But what choice do I have?*

Moments later, upon leaving the unkempt truckers' restroom, Paul found himself torn between wanting to obey his mother, versus taking a few minutes to see if the place had anything he might be interested in.

*Maybe if I shopped only for a few seconds, Mom wouldn't notice*, he thought, while contemplating the situation. *And if I did buy something, I could tell her I happened to see it on my way out.*

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When Paul was finally ready to pass through the station's front glass doors ...

"Excuse me, son," a dark-haired stranger said, approaching him. "You look like someone who would appreciate a real bargain when they saw it. Would you be interested in buying a great computer game – real cheap?"

"How cheap?" Paul asked, as his curiosity brought him to a halt.

"Ten bucks."

“Maybe. What are you selling?”

“Well. I’ve got this neat, action-adventure space game that’s expected to hit the top of the charts a few months from now when it’s officially released,” the guy said. “Currently we’re selling the beta version at a discounted price so we can get some feedback on it.”

“Oh?” Paul raised both of his eyebrows. “What is it called?”

Pulling out a brown paper wrapped package about the size of a DVD from inside of his leather jacket, the man unexpectedly paused for second and quickly surveyed his surroundings. “We named it, ‘Clash of the BattleStars.’”

## **Chapter Eleven - South Of The Border**

As Paul climbed into their U-Haul, Ellen couldn't help but notice his unusual expression.

"Is something wrong, son?"

"I think there might be," he said, appearing to be slightly confused as he buckled his seatbelt and yanked the passenger side door shut.

"Well. What is it? Is it something we need to address before leaving the station? I've already filled the truck and we're ready to go."

Paul turned to face his mother. "Have you given anybody a copy of Clash of the BattleStars, the game Tim and I created?"

"No. Why?" Ellen asked, starting the engine and placing the U-Haul in Drive.

Paul pointed at the dark stranger standing next to the front door of the green and white BP station. "See that guy over there. He just tried to sell me a copy of it."

"Are you sure it was the same game?" Ellen asked, looking both ways before pulling their truck onto the two-lane road which would take them back to the interstate.

"It had to be. Not only did I recognize the spaceship on the outside cover, the game had the same name as mine."

"That still doesn't necessarily mean it was yours," Ellen said, now turning into the front entrance of South of the Border and shutting off the truck's engine. "It easily could have been another game with the same title."

"That is possible, but it's highly unlikely. Is there any way I could give Tim a call? After all the work we've done, the last thing I want is for us to get ripped off."

Ellen nodded. "I can understand that, and I'll tell you what. If it'll make you feel better, later this afternoon I'll call Joe and see if he knows anything about it. In the meanwhile, I'm going to need you to stay here a while and keep an eye on the truck."

"Here?" Paul gazed out the cab's front window. "When did we stop at South of the Border?"

"You just don't worry about that," Ellen said, looking serious. "And don't get excited or come up with any big plans. I only stopped because there's something I want to get. ... Now, be a good boy and wait for me."



Paul released a loud sigh and nodded okay. “Yes, Ma’am.”

*This isn't fair! Why does she get to go inside? I should be allowed to go too. Adults! All they do is think about themselves.*

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As time passed, Paul watched numerous happy families ambled to and from the various brightly colored gift shops where a variety of Mexican trinkets were proudly being displayed.

“There!” Ellen said, when she opened the U-Haul’s driver side door. “That wasn’t too long of a wait, was it Son?”

Paul briefly gazed in her direction but didn’t speak a word as his mother started the truck’s engine and then shove the transmission into gear.

“No, ma’am,” he eventually said, slumping his shoulders and diverting his eyes toward the floorboard.

No doubt, a growing depression was beginning to fill his soul.

*I guess Mom's more interested in getting to that raggedy old farm than she is in having fun.*

\*\*\*\*\*

With the sound of rubber rolling over loose gravel starting to fill his ears, Paul knew it would soon be followed by the unvarying roar of Goodyear rubber against hard black Interstate. However, to his surprise, a few seconds later the truck came to a stop.

“Well?” his mother said, placing the U-Haul in park before removing its ignition key. “Are you going to get out? Or are you going to sit and mope like a hound who’s lost its bone?”

Paul raised his head and began to scan his surroundings.

“Hey. Wait a minute! This isn’t I-95. We’re sitting at the back end of a parking lot. And over there is one of the buildings that belongs to the huge Mexican motel I saw earlier.”

Twisting his torso so he could face his mother, Paul excitedly asked, “Are we going to get to stay here a while?”

Ellen replied with a bright ear-to-ear smile and nodded yes.

“That’s super,” Paul said as his fingers fumbled on the latch of his stainless-steel seat belt. “How soon can we start checking out the place?”

“Well. That depends,” Ellen said, pretending to be serious.

Paul’s dark brown eyes reflected the foremost question within his mind. “On what?”

“Well,” his mother began, still wanting to tease him. “It’ll depend on how quickly we can get our suitcases inside room two ten and get cleaned up.”

“We’re staying the night?” Paul’s mouth fell so far open, it almost hit the top of the truck’s front seat.

“Wow! Thanks, Mom.”

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With his heart now pumping so fast that he thought it might pop out of his chest and race toward the motel room without him, Paul jerked his door wide open and made a dash toward the rear of the truck.

“You’re not eager. Are you, Son?” Ellen asked when she caught up with him.

“You know that I am!” Paul said, watching his mother unlock the padlock and raise the truck’s back door. He then quickly reached inside. “Got ‘em.”

With both of their suitcases in hand, Paul sprinted across the parking lot toward their room’s front door. However, upon his arrival, he realized his mother was still holding the key.

*Great. Isn’t this just great?*

Ellen ignored her son’s impatience and opened the door. Paul, soon thereafter, dashed inside and set their suitcases at the foot of each bed, before taking a seat on the one closest to the window.

He then began to sit and grin.

He didn’t know exactly why, but for an unknown reason, he was glad his mother chose the bed closest to the bathroom.

*Maybe it’s because she wants me to be close to all the neat stuff outside.*

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A few moments later when he decided to take a closer look at the inside of their room, he couldn’t help but notice its predominate Mexican décor – dark green, low cut carpeting and tan colored walls with various styles of strange swirls on them. And not too far from where he was sitting, vividly colored pictures of Mexican bullfighters on a black velvet background lined the motel

room's walls. They easily matched the room's ceramic lamps, which had an Aztec-type design on them.

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Now lying on his bed with his head resting on its pillow, he watched as his mother began to patiently apply her makeup.

"Why are you doing that?" he asked after a while. "Dad isn't here to see you."

His mother's face immediately became somber and Paul knew he said the wrong thing.

"I know," Ellen said, trying to act like nothing was out-of-sorts. "I just wanted to look pretty when we go out."

Paul gazed at her and his lips formed a caring grin.

"Gee Mom," he said, before pausing. "You didn't need to put on makeup just for that. As far as I'm concerned, you look pretty all the time."

Ellen smiled in reply and placed the tube of lipstick she was holding back inside her purse.

"Are you ready to go?" she said, pulling back the chair she had been sitting in.

Without delay, Paul leaped to his feet. "As ready as I'll ever be."

"What about your wallet?" Ellen asked as she reached for her cell phone. "You may find something you'll want to buy."

"You're right" Paul twisted his abdomen so he could gaze at where he was previously sitting. "I didn't think about that."

As Ellen selected Mr. Hegler's name on her cell phone's contact list, Paul opened his suitcase and stuck his hand inside.

"I got it now," he said, placing his wallet inside his back pocket, before plopping on the edge of the bed.

"Good. Now if you could just hold on a moment, I'm calling Titan Industries to see if I can reach Mr. Hegler and ask him about your game."

Paul turned so he could watch the activity outside their motel room's front window. "No problem, Mom." He then began to fantasize about the amusement rides the two of them would enjoy a few hours later.

“Yes. Mr. Hegler,” Ellen said, sitting in front of the mirror with the cell to her ear. “This is Ellen. I’m glad you’re in. Yes. We’re fine, thank you. No. We’re staying over at South of the Border. I do have a question though....”

The second “Clash of the BattleStars” was mentioned, Paul swiftly diverted his attention to his mother’s conversation.

“I see,” she said. “Yes. Please let us know as soon as you can. As you can imagine, Paul is quite upset. ... Okay. Thanks. Talk to you later.”

After pressing the End icon on her phone, Ellen stuck it inside her purse.

“So what did he say?” Paul asked, his right knee bouncing like an out-of-control Pogo stick.

“He said he was going to look into it and give me a call.”

Paul nodded okay, and upon seeing his mother reach for her handbag, got to his feet and started to head toward the door.

“I love you, Son,” Ellen said, wrapping her arms around him for the first time in of weeks.

Paul grinned and hugged her back. “I love you too, Mom.”

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After spending the afternoon roaming from gift shop to gift shop and enjoying the motel’s enclosed swimming pool – Ellen agreed that as soon as they completed supper, they would check out PedroLand Park.

Once there, the rides which initially caught Paul’s interest were the ones which were either extremely fast – like the rollercoaster, or they were bumpy – like the bumper cars and parachute drop.

Unlike her teenage son, Ellen was more partial to the slow stuff, like a Ferris wheel, carousel, or train ride. Thus, during most of the evening, Paul spent the time enjoying the rides, and his mother would either watch or visit one of the game booths.

However, just before their night out together came to an end, Paul conceded to go with his mother on a ride which caught her attention. It consisted of a two-hundred-foot elevator, which led to a brightly colored, gigantic Mexican Sombrero.

He, at first, didn’t think this was going to be much fun. However, once they arrived at the top, his opinion quickly changed. Being this far up, he was able to see things he guessed must have been at least a hundred miles away. And during the time the two of them were on the east side of the tower, Paul could have sworn he could even see the Atlantic Ocean on the far horizon.

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Soon after they woke up the following morning, things started to change from the way they had been the last couple of days. Ellen, instead of waking up her son so early that not even the clouds had arisen, this morning she decided to let him sleep until nine a.m.

Waking up at a much later time initially surprised him. However, during breakfast, Paul quickly found out why she had done so. There were only four to five more hours of driving left before their travels would be over.

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After enjoying a nice spicy Mexican breakfast, the two of them exited the restaurant and Paul instinctively presumed his mother would want to hurry back to their room so they could get their stuff loaded into the truck. However, Ellen had something else in mind. She stated she wanted to stop by one of the gift shops they visited the day before.

So off they went.

When the two of them entered the novelty shop, Ellen immediately made a beeline for the ceramic plates displaying a picture of Pedro the Mexican and the phrase “South of the Border,” underneath.

“Don’t you think this would look nice in our new kitchen,” she asked, presenting one of the shiny Mexican-styled dinner plates for his inspection.

Paul wanted to say, Now why in the world would anyone ever want a piece of junk like that?, but in order to keep his mother happy, he said, “Yes ma’am,” and presented her with a nod, as if he actually agreed with her.

That must have made her happy because she smiled, before continuing to shop.

Several minutes later when he was starting to get bored, he decided to glance out the store’s front window – and what he saw, caused his eyes instantly widen.

*Isn't that the same dark stranger I saw at the BP station?*

“Mom,” Paul said in a raised tone he hoped would get his mother’s attention, yet not disturb the other customers. “Did Mr. Hegler ever call back you back?”

“Yes,” Ellen said, studying two the different styled plates she currently held in her hands. “And you don’t have anything to worry about.”

*Now what does that mean?* Paul appeared to be puzzled. “Are you sure?”

A short distance away, Paul’s stranger was currently in the process of selling something to another young teenager.

“I’ve watching the same person I told you about yesterday and I think he just sold some kid another copy of my game.”

“Paul,” his mother said, sounding like she was irritated. “Whatever the guy’s selling, it can’t be your game. Mr. Hegler has assured me that no one except you and Tim has a copy of it. So drop it, Okay?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Paul said, clearly showing his disappointment.

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After an additional fifteen minutes of “South of the Border” plate shopping passed, a familiar sound that was rapidly increasing in volume caught Paul’s attention.

*I wonder what that is all about?* he thought, hearing the wailing police siren come toward them.

Continuing to gaze out the storefront window, he noticed that instead of there being a single patrol car heading in his direction, there were at least three of them.

Not to Paul’s surprise, the dark-haired stranger he previously had been watching, appeared to have also heard them as well – And now, seemed to be fumbling with his keys, while trying to open the driver’s side door of an off-white van.

A few seconds later, when it started to move toward the entranceway closest to the I-95 northbound ramp, its path was immediately blocked by several black South Carolina patrol cars.

“Hey Mom,” Paul excitedly shouted as he pointed toward the novelty shop’s front window. “Look at this!”

Ellen gazed outside. “I wonder what that is all about?”

“I don’t know. But I do know whoever the guy was, he’s in deep trouble now.”

Ellen looked at her son and smiled, while trying not to reveal anything she might have known.

## Chapter Twelve - Home, Sweet Home?

Just a few miles after crossing the South Carolina state line, Mrs. Pontiac turned off I-95 and began what would be the final leg of their journey and from this specific locale, the east coast of North Carolina appeared to be a never-ending panorama of sandy soil, flowers and trees and cities so small that if you blinked, you probably would have missed them.

Paul couldn't help but wonder if any teenagers were unfortunate enough to live around there. And if they did, what would they do for fun?

When noon finally arrived, Ellen pulled the U-Haul into a local fast food joint. However, a half hour later, they were rolling down Hwy. 15 – 501 again.

Paul didn't know why, but after having consuming a super-sized value meal, he felt so tired the only thing he wanted to do was sleep. With all the countryside surrounding them now looking pretty much the same, it didn't take long to surmise it was highly unlikely he would miss anything if he closed his eyes and took a short nap.

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“Paul. Wake up. We're here.” He then unexpectedly heard his mother exclaim after what surely couldn't have been more than five or ten minutes.

*This is strange. The truck is stopped, and its engine is off. Maybe we're at a gas station.*

“Here? Where?” Paul asked, before releasing a loud yawn.

“We're at our new home,” Ellen said, sticking the truck keys inside her purse.

Taking a moment to first wipe the sleep out of his eyes, Paul stopped and looked around.

*OH NO! She wasn't kidding.* His very worst nightmare had become a reality.

“Mom!” Paul said, realizing this place was the same weed infested, abandoned farm she brought him to a few months earlier. “Please tell me this is a joke. You really didn't buy this dump, did you?”

“No. It isn't a joke, Son,” Ellen said as her broad smile vanished. “This is going to be our new home.”

She then paused.

“I'm sure after you get out of the truck and take a look around, you'll see with just a little fixing up we'll be able to turn these twenty-seven acres into one of the best places we have ever lived.”

*Yeah, right. And I suppose if I painted myself green and placed a cloverleaf on the front of my hat, I would magically turn into a leprechaun!*

After pausing to examine the large, white framed home and its surrounding property. “Mom,” he began. “Out of all the nice-looking farms Mr. Henderson showed us a few weeks ago, why in the world would you buy this one?”

“Just give it a chance. Okay, Son?”

Paul lowered his head in despair as Ellen opened the driver side door.

“Yes, ma’am,” he replied shortly before exiting the truck and doing another 360.

*Man. This place looks even worse than the last time. Not only is the grass completely dead. All the fields are dried up and full of cracks. And of course, the dead weeds are still here. ... It seems like the only thing still alive is the giant oak near the house and a few pecans along the driveway. ... Can't this place grow anything besides trees and dead weeds?*

Feeling just like a recently convicted criminal, Paul stared at the ground in front of him and watched as gray dust swirled around his feet with every step he headed toward the side porch, which opened into their new living room.

*This is unbelievable.* he thought as he slowly forced himself to climb up the porch’s wooden steps. *It seems like not only is this porch made of antique wood, but the last time it got a fresh coat of paint was around the time Abe Lincoln was president.*

He then attempted to turn the brass door handle and open the door.

“Mom, do you have a key to open this thing?” Paul asked, turning back toward the U-Haul. “The door is locked.”

“I have it right here,” Ellen said from the end of the truck. “But first, come help me with our suitcases. Then I’ll give you the key.”

“Okay, Mom.”

Heaving a sigh, Paul headed back down the steps, and a few minutes later, returned with the brass key in his pocket and a set of leather suitcases in each hand.

He then set the cases down and tried, once again, to open the door.

*It figures,* he thought as he struggled to turn the handle. *This place is so decrepit, you can't even open the door with the key.*

Stomping his right foot, the boards underneath proceeded to give way.



“OH ... NO!”

“C-R-A-C-K!”

“A-A-Ah!” Paul screamed as his feet sank. “M-O-M! Help!”

“What’s wrong,” she asked before seeing what the problem was. “Oh, my! Are you all right, Paul?” she then exclaimed, and ran to help him.

Paul looked at where his jeans met the remaining unbroken boards.

“I guess so,” he said and paused. “You know, Mom. Buying this place was one of the stupidest ideas you ever had. I don’t belong in a garbage heap like this. Especially one located in the middle of nowhere.”

“I should be back in Florida either working with Tim on a computer game or out at the ranch,” he loudly continued while reaching for his mother’s outstretched hand. “Having a good time with Half Pint!”

At once, Ellen frowned. Then yanked on his arm so powerfully, not only did she pull him out of the hole he created in the side porch, she almost threw him on the ground directly in front of its steps.

“Listen here, young man. Don’t you ever address me in that manner ever again. I am your mother and you are going to treat me with respect,” she exclaimed before pausing to catch her breath. “Furthermore, like it or not, we own this farm and this is where we’re going to live. So I better not ever see or hear anything negative about it from you. You understand me?”

Paul’s face became contrite and he began to drag his feet toward the back of the U-Haul. “Yes, Ma’am.”

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After the near injury causing incident, Ellen quickly decided that instead of using the side porch, they should start using the steps leading to the kitchen, and the front porch. The front porch, just like the side one, also entered the living room.

Soon after the unloading process began, the two of them discovered the previous owners apparently did not believe in cleaning. Therefore, instead of arranging things the way they originally planned, Ellen now insisted they pile everything against the outer walls.

“That way,” she said. “Whenever I get a chance to start cleaning the place, I won’t have to move everything out-of-the-way.”

Paul guessed it made sense. However, considering how large each of the rooms were, even if they put everything where it belonged, each room would still be empty.

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As the afternoon continued, Paul had no doubt if his father would have been there, moving things like the stove, refrigerator, and couch would have been a heck of a lot easier.

Moving was a lot of hard work and even before they finished, he noticed he was covered in sweat, from head to toe. However, as exhausting as unloading this stuff was, he became downright proud of his mother several hours before they were done.

Despite the fact he was still a bit upset with her, she proved to him, she was a whole lot stronger than she looked.

He also found it interesting that although Mr. Henderson told them nobody had lived in this place for over a year, there was no doubt, the realtor was completely wrong. That afternoon they found two black snakes, a half dozen squirrels, and more rats and field mice than anyone would want to count.

With the discovery of such creatures, most mothers would have been jumping, screaming, and running all over the house. However, not Ellen Pontiac. The moment she caught sight of a field mouse, she would fly to the kitchen, grab her broom, then start chasing it.

The snakes, unfortunately, weren't as lucky. When Ellen would see one of them, she would grab her father's single shot, twelve-gauge shotgun, and in no time at all, the snake's head would be vaporized. A thin, long body with its tail still twitching would be the only thing left.

Overall, Paul was somewhat glad his mother knew how to take care of those varmints. And it wasn't because he couldn't have done it himself. He could have. But he preferred not to have anything to do with them.

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As the sun continued its journey toward the western horizon, Paul and his mother were about to finish the task of setting up their beds. Next, they would start sorting boxes, each according to the room they belonged.

Unlike their home in Florida, which was rectangular shaped and each of the bedrooms was located near each other at the east end of the house, this house was "L" shaped. Ellen's room was located at the short end of the "L," and the guest bedroom and what soon would become Paul's bedroom was located at the long end – near the living room. The house also had two complete bathrooms, a large kitchen, and a washer and dryer room whose locale was near the kitchen.

Last, but not least, their new home also had a formal dining room.

This room, according to Paul, was a waste of good living space. However, he did find the size of their new living room amazing. It was much larger than most people's living and family room put together.

*Well so far, I've fallen through the porch. Almost got bit by a snake. And have had to do twice the amount of work I was supposed to do.* Paul thought as he set the last box in its place. *I wonder what other new surprise this place is going to hit me with?*

Unfortunately, before an additional five minutes would pass, his rhetorical question would get answered.

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Upon entering the bathroom closest to his bedroom, "No water." Paul announced as he stared into a dry toilet bowl. "How do they expect me to use the toilet, without any water?"

Turning toward the sink, he grabbed the cold-water knob and twisted it.

*This doesn't make any sense. We're getting water here. ... Hmm. Let me try the other one.*

Now twisting the left knob. *There's water here, too,* he thought. *And it's heating up.*

Unconsciously, Paul reached up and scratched his forehead.

*That's strange. I wonder why water is getting to the sink, but not the toilet?*

Since he was aware he didn't know diddlyquat about plumbing, Paul decided to head to his mother's bathroom. Most likely, her toilet would be working.

"Mom!" he yelled, upon discovering the same scenario. "None of the commodes work and I need to go really bad."

"Use the outhouse in the back," his mother hollered from the kitchen.

"Do what?" Paul took a couple steps in her direction.

"I said, USE THE OUTHOUSE!"

Paul strolled into the kitchen. "Are you serious?"

"Yes." Reaching into a nearby cardboard box, Ellen pulled out a roll of toilet paper and placed it in her son's hand. "Now head out the back, make a forty-degree turn, and proceed towards the edge of the woods. You can't miss it."

Paul stared at the roll in his hand. “Okay.” And Ellen almost laughed at the way her son’s mouth gaped open.

*After opening the back door to head down the wooden steps, I can’t believe I’m going to have to use some crude, wooden contraption called an outhouse. ... Gee. Welcome home. Don’t you just love country life?*

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Now continuing his journey toward the forest, Paul could not help but picture how the minute he stepped inside the thing and shut its door, his body would instantly be transported down to the fiery depths within the center of the earth. And knowing his luck, he’d be stuck there until Hades froze over.

Upon completing the directions his mother gave him, Paul discovered the lonely, wooden shack resting at the edge of the forest. It was surrounded by a collection of strange green vines; whose leaves grew in groups of three.

The metallic roof of the unpainted building was a rusty brown and its wooden sides were full of cracks and holes. And to make things additionally worse, someone built the outhouse on the extreme edge of a hill which was so steep, Paul was positive if a strong wind came, it would tip over and roll downward.

*Should I open the door and go inside? Or, should I travel further into the woods and try to do what I need to do, behind some tree?*

As Paul contemplated this decision, his body suddenly informed him that whatever he was going to do, he needed to hurry up and do it.

“I guess the outhouse will be safe,” he said, attempting to reassure himself as he shut the rickety front door behind him.

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While sitting inside, he kept telling himself there wasn’t any danger. Yet for some reason, his body just wasn’t buying it. And as time continued to pass, he began to wonder how much longer this was going to take.

Unexpectedly, a rustling sound started to echo in the distant.

*I wonder what that could be?* Paul thought, feeling his muscles tense. *Whatever it is, it sounds larger than a squirrel and seems to be getting closer.*

Surprising, almost as fast as it started, the rustling sound inexplicably disappeared.

*That's strange.*

Concluding whatever animal which had made the sound must have left, he started to relax when ...

“A-H-H! WHAT IN THE WORLD IS THAT?” Paul screamed, jumping to his feet.

From directly below where he sat, something damp and cold abruptly touched his exposed bottom.

Paul immediately slammed the outhouse door open and began a seventy-five-yard sprint for his life.

Reaching the cherry trees which stood midway, his lungs desperately grasped for oxygen. However, with the back door of his house in sight, he felt his valiant efforts to escape might be successful.

Until – all at once, everything rapidly came to a precipitous end.

Feeling something unbelievably strong, violently grab the cuffs of his dangling pants, within seconds, Paul's slim teenage body forcefully crashed against the cold, hard ground.

*I guess it's checkout time*, he thought as he waited for a pair jagged fangs to start shredding his exposed bare flesh.

## Chapter Thirteen - A Hunting We Will Go

While Paul waited for the searing pain of sharp, jagged teeth ripping his legs and torso into ground hamburger, an unexpected squeak resounded from the back door.

No doubt, upon discovering her youngest being eaten alive, his mother's panic-filled scream would soon fill his ears.

"Paul," Ellen said in a tone so calm it would make a person think nothing unusual was occurring. "Why are you laying half naked on the ground? And where did the overgrown dog come from?"

*Dog? Paul immediately cringed. Man. I must really look like a dork!*

"Ah-h, Mom," he said, raising his head as the sticky, wet tongue of the huge, black Labrador began to repeatedly lick the side of his leg. "Would you mind leaving me alone for a while? I'll let you know what's going on in just a few minutes. Okay?"

"Okay, Son."

Shaking her head at the ridicules sight she just seen, Ellen entered inside.

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The following day before Paul finished his lunch, Ellen decided that her teenager was old enough to learn how to make do without some of the modern conveniences most people take for grant. Thus, while gazing across the kitchen to where he was sitting, munching on his last tablespoonful of rice pudding, she put her plan into action.

"Paul, is there anything else you'd like to eat before I put away the dishes?"

"No thanks," he said and slid his chair away from the table.

"Good." Ellen smiled and picked up his empty bowl and glass. "Now you'll be able to help me."

"Do what?"

"You heard me," Ellen said as she reached across the sink to turn on the hot water spigot. "There's no reason why a healthy, young man like yourself can't help his mother wash dishes every once in a while."

“But Mom. I’ve got plans this afternoon.”

Ellen looked at her son so fiercely, her eyes could have burned a 22-caliber hole right through his chest. “Plans? What possible plans could you have made that are so important you can’t even spare a couple of minutes?”

“I was about to go hunting with granddad’s rifle. Anyhow, don’t we have a dishwasher?”

Ellen turned around and gave him a look as if the kid lost his mind. “Aren’t you forgetting something?”

“What’s that?”

“Our dishwasher isn’t hooked up yet,”

Paul paused, while a voice inside his mind yelled, *Hello stupid. You’re doing it again.* “Oh. That’s right. I forgot.”

“Did you also forget that earlier this morning I asked you to take the trash to the burning barrel?” Ellen asked as she washed a white dinner plate and placed it in the sink.

Standing before his judge, Paul bowed his head. *Guilty, your honor,* he mentally said to himself. However, not wanting to admit it, he replied, “No ma’am. I was planning to do it as soon as I got back from hunting. But, I’ll do it now if you’d like me to.”

Straightaway, Ellen’s expression told him that she knew what he said wasn’t exactly the truth.

“I got a better idea,” she said, handing him a white and blue plaid apron. “I’ll wash the dishes while you dry and put them away. Then, if you do a good job, when we’re finished I’ll help you with the trash. I’ve got a couple of empty boxes in my bedroom that need to be taken out anyway.”

Paul hesitated. Even though assisting with the dishes was far from one of his favorite things, he eventually concluded the only way he could keep peace in the home would be by accepting his mother’s proposal.

“Paul,” Ellen said several minutes later when she took the apron out of his hand. “Instead of burning the trash right this minute, why don’t we wait until you return this afternoon since much of this stuff is mainly empty boxes? That way, you would have plenty of time to gather all the dead limbs and around the house. Then come supper time, we could start a bonfire and have a weenie roast.”

*So, in other words,* Paul thought. *If I agree to do a little work, I would be rewarded with a cookout.*

“Sounds good, Mom. Can we also roast some marshmallows?”

“If we have any.”

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Carefully removing his grandfather’s rifle from his bedroom closet, Paul proceeded to their garbage barrel so he could pick up some cans. Never having the opportunity to touch a gun before, he figured it might be wise to do a little bit of target practice first, before heading into the forest and begin hunting the big game.

So, after placing a few of his aluminum cans on top of a couple of empty cardboard boxes, he moved about twenty feet away. Within thirty minutes, he discovered he was able to successfully hit a can with every fourth or fifth shot.

“You’re doing pretty well for a beginner,” Ellen said, coming up from behind and grasping his right shoulder.

“Thanks, Mom.”

Gently pressing the trigger once again, Paul felt the gun’s kick slam against his left shoulder. And the accompanying whiff of freshly burnt gunpowder readily enhanced the view of another aluminum can fly before crash landing with its bullet pierced side facing the barren ground.

“That was a great shot,” his mother said. “You know, if you’re still planning on going hunting this afternoon, I wouldn’t be surprised if you bring home a few gray squirrels for supper.”

A puzzled look instantly flashed across the front of Paul’s face. “People actually eat those things?”

“Of course,” Ellen said with a light chuckle. “And the way I’d fix it, you’ll love it. It’ll taste very similar to chicken.”

“I’ll have to take your word on that,” Paul said, though his facial expression reflected his doubts. “How many squirrels do you want me to get?”

“As many as you can kill.”

“Okay. Consider it done.” With his confidence boldly showing, Paul was sure his mother would get the unspoken message she could expect him to bring home at least ten or fifteen squirrels that afternoon.

Moments later, after verifying he had a second box of shells in his pocket, Paul set the gun’s safety switch on. Then, grabbing his rifle with both hands, he momentarily held it in front of his chest – the same way he seen professionals do on TV, before slinging it onto one of their shoulders.



“I’m all set,” Paul declared, now ready to make his first trek into the wilderness located behind their house. “If there are any squirrels in these woods foolish enough to expose themselves, they better begin to say their prayers – ‘cause they’re about to become my next target.”

However, as much as he was trying to be a true-blue, bonafide hunter – Paul managed to overlook one of the basic requirements he would need to follow if he were going to have even a remote chance of being successful.

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Taking the pathway which would lead him to a small three-acre field located at the back of the farm, he turned right as soon as he passed their decrepit, natural log, tobacco barn. And soon afterward, upon he entering the forest, he noticed a natural blanket of dried oak and maple leaves covering the ground.

Still being an adolescent deep inside, the beauty of the scenery around him quickly proved too much of a temptation. Therefore, instead of taking slow, careful steps, like a professional hunter – as he journeyed deeper into the shadowy woods, Paul let the sounds of blackbirds chirping, frogs croaking, and leaves crunching underfoot divert him from the primary reason for this expedition.

Several minutes later after reaching one of the small, slow-moving, babbling brooks which ran through the backside of their property, Paul began to hear the distinct crunch crunch crunch crunch sound of a good size, four-legged animal heading in his direction.

“Why hello, big fellow,” he said to the dark-haired monster who had chased him from the outhouse the evening before. “Did you enjoy the leftovers Mom and I set out for you last night?”

The black Labrador gently lifted its head and began to swing its tail in a long, sweeping left-to-right motion. ... It was almost as if he understood what Paul said.

“You know if you’re going to be my dog,” Paul continued while setting his rifle on the ground so he could kneel. “We’re going to have to give you a name.”

Paul then paused and proceeded to gaze at the blue sky above.

“How about Midnight?” he eventually suggested, ruffling the fur along the dog’s neck as it stared at him in wonder.

A long drool of sticky saliva escaped the left side of the dog’s mouth and it splattered across a moss-covered rock.

“That’s it. Since your hair’s completely black, I’ll call you Midnight. How does that sound?”

Woof! Woof!

*Wow! Midnight must understand English. He answered me.*

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With Midnight now by his side, the two of them resumed their search for squirrels utilizing the discretion one would expect from a herd of stampeding African elephants. And after following the stream as it twisted this way and that, hours later it dawned on him – he no longer had even the foggiest idea where he was.

After deciding this would probably be a good time to search the woods and bushes around him for something familiar, Paul came to a quick halt. Unfortunately, the only thing halfway close which contained the slightest hint of being useful was a hill located to his right. The trees in that direction seemed too thin near its top.

“What do you think, Midnight?” he asked, staring at the pathway in front of him. “If we continue to follow the stream, we’re only going to get further away from the house. Yet, if we turn around and try to use it as our guide home – the dang thing has branched so many times, I seriously doubt we’d make it.”

Paul looked down and momentarily stared into Midnight’s golden-brown eyes to see if his four-legged friend had a solution.

“Maybe we should head up the hill to get a better look around. What do you think?”

Midnight gazed at him with his jaw partly open and it gave Paul the distinct impression that if dogs could talk, his answer would have probably been, “Why in the world are you bothering to ask me? I’m only a dog.”

“I know,” Paul said as he gave Midnight a gentle pat on the head.

Trudging to the top of the hill, Paul discovered the knoll they were standing on overlooked a large grass-covered pasture at least fifty acres in size.

“Look, Midnight. Isn’t this cool?”

Midnight must have agreed with him. Because the moment they started to walk across it – he quickly raised his tail and ran out of sight while chasing a small, brown-haired rabbit.

“Midnight,” Paul began to yell. “Come on, boy. Midnight! Don’t leave me all alone in the middle of this wilderness. Come here, Midnight.”

Then suddenly, an unexpected sight made him decide to stop calling.

High in the sky above him just a short distance away, floating first up and down, then around in a circle, was what his mother had called a chicken hawk.

He also recalled how Ellen said they were only good for one thing and one thing only, target practice. Therefore, since Midnight had run off and most likely wouldn't be back until he caught the rabbit, Paul figured he might as well take advantage of the situation.

"Come on. Stay put," Paul commanded as he stared down the barrel of his granddad's rifle, focusing its sights on the chicken hawk as it kept making tighter and tighter circles around an old dead oak tree about three hundred yards away.

"There you go. I know you can do it," he continued as the hawk slowly began to drift to the point where he was aiming. "Just a little closer now."

"B-L-A-M!" his rifle abruptly roared, and soon thereafter, he began to walk in the direction of the tree where the chicken hawk flew at the instant he pulled the trigger.

A sight then instantly appeared that was so frightening, his spine began to violently shiver and he instantly froze.

"Holy Moses!" Paul howled as he ejected the empty shell's casing from the rifle's barrel as fast as his fingers could manipulate the gun's bolt. "Where did those men come from?"

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While trying to decide if he should stay or make a run for it, Paul watched as the two men stood in place for a moment, as if conversing. Then extending his right arm, the heftier-set one of the pair pointed to the tree limb above them, before turning and directing his forefinger directly at the spot he was standing.

After seeing this, there was no doubt regarding what the men were talking about.

*Hmm. The guy on the left seems vaguely familiar.*

After deciding to first try to find Midnight before hightailing, Paul looked one final time toward the tree so he could see what the men were up to.

To his concern, the heavier one started to enter the driver's side of a large, white vehicle with gold trim on its sides.

*Hey! Haven't I seen that car before?*

"Midnight. Midnight," Paul proceeded to desperately shout. "Come on, Midnight. We're in deep shit and need to get out of here."

Not having the slightest clue regarding where his dog might be found, Paul's eyes repeatedly trailed the edge of the woods.

*If only I could see a group of rustling weeds, or even better yet, a black wagging tail.*

"Come on, Midnight," he yelled again as sweat beads trickled down his forehead. "We have to go, Midnight. The guy in the car is going to be here at any moment."

Moments later, Paul realized if he waited any longer, it'd be too late. Thus, grasping the rifle's barrel with his right hand, he began to run as fast as his legs would carry him. And when he was about fifty yards away from the edge of the forest, he caught sight of a large clump of trees and bushes which possibly could hide him.

Huffing and puffing, he continued running, pushing each leg to the very max. However, even though he was scrambling as fast as he was physically capable of, the white car relentlessly kept coming.

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A worn, two-wheel pathway approximately twenty feet from his current position then appeared between him and the line of trees where he was planning to escape.

"Uh. Oh. That's not good." Paul said, looking down, before glancing to his left.

Almost instantly, the ear-piercing honk of a car horn told him his attempt to escape had been in vain. Therefore, knowing he was going to be punished anyway, he waited for the Cadillac to stop and walked up to the driver's side door.

"Mr. Henderson?" Paul said, surprised to see his mother's former realtor exiting the car. "What are you doing here?"

"I was about to ask you the same thing," he said, shaking Paul's hand. "But before you tell me, what are you doing with a rifle?"

In answering his question, Paul first informed Mr. Henderson about Midnight, and how the two of them were out hunting and had gotten lost. He then conveyed the story about the chickenhawk, and not knowing anybody was even remotely nearby until he had already taken a shot at it.

"I see," Mr. Henderson said as a wrinkle appeared on his forehead. "I guess I should first tell you, you're trespassing on one of the many properties I own in this area. Also, as things would have it, I was busy showing this property to a potential client when you shot your rifle. ... Furthermore, I guess I should inform you that even though you're lost, you're not extremely lost. From where we're standing, you are only about a half mile due north from your mother's farm. The two properties lie just across the road from each other."

“They do?” Paul glanced in the direction Mr. Henderson was pointing.

“Yes. Now, about this hunting thing,” he continued, remaining serious. “I don’t know if you realize it, but instead of hitting the chicken hawk you were aiming for, you hit the bottom limb of the oak tree my client and I were standing under.”

“Oh, no!” Paul exclaimed. “I’m sorry, Mr. Henderson. Like I just told you, I didn’t know anybody was around until after I pulled the trigger.”

“I believe you,” Mr. Henderson said. “But, to avoid any possible future incidents, I’m going to have to inform your mother about this incident. Also, I want you to promise me you’ll never hunt on my property again.”

Paul repeatedly crossed his heart. “I promise. But, do you really have to tell my mom, Mr. Henderson? She’s going to kill me!”

“I’m sorry, Paul. I’m afraid I must. That’s the only way I can make sure there won’t be any hunting accidents out here. ... I don’t know if you realize it or not, but something like this could result with you ending up in jail or prison. But don’t worry, son,” he stated, giving Paul a small smile. “When I tell your mother what happened, I’ll be sure to emphasize you got lost and this was just an accident.”

Paul knew Mr. Henderson was just saying that to make him feel better. But the knowledge he was going to tell his mother still made his stomach slam against his feet.

“Thanks, Mr. Henderson,” Paul grudgingly said, before slowly turning in the direction of his house.

As he took the first step of his journey, Paul heard the high pitch tone coming from Mr. Henderson’s cell phone as each button was pressed. And with placing his left foot in front of the other, he began what would seem to be at least a two thousand mile walk back to the place he called home.

## Chapter Fourteen - Burlington Mall

“Paul. Are you ready to go?” Ellen asked, noticing her son was still lounging across the couch, watching cartoons like he did most Saturday mornings.

“Go where?”

“Out. We need to go shopping this morning,” Ellen said. “The mall is having their Back-To-School sales this weekend and we need to take advantage of it.”

Paul sighed.

*Heaven knows the last thing I want to do this morning is to go out shopping. ... Yet, Monday does start a new school year. But just because I have to go back to school, do I really need to run out and buy new clothes? ... Oh, well. ... Hopefully, this trip won't be as bad as most of them are.*

“Okay, Mom. I'll be ready in a minute.”

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Unfortunately, soon after arriving at the mall, the school supply trip rapidly transformed into a being-with-your-mom shopping adventure.

The moment Ellen stepped inside Sears, she immediately noticed a women's fashion sale was in progress and began to shop for dresses. And Paul, in the meantime, gained an opportunity to sit in a chair and watch his fingernails grow.

Needless to say, it didn't take long before he got so bored, he started to count the perforated holes in the ceiling tiles – just to be doing something.

However, in what seemed to be like a century later, Ellen finally reappeared from the dressing room, holding a half-dozen dresses.

“I believe I'm done here,” she said, handing the garments to the young brunette salesperson who had been assisting her. “Are you ready to move on?”

“I've been ready,” Paul said, hopping out of the chair. “Did you buy anything?”

“No.” A hint of despair reflected in Ellen’s reply. “But before we leave town today, maybe we’ll stop by J.C. Penny. I really would like to find a new dress before we start school Monday.”

“We?” Paul turned and glanced at her, and a puzzled expression washed across his face as the two of them approached the aisle leading to the mall’s central walkway. “What do you mean, ‘We?’”

“We. As in the two of us. ... A couple of weeks ago I took the guidance counselor job at new your school.”

Paul stopped and his mouth popped wide open. “Heaven forbid, Mom! Why in the world would you go off and do something like that? Don’t you know what it means?”

A blank expression appeared on Ellen’s face. It seemed like she didn’t have the slightest clue to what her son could be referencing.

“I guess it means, occasionally, we’ll be able to see each other during the day.”

*I can’t believe this. Hasn’t my mother ever heard the cliché about being the preacher’s kid? ... I haven’t even seen my new school and already I’m ruined. All the other kids there will now hate me and constantly give me a hard time. Not to mention, being the guidance counselor’s son, every teacher will expect twice the amount of work out of me. ... God help me! I’m doomed.*

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As Paul and his mother continued to stroll through the mall’s main walkway, he attempted to explain the ghastly repercussions he’d face by her being in that position.

However, he soon found out that he might as well have been talking to a brick wall. After taking several minutes to thoroughly explain the horrid consequences her actions would be creating, it looked like either his mother was refusing to accept how serious the problem was going to be or she had simply decided to ignore him.

“Paul,” Ellen said, after he rambled an additional fifteen minutes. “Believe me. I’m sure when you step into your homeroom class, not only will the other students be glad to see you, they’ll be eager to become one of your friends.”

*How can she say that? As an adult, can’t she see that a teenager’s life is a whole lot different from an adult’s? Teenagers don’t react to things the same way old folks do. Adults should know that. Is it possible that when a person gets old, they suddenly forget what life was like when they were a teen?*

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Minutes later, when Ellen stepped inside the jewelry store located near the center of the mall, Paul knew he’d better prepare himself for another long, drawn-out waiting period, just like the one he was forced to endure inside of Sears.

“Mom,” Paul said before his mother started her usual routine of examining a piece of gold jewelry Kay Jewelers offered. “Can I go use the bathroom? The public restroom is only a little way from here.”

Almost at once, Ellen turned and presented him with a look as if her son had asked for the password to the parental Internet security control program she had a professional install on his computer several months earlier.

“I guess so since it’s not too far away,” his mother said after a few seconds. Her wrinkled forehead revealed the inner conflict she was experiencing. “But whenever you’re finished, I don’t want you to start roaming the mall. You are to just wait for me near the front of the Men’s restroom. ... I’m should only be here a couple of minutes.”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

Doing a ninety-degree swivel, Paul quickly exited the jewelry store before his mother had a chance to change her mind.

*I sure wish Mom would stop treating me as if I were a little kid. He thought as he rushed down the aisle. After all, I am thirteen and a half. That’s old enough to be able to take care of myself.*

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When Ellen arrived about fifteen minutes later to pick him up, the two of them headed back toward the center of the mall where a group of portable booths had been set up by various businesses to display their specialty goods and services.

One of them, currently occupied by a satellite TV and Internet company, promptly caught Paul’s attention and he convinced his mother they needed to head in that direction.

“That’s right,” the salesman said when Ellen questioned him about the price. “For only \$49.95 during the first twelve months, you can enjoy satellite TV in any three rooms.”

“Oh, really?” Paul reached down and picked up a tri-folded brochure. “And how much is the installation?”

“Installation’s free,” the bald man answered, giving the teen a broad smile.

“Okay.” Paul nodded. “And how much is the Internet service your company offers?”

“For the unbelievable low price of fifty-nine, ninety-nine a month. And our basic home service comes with a download speed of a full 25 Megabytes per second.”



“Excuse me?” Paul interrupted, instantly frowning. “You’ve got to be kidding? That’s almost two dollars a day for a snail’s pace service. . . . I’m not even sure I’d be able to play a decent online video game at that speed.”

The salesman looked at him and grimaced. “It sounds like you might need something a bit faster. We do have a 30 Mbps plan, and it only costs sixty-nine ninety-nine a month.”

Paul briefly stared at the salesman and snorted, then lowered the brochure he had been reading back unto the counter. “That’s still way too slow. Don’t you offer anything faster?”

“Yes,” the salesman said, before deliberately hesitating. “But I doubt you’d be interested.”

“Why not?”

“Because of its price. Our company does offer a lightning fast Elite Premium 50 Mbps service, but it costs \$99.99 a month,” the salesman said, displaying a prevalent crease on his forehead.

Paul turned to face his mother and they shared a let’s-forget-about-this expression.

“Come on, Son,” Ellen said. “I believe we’re finished here.”

Paul nodded his agreement and fell in step beside her.

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A few minutes of silence passed as the two of them strolled down the mall’s main walkway.

“Mom. Do you think we’ll ever get an internet connection so I can get online with Tim?”

“I don’t know,” Ellen said. “With the exception of DSL, which would be way too slow to meet our needs, so far either the cost has been too expensive or the internet company doesn’t provide service in our area.”

*Gee. Another fantastic benefit of living in a no man’s land.*

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After completing lunch at the mall’s food court, Paul figured since his mother already tried to buy something for herself at Sears and a few other stores, she would be ready to start some back-to-school shopping for him.

“Mom,” he said, pointing to one of his favorite clothing stores as they rode up the escalator. “Can we head over to The Gap for a while?”

“I suppose so,” Ellen answered. However, Paul noticed that her eyes appeared to be focused elsewhere. “But let’s first stop by Lerner’s since it’s next door. It looks like they’re having a dress sale.”

*Of course, they're having a dress sale. Have you ever seen a women's clothing store when their not?*

As the two of them walked along the upper-level bridgeway which led to the other side of the mall, Paul began to hear the high-pitched sound of his mother's ringtone from inside her purse.

In turn, Ellen looked down and soon came to a complete halt. She then lifted her cell to her ear.

"Can you hear me now?" A man wearing a dark blue business suit kept repeating into his cell as he walked in the direction of where Ellen was standing. ... Within seconds, he bumped her arm.

"What the ...?"

"I am so sorry," the businessman said, quickly closing his phone. "I wasn't watching where I was going. Are you hurt?"

"No. I don't think so," Ellen replied. "But you did cause me to drop my phone."

"Let me get it for you." Getting down on one knee, the man began to search the floor around them.

"Mom," Paul said, interrupting the adults. "I believe I saw it flying towards the fountain."

"Oh no!" Ellen exclaimed, covering her mouth with both hands.

"Don't worry," Paul said, giving his mother a smile. "I'll quickly run downstairs and get it."

Since the "UP" escalator was a lot closer to where they were standing and would be the fastest way to the fountain, Paul figured it would only make sense to jump on its handrail and ride it downstairs. Thus, after making sure nobody was on the escalator, he proceeded down – and the moment his feet hit the first-floor, he flew like the wind toward the fountain, about forty feet away.

T-W-E-E-T! The shrill of a whistle suddenly reverberated out of nowhere.

"Hey," a gruff voice shouted. "Get out of the fountain, kid! And who do you think you are riding down an escalator like that?"

"Who me?" Paul answered, acting innocent while taking a couple steps closer toward the spot where his mother's phone landed.

"Yes, you," the mall's security guard said. "Now get out of the water!"

"Sure. I'll be glad to. In just a second."

As Paul was about to bend downward, he figured he would quickly snatch his mother's phone, and then explain to the officer exactly what he was up to. However, the moment he proceeded to lean forward to get it, the dark-haired security guard rapidly came up from behind him, yanked both of his wrists behind his back, and slapped on a pair of handcuffs.

"Hey, officer. What do you think you're doing?" Paul exclaimed to the security guard, who was now pushing him towards the fountain's edge. "I need to get my Mom's cell phone."

"I'm sure you do," the guard said, obviously disbelieving him.

"I'm not joking," Paul said as he was being forced to step over the fountain's perimeter wall. "While we were on the bridgeway, my mom accidentally dropped her phone ... so I ran down here to get it."

"Yeah. Right, kid," the guard replied. "And I guess all the other kids I've found picking up the coins inside the fountain were retrieving cell phones, too."

Paul frowned, and another security guard soon joined the dark-haired one, and they promptly escorted him toward the mall's security office.

"Shouldn't I be able to contact my mother?" Paul said when they led him inside a small, plain office full of video monitors, each showing a different location inside and outside the mall.

"We'll page her in a minute," the guard answered. He then ordered the teen to sit on a dark leather couch. It looked like something recovered from a long-abandoned mobile home.

A couple of seconds later and for what seemed for no apparent reason, he began to stare at him. "Haven't I seen you before, kid?"

"I doubt it," Paul said. "I've only been in this mall a couple of times since my mom and I moved here a few weeks ago."

"Where did you come from?" the guard asked as he began to fill out a form he yanked from the desk's bottom, left-hand drawer.

"South Florida," Paul said, wondering why he would ask.

*This guy's so dumb, I'd make a bet he thinks Miami is located somewhere in Texas.*

At once, the guard gave him a piercing look. "You wouldn't be from Hollywood, would you?"

"Maybe. Why?"

"Well. Well. Well. That explains everything," the guard exclaimed, rising to his feet. "Now I know where I've seen you."

*This guy must have a screw loose.* Paul thought. “What are you talking about? There’s no way you could have seen me before now.”

After coming from around the desk, the guard proceeded to stand directly in front of Paul’s face, while his co-worker continued to just sit and watch the scenario play out in front of him.

“Oh yes, I have, kid. I never forget a face. Before I came here a month ago, I used to work in security at the Hollywood mall. And that’s where I’ve seen you.” He then paused to catch his breath. “A few months ago, you were one of the troublemakers on the mall’s roof, throwing water balloons at the customers entering Sears. And if I recall correctly, and I am sure that I do, you were also the one who hit me with a handful of rocks during your getaway.”

*Uh, oh.* Paul thought. *I’m in d-e-e-p trouble now. Not only with this guy, but I never told Mom about that. She’s going to kill me!*

Seeing the frightened expression on his victim’s face, the security guard started to feel extremely confident and crossed his arms. “What’s wrong, kid? Cat suddenly got your tongue?”

Paul felt his stomach instantly twist itself into knots as the mixture of fright and anger inside his abdomen continued to grow. “How about just getting on with what you’re going to do. Okay?”

“Sure, kid,” the guard said, flashing a smirk as he returned to the seat behind his desk. “Let’s start with an easy one. What’s your name, kid?”

“Paul Pontiac,” he said, leaning back against the couch. “You know, like the automobile.”

“Yeah. Right, kid,” the guard sarcastically replied, pounding the top of his desk with his fist. “And I’m Joe Chevrolet. Now, let’s try this again. What’s your first and last name, kid?”

“I told you,” Paul said, feeling his muscles tighten. “My name is Paul Pontiac.”

“O-K.” The guard began to strum his fingers on the worn vinyl desktop, then paused and took a deep breath. “Come on, kid. This isn’t the best time to start playing games with me.”

“Won’t you please just page my mom?”

The guard glanced at the ceiling as if he needed a moment to think about his victim’s request. “What’s her name, kid?”

“What do you think?” Paul yelled back. “If my name is Paul Pontiac. What do you think my mother’s name would be, you moron? Marilyn Monroe?”

The guard’s face turned beet red and beads of sweat could be seen close to his hairline. And for a brief second, Paul would have sworn the guy was about to leap across his desk.

“Any more smart mouthing out of you, son,” the guard loudly growled. “And instead of paging your mother, I’ll give a call to the city police. They know exactly how to take care of juvenile delinquents like you!”

Paul paused so he could think about what the guard just told him. Then deeming the moron had to be bluffing, “Go ahead and call the cops,” he said. “What are they going to book me on, Violating the Waters of your Sacred Fountain? Or, perhaps you’d like to charge me with Unmercifully Hassling a Mall Security Guard, you wannabe Rambo!”

“That’s it, kid,” the guard hollered, now jumping to his feet. “I’m going to lock you inside one of our holding cells until we get in touch with your mother.”

“And how exactly are you going to do that?” Paul asked while he was being yanked off the couch and led down a dark, gloomy hallway. “You still don’t even believe what my name is. So there’s no way you know what my mom’s is.”

“That’s no problem, kid,” the guard said, forcefully shoving Paul into a small eight by ten-foot room with a door made of thick steel bars. “Sooner or later, you’re going to decide to cooperate. And when you do, we’ll page your mother.”

A dull clanking sound then abruptly interrupted the conversation.

“But I’ve been telling you the truth,” Paul shouted from behind the locked door as the guard slowly walked down the hallway. “You just don’t believe me.”

“Sure you have, kid,” the guard answered back. “Just remember – whenever you’re ready to start being honest with me, you can give me a yell.”

And with those final words, the security guard disappeared.

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“Gee, isn’t this a fine mess I’ve managed to get myself in?” Paul mumbled to himself. “Even with telling people the truth, I still manage to lose.”

Feeling bored, Paul began to imagine what was going to happen when his mother found him, and the security guard told her what he and his friends did at the Hollywood mall.

*I wonder which is worse? Sitting on a steel bench with my hands handcuffed behind my back while a couple of flies buzz around the stainless-steel, combination sink and toilet; or having Mom show up, which is going to result in an early death? ... You know, it would have been nice to at least gotten my high school diploma before I died.*

As the boredom continued to build, Paul decided he might as well walk around the room so he could read the various slogans previous occupants wrote or scratched onto the walls.

“For a good time, call Sarah at...”

Never mind. I don’t think I’d be interested. Let’s check out this other one above the bench.

“Henry Madden – August 3, 2008.”

*Gee. I guess this guy wanted to be remembered. Here’s one by the sink.*

“Here I sit all brokenhearted. Tried to...”

*Oh, forget it! That saying is so old, I’d bet someone even wrote it on one of the walls of King Arthur’s castle. I mean, can’t you just see one of the Knights of the Roundtable coming to King Arthur and saying, “Excuse me, my Lord, I’ve just returned from the loo and found a rather unusual saying written on the wall.” I’m sure by the time that knight was through quoting the poem, King Arthur would have had the guy making a beeline for the gallows.*

Since there weren’t any clocks inside the holding cell, Paul had no idea how long he’d been there when he suddenly heard a familiar voice coming from down the hallway.

“Excuse me,” the voice said. “I seem to have lost my son and was told if I came to your office, you might be able to page him for me.”

“No problem, ma’am,” the guard politely replied. “How old is he?”

“He’s thirteen.” Paul heard his mother say. “I just can’t imagine him running off like this. That’s not his nature. He’s usually a good boy.”

“I’m sure we’ll be able to locate him, ma’am,” the guard said. “He’s probably at the mall’s video arcade and just lost track of time.”

“I don’t think so,” Paul heard his mother interject. “You see, I dropped my cell phone from the second floor and it fell into the fountain. ... He said he was going to get it for me, but then never came back. And what’s strange, when I checked the fountain a few minutes later, my cell was still there. Do you think someone might have kidnapped him?”

The security guard suddenly gulped and his complexion faded to a ghostly white.

“Ma’am,” he said after a moment. “Could you give me your son’s name, please?”

“Sure. His name is Paul Pontiac. ... I’m Ellen, his mother.”

The guard froze in silence.

“Mom?” Paul yelled through his holding cell door. “Is that you?”

Ellen paled and tore down the hallway to where she heard her son’s voice coming from.

“Paul!” she shouted, almost in tears as she stood in front of the metallic door separating them. “What are you doing locked up in a holding cell? And why are you handcuffed? Are you okay?”

Paul instinctively bowed his head. “I’m okay, Mom, except my wrists really hurt.”

By the time the guard walked up to where Ellen was standing, she was so mad, it seemed like she was ready to kill somebody.

“Why is my son locked up and handcuffed? And, why wasn’t I paged?”

The guard, looking contrite, glanced up at her and tried to reply, but before he could utter a word, Ellen continued.

“I’ll have you know I’ve been searching for my son for the past hour only to find out you’ve had him incarcerated the whole time, Officer. You’d better have a mighty good reason for this or I’ll guarantee, I’ll have your job. ... Now get my son out of there and immediately remove those handcuffs!”

After security guard readily complied, Paul began to rub the spot on his wrists where the handcuffs had been digging into his skin.

He then followed his mother and the security guard to the front office.

“Now,” Ellen began, using the tone of a ferocious female panther whose cubs were threatened. “Are you going to give me some answers? Or am I going to have to get the mall’s manager?”

The security guard smiled and quietly motioned for her and Paul to take a seat on the couch – then sat down behind his desk and made a steeple with his fingers.

“Mrs. Pontiac,” he slowly began. “I’m not sure if you are aware of it, but your son has a history of being a troublemaker.”

“My son. A troublemaker?” Ellen said open-mouth, obviously not believing a single word the guard said. “How can you say such a thing? My son hasn’t visited this mall even a half dozen times. And every time he was here, I’ve been with him almost the whole time. He has never caused any trouble.”

“No doubt that’s true,” the guard said with a smirk. “However, Mrs. Pontiac, were you aware that a few months ago your son and a couple of his cohorts were seen throwing water balloons at Sears customers from the roof of the mall in Hollywood, Florida?”

He then paused to let the accusation sink in.

“Not to mention, in order to effect his escape, he threw rocks at the mall’s security guards.”

“No. I’m not aware of any such activities,” Ellen said, taking a quick glance at her son. “Where did you get this information?”

The security guard slid a bit closer to his desk, then looked directly into Ellen’s blue eyes and smiled. “Ma’am, I know about this incident because not only was I working at the Hollywood Mall roughly three months ago when the indiscretion occurred, I was also one of the guards your son hit with several stones.”

Ellen rapidly turned and faced her son, and the hurt displayed deeply cut through Paul’s spine like a razor-sharp machete.

“Is that true, Paul?”

“Yes, ma’am,” he said, lowering his head as he answered in a tone just barely above a whisper.

“I am very disappointed in you, Paul, and we will be discussing this when we get home.”

She then turned to face the security guard.

“What my son did at Hollywood Mall a few months ago was wrong, Officer. And I’ll guarantee, he will be punished for it. However,” she said, before pausing. “... you still haven’t told me anything Paul could have possibly done today that would warrant him being locked up and handcuffed like a common criminal.”

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For over thirty minutes, the security guard did his best to justify his actions, by attempting to make Paul appear to be nothing but a young, lawless rebel. However, before the meeting ended, both the security guard’s immediate supervisor was present and the mall’s manager had also been called.

“Mrs. Pontiac,” Mrs. Brook, the manager of the mall said, using a tone which indicated the meeting was about to come to an end. “I agree with Mr. Gowen, our security manager. This incident involving your son appears to be the result of a huge misunderstanding.”

She then paused.

“I’m also in total agreement that Mr. Miles’ actions concerning your son were totally unwarranted. Therefore, from our management and staff, I would first like to offer you and your



son our heartfelt apologies. And additionally, to compensate both of you for this extremely negative experience, I would like to offer you a one-thousand-dollar mall gift card, if you would agree to sign this release form which states you will not file a lawsuit against us.”

Ellen gasped and seemed to be shocked beyond belief. “A thousand dollars?”

The manager, in reply, instantly displayed a forced smile.

“You’re right, Mrs. Pontiac. What was I thinking? Considering the trauma your son must have gone through, let me offer you a five-thousand-dollar card, instead.”

“Mom,” Paul said before his mother had a chance to glance at the plastic card being pushed toward her. “I don’t ...”

“You’re right. And I can’t agree with you more, Paul,” Mrs. Brooks abruptly interjected before he had a chance to finish what he was about to say. “How about as a final offer, I offer you and your mother a ten-thousand-dollar gift card. And since you’re obviously a student at one of our local schools,” she added, directly facing the teen in front of her, “Paul, how would you like a brand-new computer of your choice from the Computers R Us store located ...”

“I know that store,” Paul said, enthusiastically. “Every time Mom brings me here, I always stop by there.”

Mrs. Brooks offered Mrs. Pontiac a broad smile and waited for Ellen to respond. “So, what do you think?”

“What do you think, Paul?” Ellen asked her son.

“It sounds good to me.”

“And do you agree with him, Mrs. Pontiac?”

“Well,” Ellen began. “If my son is happy, then ...”

“That’s great!” Mrs. Brooks said, shaking Ellen’s hand. “Now if you will be so kind as to sign this release ...”

Paul, in the meantime, twisted around and gave the security guard a quick glance. “So what about Mr. Miles? Is anything going to happen to him?”

“Yes. Definitely,” Mrs. Brooks said, shaking her head, before turning to face her employee. “Mr. Miles. Effective immediately, you’re fired!”

## **Chapter Fifteen - The First Day Of School**

Standing by Half Pint's side, Paul reached up and began to brush her beautiful, long brown mane. "You did great!" he said, feeling his chest about to burst with pride. "If you run that fast Saturday, I know we'll win the five-barrel race."

"Oh no, you won't," Tim said, interrupting from on top of Brave Boy's saddle as he rode up to where Half Pint was standing. "You must have forgotten. Brave Boy and I are also in the contest. And with the two of us in it, you and that nag of yours will never have a chance."

Paul swiveled around and gave his friend an evil eye. "I'm hearing some mighty big words coming out of that mouth of yours, Tim. You wouldn't want to put a little wager on it. Would you?"

Tim looked like he was about to reply when an extremely rude sound abruptly diverted Paul's attention.

"Paul! It's time to get up," he heard his mother yell from the far end of the hallway. "You know today's your first day of school."

"I know," Paul replied as his dream evaporated into nothingness.

"And don't forget, son. You need to decide if you're going to ride to school with me or are you going to take the bus."

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Throwing his blue and white "Intel Rules" cotton blanket to the side, Paul stretched and slid his legs down the side of his bed.

*Boy, I'm glad Mom let me buy some turquoise paint while we were out shopping. I can't wait to repaint this bedroom. This dark purple is hideous.*

He then tiptoed into the kitchen, still wearing his Battle Forge pajamas.

"So, have you made your decision yet?" Ellen asked as her son released a loud yawn.

*Gee. Is there really a decision that needs to be made? The answer is obvious.*

"I've decided to take the bus," Paul declared. "You've always said it was good for people to expand their horizon by trying new adventures. So that's what this will be, a new adventure."

Ellen removed her iron skillet from the top of the stove. “So, in other words,” she said, as she started to head toward the table, “you don’t want anybody to see the two of us entering your school together.”

“That too,” Paul agreed, bending forward with an unusual amount of interest in how he was going to cut the stack of fried eggs his mother placed on his plate.

“I swear. I just don’t understand teenagers.” Ellen stated as she proceeded to the cabinet so she could pour herself a fresh cup of coffee. “You’re embarrassed to be seen in public with me. Yet, anytime you want or need anything, I’m the first person you run to.”

Not knowing exactly how to reply, Paul sat quietly and lifted a fork full of eggs to his mouth.

“Mom,” he eventually said. “Have you decided what the punishment is going to be for what Tim, Harold, and I did in Hollywood?”

“Yes, I have,” Ellen said, turning to face him. “Do you recall the fancy new computer we bought last Saturday– the one you claimed would be a real powerhouse performer?”

“Of course, I do.” A lump suddenly appeared in the middle of his throat.

“Good. Since you need to be punished and I need a good computer at home due to this new job,” Ellen said, before briefly pausing, “you’re going to lend me it for a few weeks or however long it might take for me to buy one equipped to suit my needs.”

Paul’s mouth flew wide open, and it looked like he was about to panic.

“But, Mom,” he loudly declared. “How can you do that to me? It’s not fair. By the time I’ll get my new computer back, it’ll be obsolete.”

“I seriously doubt it,” Ellen said with a slight grin. “Is your current system obsolete?”

“It might as well be since I don’t have access to the Internet,” Paul said with a frown. Taking his last gulp of orange juice, he set his empty glass on the table. “What you don’t understand is, creating games using the latest graphic capabilities would be possible with a new computer because it would have all the latest hardware.”

Ellen gazed at him while displaying a puzzled look. before reaching over and removing her son’s empty glass and plate from the kitchen table and carrying them to the sink.

“Couldn’t you still write the programming code using your old computer?”

“I might,” Paul said, taking a bite out of a piece of toast. “But I wouldn’t be able to test it. I’d have to have a new computer to do that.”

Ellen pursed her lips and momentarily paused.

“Well. Let me think about it for a while. And in the meantime, just hurry up and finish your breakfast so you can get dressed for school. ... We’ll talk about your computer problems later tonight.”

\*\*\*\*\*

About fifteen minutes after Ellen jumped into her sedan, an antiquated, faded yellow school bus appeared at the end of the driveway and it looked like something made in the 60’s.

Paul quickly grabbed his backpack and ran out to catch it.

*I’m sure glad Tim isn’t around to see this*, he thought as he scooted down the narrow aisle before finally taking a seat on a cracked, brown plastic covered bench located near the middle. *I can imagine the way he would crack up laughing.*

Diverting his attention to the bus driver, Paul couldn’t help but notice he was wearing a Pearl Jam T-shirt, off-brand blue jeans, and a set of gold-colored earrings in each of his ears. No doubt, this had to be a student since there was no possible way this kid could have been older than seventeen or eighteen.

*I can just imagine this dude at the Department of Motor Vehicles taking his driving test.*

*“Excuse me, son,” the officer would say. “What type of vehicle are you going to be using for the driving portion of your license test today?”*

*“A school bus.”*

*“A school bus?” the officer would repeat.*

*“Oh, yes,” the dude would answer. “It’s been my lifelong dream to grow up and become a school bus driver. In fact, as soon as I pass the test, I’ve already got the job. Not to mention, my dad told me that as soon as I obtain my driver’s license and get an assigned route, he’ll start letting me spend evenings on the front porch with him – sitting on the couch, drinking beer, and watching TV.”*

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As Paul continued his observations, he detected there were only about four or five other students on the bus, and each of them was wearing a flannel shirt, and either jeans or overalls like the type of clothing worn on reruns of an old country music show called “Hee Haw.” Therefore, instead of trying to talk to them, since most likely they wouldn’t have anything in common, he entertained himself by staring out the window.

Soon after turning onto an Old County Farm Road, Paul noticed a farm substantially larger than any of the others he saw in this region. Instead of being a fifty, one hundred, or even a three-hundred-acre farm, this piece of property must have had a thousand, if not two thousand acres. It

also had an enormous, white wooden barn which caught Paul's attention and he guessed it probably held at least five hundred head of cattle.

In the same vicinity, he also observed that apart from a few men who were wearing light blue shirts and dark blue trousers, most of the others working there were dressed in bright orange jumpsuits – with large black letters written on the back.

When the bus eventually came to a halt in front of an old frame house located across the street, he was able to make out what the words said. "County Jail."

*That's strange. Why are all these men wearing orange jumpsuits with the words County Jail on the back if they're farm employees?*

The only conclusion, which appeared to make any sense was: One - these men must have originally been county jail employees, since it was written on the back of their company uniform. And, two – Guilford County must have recently reassigned them here and didn't have time to update their uniforms. ... He also resolved that the small number of people dressed in blue must have been the foremen.

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A few seconds later, Paul detected a large cow pen next to the huge barn and a hundred or so Guernsey cows patiently waiting to get milked. At least, that's what he thought since it was still just shortly after sunrise.

Just opposite the pen on the other side of the street, a blond-haired kid wearing a green cap with the letters 4H exited a white framed house. Strangely enough though, the moment the boy stepped through his front door, a large heifer from inside the cow pen immediately rushed toward the fence and began to repeatedly moo.

*What in the world is that all about?* Paul thought as he observed the teenager's face turn at least a hundred shades of red.

Paul concluded it must not have been anything too important since the kid decided not to pay the animal any mind and continued to get on the bus – despite the fact, everybody, both on the bus and on the farm was now laughing.

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When the bus finally came to a halt in front of the last house on the route, Paul stared at the vehicle parked in its driveway and began to wonder about the family who might reside there.

*Whoa. What kind of person keeps a funeral hearse in their driveway? A mortician, maybe? That is weird.*

Soon afterward, the front screen door opened and a deathly pale teenager stepped outside. He then unexpectedly stopped and began to glare at the sun, as if it were alien.

When the kid resumed heading for the bus, Paul noticed his gait was also unlike any he ever saw before. Instead of walking normally, he moved similar to a young Frankenstein.

*I wonder what kind of morbid psycho might be lurking deep inside a person like this?*

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At the moment the bus proceeded to leave that eerie locale, an abrupt lurch occurred, which was followed by the spine-tingling sound of grinding gears, metal against metal, as the school bus driver tried to place the vehicle into first. However, instead of the engine quieting down as they began to pick up speed, an ever-increasing whine resounded.

The driver, soon thereafter, tried to shift gears. But, it wasn't working. Instead of hearing the usual gnashing of gears while the transmission was being forced into second, an abnormal revving sound came from the engine.

"Uh, oh," the driver said as the vehicle's speed began to diminish.

"What's up, Greg?" Paul heard an older student holler in the driver's direction. "Have you forgotten how to drive this piece of crap?"

"No," the driver yelled over his shoulder.

Lifting his right hand high into the air, he displayed a long steel rod with a black plastic ball on top. It appeared to have come from a small hole in the floorboard.

"Folks. I hate to tell you this, but we've got a problem. Unless I can figure out a way to get this gearshift back into the transmission, we're going to be stuck in first gear the rest of the way."

In an instant, more than half the students on the bus cheered. However, a few others, like Paul, only let out a mournful groan.

Most days, he wouldn't have minded. But the last thing he needed today was to be late for his first day of class.

\*\*\*\*\*

When the bus eventually crept inside the schoolyard, everybody was thirty minutes late and unfortunately, that meant those like Paul, who was new to Gibsonville School, wouldn't get a chance to stop by their homeroom class – which was the locale for newbies to receive their class schedule.

Now exiting the bus, the tall oak trees throughout the K-12 school's courtyard immediately caught his attention and he could not help but notice how they majestically highlighted the brick, two-story structures they surrounded.

How old, but beautiful the sight was. It kind of reminded him of a movie he saw about the civil war, entitled “Gone with the Wind.”

The movie had happened to be playing at an extremely old, but well-preserved theater in the historic part of Savannah, Georgia when his parents took him there for vacation. And unlike most communities, the city mainly consisted of huge mansions with tall, sculptured columns on their front porch.

Ellen mentioned, while there, that houses this large were called plantations.

*They’re okay*, he remembered thinking. But at the time, he really didn’t care much for wasting his vacation looking at old stuff.

However, before their family vacation ended, one thing Paul did enjoy was riding with his parents in a black wooden carriage being drawn by some extremely beautiful horses. It’s driver called them “Tennessee Walkers” and said they were worth around five thousand dollars apiece.

Even though these sorrel colored animals are a beautiful sight to behold, Paul recalled thinking, *I seriously doubt they’re worth even one smidgen more than my Half Pint.*

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“Excuse me, son,” an instructor wearing a gray woolen suit, white shirt and a maroon tie held in place by a golden globe-shaped pin suddenly said the moment Paul accidentally bumped into him.

“My bad,” Paul said, trying to sound cool.

“No problem.”

The instructor’s reassuring smile gave him the impression, he meant what he said.

“Do you need some help?”

“I kinda do,” Paul said, felling his cheeks blush. “How did you know?”

“As you were walking down the hall, I noticed you seemed to be in some type of a daze – like perhaps you were lost.”

“I hate to admit it. But you’re right.” He then stuck out his right hand. “I’m Paul Pontiac. This is my first day here.”

“I’m Sunny Long,” the instructor said, returning the shake with a smile. “This is my first-year teaching here, as well. It’s nice to meet you, Paul.”

“Nice to meet you too, sir.”

Not knowing how to approach the subject, Paul gazed downward at his gray Nike’s.

“Do you know where I can pick up my class schedule? My bus was late, so I missed homeroom.”

“Who’s your homeroom teacher?” Mr. Long asked.

“A lady called Mrs. Bass. I was told she teaches English.”

“That’s correct, she does. And I’ve heard she’s an excellent instructor.” Mr. Long then stopped and gazed down the hallway. “Just a second ago I thought I saw her heading toward the Principal’s office. Most likely, that’s where you’ll need to go.”

“Thanks. Could you tell me how to get there?”

Mr. Long promptly pointed his forefinger down the walkway.

“Just go to the end of the hall, then climb one flight of stairs, then go to the end of the adjoining hallway and turn right. . . . As soon as you’ve passed the entrance to the auditorium, which is near the school’s trophy case, start looking to your left and you’ll see the words “Principal’s Office” written on the door. His office is right next to the new guidance counselor’s office.”

“That would be my mom’s office,” Paul accidentally blurted.

Mr. Long, in reply, released a chuckle.

“I suspected as much. Upon hearing your last name, it was easy to make the connection. I’ve heard a lot about you.”

*You have?* Paul thought.

More sirens went off inside his head than a person would hear if they had been watching a whole fleet of patrol cars chasing a bank robber down the Interstate.

Picking up on Paul embarrassment, Mr. Long deliberately glanced at his watch. “You’d better get moving along, Paul. The bell signaling the beginning of your first class is going to ring any second now.”

“Ah-h. Yes, sir,” he said, unconsciously twisting the wristband of his own watch. “Thanks for your help. It was nice to meet you sir.”

BURR-R-R-R-RING

Giving Paul a nod, Mr. Long began his treacherous journey through the chaos-filled hallway of teenage students as they haphazardly began to proceed toward their first period classes.

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“Can I help you, son?” a middle-aged lady wearing a navy-blue dress dotted with small, white, daisy-like flowers, asked as he opened the door.

Paul liked how her blondish-brown hair glittered in the fluorescent light, while her dark blue eyes sparkled as if they were saying, “You are someone important.”

“Is this the Principal’s Office?” he asked, wondering, soon thereafter, why would he ask something so stupid.

“I think so,” The lady said, giving him a wink and a friendly smile. “You must be new here. Welcome to Gibsonville School.”

“Th-thank y-you. I guess. ... My bus was late this morning, and I was told to come here to pick up my class schedule.”

“You must have been riding on bus thirty-nine this morning,” the lady said with a nod. “Could you please give me your name and the name of your homeroom teacher?”

“Sure,” Paul replied. “It’s ...” And as he gave her the requested information, an ear-piercing clang of steel repeatedly striking steel reverberated throughout the office.

“Okay. You’re in Mrs. Bass’ homeroom,” the lady said as if the torturous sound of the tardy bell ringing never existed.

“That’s correct,” he confirmed, and a broad ear-to-ear grin soon appeared on the lady’s face.

“You must be Ellen’s son.”

*Oh no. Not again.*

“Yes, I am,” Paul said, trying to ignore the implication of those dreadful words. “Do you have my class schedule?”

The lady nodded, and proceeded to dig through a rather large stack of forms, which had been placed inside a small wooden box, marked “In.”

“I believe this is it,” she said, removing a lonely three-by-five-inch sheet of paper and briefly glancing at the form before handing it to him.

“Thanks.” Quickly turning, Paul left the office.

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Slowly heading down the now empty hallway in the opposite direction from which he came, Paul began to study his new schedule.

“I wonder where room 220 might be?” he said after discovering that math was going to be the first class of the day.

With no one there to assist, he proceeded to read the numbers above the classroom doors. “112...113 ...114.”

*Hmm. Obviously, I'm on the wrong floor. All the numbers here begin with a one. ... No problem. I'll continue down the hallway and then head up the staircase.*

With each step he took, a squishy tennis-shoe-rubber meeting tongue-and-groove hardwood floor sound promptly echoed so loud, anyone approaching would easily have known his precise location and exactly where he was heading.

Upon arriving at the stairwell's military gray doorway, he began to hear a rhythmic thump increasing in volume – as if someone was heading down the endless two-flight staircase. Instinctively, Paul held his breath.

*Is that another student? Or, could it be an instructor?*

When he crossed the midway point of the first flight of stairs, the answer rapidly appeared. Whoever was descending, they were wearing black leather shoes and a dark blue pair of polyester dress pants.

*Just my luck. Another instructor.*

“Excuse me, son. Could I please see your hallway pass?” asked a stern-faced man, coming to a halt in front of him.

“Hallway pass?” Paul shrugged his shoulders. “I don't have a hallway pass. Nobody told me I needed one.”

The teacher, in reply, gave him a scowl so intense, Paul thought the guy was going to eat him alive. “Right, kid,” he said with a snarl. “Considering the fact that you, like the other eight hundred students here, have attended this school since kindergarten – don't you think you should know the rules by now?”

“But. This is my first day,” Paul croaked, causing the instructor immediately frown.

“Hmm,” he said, squinting his left eye as he grabbed a small sheet of paper and a ink pen from inside his shirt pocket. “What is your name, son?”

“Paul Pontiac.”

Suddenly, as if what he just heard made a difference, the instructor stopped writing and began to stare at him – as if he had a need to memorize Paul's face.

“So, you’re the new guidance counselor’s son. I guess you wouldn’t know our rules yet,” he eventually said matter-of-factly. “I still would like to know what you are doing in the stairwell, instead of being in class.”

“Well, sir,” Paul began. “It’s like this ...”

When he finished explaining where he had come from and why he wasn’t in class, the instructor placed his hand on top of his shoulder and examined his class schedule – then motioned for him to follow him back up the stairwell.

“I appreciate your help,” Paul said as the door to classroom two twenty came into view.

“It was my pleasure,” the instructor replied and opened the classroom door. “However, since you didn’t obtain a hall pass from the Principal’s office, I’m going to have to inform Mr. Onslow, your math instructor, why you’re late.”

*Oh, great.*

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Shortly after stepping inside, Paul was told to remain standing in the front of the classroom as the two instructors conversed.

With the other students’ piercing eyes now solidly gazing upon him, he felt like he landed into a school of sharks which were waiting for the optimum moment to attack.

Soon thereafter, Mr. Onslow walked up and had him face the soon-to-be predators.

“Students. ... I would like you to introduce you to the son of our school’s new guidance counselor. Paul Pontiac. Please make him feel welcome.”

The instructor then pointed toward an empty desk at the back of the classroom. “You may take a seat over there.”

With that type of introduction, Paul swore he couldn’t have felt more embarrassed – even if he had farted in front of everybody. Thus, slightly lowering his head, he proceeded toward his newly assigned desk.

*Hopefully, the gods will be with me and nothing else will happen that will bring me into the limelight.*

“Hey kid,” Paul heard a freckled face boy whisper as he passed him. “Where did you come from?”

“Florida,” he replied, still walking toward his seat.

“Florida?” another student said. “You must be one of those stupid city slickers.”

“No, I’m not,” Paul said in a low tone as he attempted to do a quick 180° turn.

Unfortunately, about midway in his turn, he somehow managed to step on one of his shoelaces. And that, along with the weight of the heavy book bag on his back, caused him to rapidly lose his balance and he instantly crashed onto the dirty walnut floor.

His fellow classmates roared with laughter as they stared and pointed.

“Yes, you are,” a third student added with a broad grin. “In fact, you’re so dumb, you haven’t even learned how to walk yet. City slicker.”

*So much for making a good first impression,* Paul thought as he picked himself from the floor and brushed off his jeans.

\*\*\*\*\*

Upon entering the cafeteria at lunchtime and discovering that all the instructors were sitting together at their own table, he hoped that things might loosen up a bit.

“Hi, there,” Paul said to the much larger student standing in line in front of him, and then waited for a reply.

*Hm-m-m. No response. Let’s try this again.*

“Hi, there,” he repeated. “I’m Paul.”

This time the kid with the solid black shirt took a glimpse over his shoulder.

“I know who you are, dork,” he said with a sneer. “Now leave me alone.”

“Now, wait a minute,” Paul said, feeling his abdomen tense. “What have I ever done to you?”

They both moved up the line a couple steps.

“You’re the new guidance counselor’s kid. Aren’t you?”

“Yes. So what? Does it matter?”

The kid just stood and shook his head.

“Man. You must be dumber than what I was told.”

“Me. Dumb?” Paul firmly placed the end of his thumbs inside his front pockets. “I’ll have you know I could probably program a computer to sing Glory Hallelujah in less time than it would take for you to even turn one on.”

“O-h?” The kid chuckled as a smile slid across his face. “So-o, not only are you a dumb city slicker, you’re also a geek. And with your mama being the guidance counselor, I bet you’re a snitch, too.”

The kid then paused for a second.

“Is there anything else you would like me to add to the list, Dorkest Supremo?”

“Yeah,” Paul said, feeling the blood boil inside of his veins. “Add this!”

Turning his body so he’d be facing the him, Paul rapidly pulled his elbow back, then drove his fist as deep as he could inside the boy’s chest, just below the sternum.

The kid crumpled like a wet rag.

Displaying a gratifying smile, Paul quietly stood in place and watched as the kid gasped for air while still lying on his back.

“Stop it, you two!” a lanky, curly haired instructor screamed as he ran toward the two of them from the front side of the cafeteria.

“You just wait,” the larger kid said, grimacing as he pulled himself into a sitting position. “My friends and I are going to be coming after you. And after we finally get a hold of you, guidance counselor’s son or not, you’re going be nothing but rotten, stinkin’ meatloaf.”

The instructor now standing right next to Paul, looked downward and gave the kid on the floor an extremely stern look. “Butch,” he said. “I thought we went through all of this last year. I wasn’t joking when I told you that if I hear about you or your friends causing trouble, I’ll personally make sure you and whoever is with you will not only get expelled, we’ll get you transferred out of here.”

“Oh. Wow. I’m scared. I knew you’d be a teacher’s pet,” Butch said, staring at Paul as he spit each word, while climbing to his feet. “The way Mr. Franklin came to your defense just proved it.”

“Come with me, Paul,” Mr. Franklin said, before turning to face the other student. “Butch. You can be assured, Paul is nobody special and he will be heading for the Principal’s office to be punished for fighting.”

Butch nodded, and as the two of them slowly proceeded down the long hallway, Paul could have sworn he heard the kid’s voice behind him, shouting, “Yes-s!”

## **Chapter Sixteen - Cigarette, Anyone?**

Soon after being led into the Principal's office, Paul Pontiac found himself being ushered to the front of a large mahogany desk. Behind it sat Mr. Raymond Skinner, the school principal. Mr. Franklin and Mrs. Pontiac stood silently at each side.

"Take a seat," Mr. Skinner said, gesturing toward a hard, wooden chair. He then studied the troubled teenager before him and shook his head. "We've got a problem here, Paul. You're definitely setting a wrong precedent for a brand-new student, especially considering this is the very first day of a new year."

"Me? I'm setting a wrong precedent?" Paul leaped to his feet and pointed his forefinger toward his chest.

"No, sir. I'm not the problem, sir. The problem is, from the second I set foot in this place, I've caught Hades from all of the other students. And I'm getting pretty sick of it."

He then loudly stomped his foot.

"I didn't have these problems when I lived in Florida, and I certainly didn't ask to come here. Furthermore..."

Ellen's face swiftly paled before exclaiming, "PAUL! You stop this temper tantrum right here and now!" and pointed toward his chair and waited for him to take a seat. "Now I don't know what in the world has gotten into you, but..."

"Hold on, Ellen," Mr. Skinner abruptly interrupted. "I know you're upset and I can understand why. But, please. Let me handle this."

In turning his attention back to where the young man was sitting, "Paul," he said. "I realize it's sometimes hard to adjust to a new school and a new environment. And, I also know most of the students at our school are related to one another. Therefore, it's sometimes difficult for a new student to get accepted."

"That's an understatement," Paul silently muttered.

"And though it might take a little time, over the next few weeks or months you will begin to make a few friends and will start to fit in," Mr. Skinner continued. "However, until that time comes, there is no way we can allow you to start a fight every time somebody says something you don't particularly like."

*So what am I supposed to do? Just stand there and take it?*

“Now normally, when a Guilford County student is involved in a fight, he or she would automatically face a five-day suspension. However, since you are new to this school, if you’ll promise me there will be no more fighting, I’ll go light on you. I’ll only suspend you for the rest of today and you’ll be required to serve a week in after-school detention starting next Monday. ... That sounds fair, doesn’t it?”

Paul stared into Principal Skinner’s eyes and hesitated, before giving a response.

*This still doesn’t solve anything. If the other kids would act friendly towards me or at least leave me alone ... I wouldn’t have a problem.*

Paul glanced at his mother and the furious, yet silent expression across the front of her face clearly communicated if he didn’t accept the terms offered, he’d be dead meat long before he made it home.

“Yes, sir,” Paul replied, bowing his head. “I promise. No more fighting.”

“Good,” Raymond said with a slight smile and rose from his chair.

As Paul approached the doorway, “Mr. Skinner, I do have one small item I would like to ask you. If you don’t mind.”

“What’s that, Paul?”

“How can I serve after school detention if I’m supposed to ride the bus home every day?”

“Son,” Ellen rapidly interjected, using an angry tone. “That’s the last thing you’re going to have to worry about. During your week of detention, you’ll be riding home with me.”

*Gee. Thanks, Mom.* Paul frowned.

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Until the very last day of his assigned after school penalty, Paul was certain the week was never going to end.

Not only did he have to serve detention, his mother decided to increase his punishment by requesting the instructor-in-charge to have him write, “I will not fight in school” a thousand times every day.

And on top of that, since she felt Paul embarrassed her and disrespected Mr. Skinner, Ellen believed two additional punishments were in order.

The first one consisted of grounding him, except to do his chores - which wasn't too bad considering the fact he lived in the middle of nowhere. But, the second one was far worse. He wasn't allowed to use his computer or play video games.

Nevertheless, despite the negative factors, one good thing seemed to come out of this incident. Butch and his gang unexpectedly had stopped calling him names, at least directly to his face.

However, whenever he passed one of them in a hallway, it was a bit difficult for anybody to miss what they yelled behind his back.

And then came the following Monday.

"Hey, geek. I mean Paul," Butch yelled one day from halfway down the hallway. "Are you going to join the new club the school's trying to start?"

"What new club?" Paul asked, swiveling around.

Butch turned to face a black friend standing next to him. "Didn't I tell you he was stupid?" He then pivoted back to face Paul. "The new Computer Club, you dork. It sounds like it'd be perfect for a geek like you."

"I'm sure it would be," Paul perfunctorily replied since he wanted to bring this conversation to a close.

He then turned and began to shuffle through a swarm of students as he trekked toward the school bus.

"Paul. Paul Pontiac," a young voice started to holler the moment he approached the bottom of the stairwell.

Looking over his shoulder to see who was calling him, Paul found a geeky-looking kid wearing a plaid shirt with a white plastic pocket protector inside his front pocket, black framed glasses with thick round lenses and a navy-blue baseball cap.

He felt sure the boy couldn't have been more than eleven or twelve.

"What do you want, kid?"

"I'm Daniel E. Whitehouse, the Third," the boy said, offering his hand. "My friends and I have wanted to get a hold of you for the past few days. We would like to tell you how thankful we are for the way you took care of Butch McGuire."

"You're welcome, I guess," Paul said, shaking the boy's hand. "But why should you care what happened between me and Butch? You're not even in high school, are you?"



He then started down the hallway toward the building's exit, instead of waiting for the kid's answer.

"Yes, I am a freshman. Just like you," Daniel said, trying to keep up with the fast pace Paul was walking. "But what you don't understand is ... for me and all my friends, you're a hero."

Paul ignored him and increased his pace.

"That's ridiculous," he eventually replied. "I've never done anything that would make me somebody's hero."

"But you're wrong, Paul. You're the only one we know of who's been able to stand up to Butch," Daniel said as the two of them approached the door which led to the bus parking lot.

He then hesitated while appearing to be pondering either what he wanted to say next or how he was going to say it.

"My friends and I would like to know if you'd considering being the president of new Computer Club the school's starting up."

Paul immediately came to a halt, then looked at the kid and chuckled.

"And where would you get the idea I'd know anything about computers?"

"That's easy," Daniel said, giving him a crooked grin. "One, Butch wouldn't have called you a geek, unless he somehow found out you like to spend time with computers. And two, when I was in your mother's office a couple of days ago, I overheard her tell Mr. Flint he should ask you about the computer problem he was having."

"Okay," Paul said, seeing he'd be unable to dispute the kid's resources. "So, who's Mr. Flint?"

"He teaches general science."

Gazing down at his watch, Paul noticed his bus would be leaving in about a minute.

"It's obvious you have the advantage here, Daniel since you know all about me. However, I've got plans this afternoon and need to be leaving. I'm about to miss my bus."

"I'll see you sometime tomorrow then," Daniel yelled as Paul proceeded to dash out the exit door. "But please think about what I've asked. We really need your help so that we can win the software contest sponsored by Titan Industries."

*Titan Industries?* Paul questioned as he boarded his bus. *I've heard that name before – but where?*

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Feeling every bump and pothole on the seemingly thousand-mile journey to his house, Paul continued to think about Daniel, and why the name “Titan Industries” seemed to be so familiar.

However, the moment Bus 39 pulled into his driveway and he saw his faithful, black furry friend waiting for him, mouth open and tail wagging, he soon forgot about both.

“Hi, Midnight,” Paul said, kneeling and giving his four-legged friend a hug.

Midnight repeatedly licked his master’s chin in reply.

Getting back on his feet, “I’m happy to see you, too,” Paul said. “Would you like to race to the house?”

First turning toward the house, then back at Paul, Midnight faced him as if to say, “I’m ready anytime you are.”

“Okay. Get ready!” Paul yelled, placing his feet into a sprint position. “On your mark. Get set. Go!”

With his feet slamming the ground at the speed of a roaring locomotive, the dirt along the two-wheel path which led to their house began to fly.

However, as he approached a huge boulder near the halfway point, Midnight started to catch him.

“Oh no, you don’t,” Paul said, releasing a sudden burst of speed.

In coming to within fifteen feet of the massive oak tree near the front of his house, Paul was positive he was going to win.

However, Midnight unexpectedly made a quick 90° turn in front of him, causing Paul to trip.

“Now why in the world did you do that?” Paul hollered, now seated on the grimy dust and dirt, which promptly covered him from head to toe. “That’s cheating.”

Midnight walked over to where he sat and stared into his face.

“Woof,” he barked as if saying, “I know. But I won, didn’t I?” And then gave Paul a lick.

“All right. You won,” Paul agreed and pet his head. “But, I still say you wouldn’t have if you hadn’t cheated.”

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After playing with Midnight for a couple of additional minutes, Paul figured it was time to go inside the house and began working on the latest adventure game he started to develop, Clash of the BattleStars II.

However, as things would have it, he soon ran into a problem.

Every time he would pause his programming long enough to peek out the bedroom window – there was Midnight, staring back at him, wagging his tail. He would then give Paul a big doggy grin.

“Okay. You win,” Paul said after twenty minutes had transpired. “And I hope you’re happy.”

Getting up from his desk, Paul walked across the room toward his closet.

“I hope you know, Midnight, I was planning on getting my character module finished before Mom got home this afternoon.”

Removing his grandfather’s single shot rifle from the far back corner of his closet, he stretched to grab a box of 22 shorts from the top shelf.

Not long afterward, Midnight started flying around the corner the moment he heard the kitchen’s screen door creaking.

“Would you like to go hunting this afternoon?” Paul asked, bending down on one knee so he could scratch his four-legged friend’s ears.

“Woof. Woof.” Midnight then began to scurry down the hill toward their natural log tobacco barn.

“Wait for me,” Paul yelled, plodding along the grassy path Midnight was following.

As he approached the edge of the woods next to the barn, Paul began to think about Half Pint and wondered how she was doing, and if she would like using one of the stalls inside of the old building.

Considering the fact the barn was run down and the weather was still hot, there wasn’t any possibility Half Pint could join him anytime soon. And because of this, up to now, he hadn’t taken any interest to go inside.

*Maybe I should, at least, check out the stalls. That way, I could tell Mom what repairs might be needed.*

First, turning a weather-worn, two-by-six-inch, gray piece of plywood that kept the large, heavy, barn door shut into a vertical position, Paul pried his fingers along its rough edges and opened the door with a yank.

Almost immediately, an invisible gaseous cloud which smelled like stale manure began to overwhelm him.

“Man. What an awful odor,” Paul said, taking a few steps inside.

Ironically, Midnight must have thought the order was something pleasant or at least non-offending since he methodically began to sniff each corner and crevice as if the horrible aroma didn't exist.

“How can you stand that smell?” Paul asked as Midnight nosed his way around a stall littered with piles of dried horse and cow dung. “It stinks!”

Midnight decided to ignore him.

Turning to his left, Paul discovered someone had installed a light green colored, wooden feed storage bin.

*Wow. This must be the favorite hangout of all the local field mice,* he thought after lifting its lid.

However, after finding nothing else interesting, he shut it with a loud, “Wham” and a thick cloud of dust instantly penetrated the space surrounding him.

Now staring at the wooden planks that ran along the floor of a hayloft, Paul couldn't help but wonder if something worthwhile might be up there.

*Let's find out.*

Midnight watched as his master semi-cautiously proceeded to stick his fingers into the crevices between the wooden logs so he could climb up.

“Well. Well. What do we have here?” Paul said, noticing a glimmer of something red reflecting from underneath a dried tobacco leaf lying in the corner on the floor.

Since the floor of the hayloft consisted of boards which had an inch to two-inch gap between them, Paul took his time inching across the aged planks.

“Can you believe this, Midnight?” he yelled, upon grasping hold of the small, boxed-shaped, cellophane sealed package. “I just found a whole pack of Marlboro’s.”

Clutching the forbidden package so tightly that if it would have been an egg, he surely would have crushed it, Paul imagined what Eve must have felt the day she was tempted.

*I know Mom has always told me to leave cigarettes alone and how they’re not good for people. Yet, it seems like the students at my school who seem cool and have lots of friends, all smoke.*

“Hmm. What should I do? Should I leave them here, unopened? Or, should I try one? ... And what if I started smoking. Would the cool guys at school begin to like me?”

Paul paused.

“I do know if Mom ever found out, she’d kill me. But, what if I just smoked one? Then I would know if it’d be worth it.”

Ripping the plastic wrap and tin foil open, Paul carefully removed one of the forbidden weeds, placed it between his lips, and lit it.

“Hey, look at me!” he shouted, holding the cigarette between his thumb and forefinger. “I’m cool. I can smoke.”

He then deeply inhaled, and within milliseconds, his body went into a major coughing spree.

“Oh, my lord!” Paul shouted, between coughing and choking. “What in the world did they put in this thing? I must be doing something wrong.”

So he tried puffing on the noxious weed a few more times.

Cough! Cough! Choke! Cough! Choke!

Determined to figure out what he must be doing wrong, Paul continued. Yet the longer he worked at it, the only thing he was succeeded at was – making himself nauseous.

Then suddenly, it happened.

B-L-A-H-H!

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Standing there, now staring at the chunky, slimy goo covering the wooden planks in front of his feet, Paul tossed the lonely cigarette butt a short distance.

*What was I thinking, and why in the world would I do something so stupid?*

The ache inside his stomach seemed almost unbearable.

“I’ve got to get down from here,” he said, feeling like he was ready to keel over and die.

However, in his attempt to make his way out of the hayloft, this time, instead of being careful about where he was going, he randomly wandered in the general direction of where he initially climbed up.

C-R-A-C-K. Paul abruptly heard as he stepped on a couple of rotten floorboards.

W-H-O-M-P!

“O-w-w,” he moaned, now lying flat on his back in the middle of a stall full of stinkin’ manure.

Carefully approaching the spot where his master landed, Midnight took one look and began to lick the remaining vomit surrounding his owner’s mouth. However, a few minutes later, he unexpectedly lifted his head and dashed out of the barn.

“How could I have been so stupid?” Paul muttered as stabbing pain consistently bolted down his arms and legs. Then, after detecting his dark hair, furry friend was no longer around, he started to yell. “Midnight, come help me. Where are you, Midnight?”

No reply.

Seconds later, a familiar noise proceeded to echo across the countryside.

“Good boy,” Paul said when he saw that Midnight had returned. “I knew you’d come back. I knew you wouldn’t just leave me.”

“You’re lucky to have a friend like him, Paul,” Ellen stated, walking over to where her son was laying. “He got my attention the minute I pulled into the driveway.”

She then knelt by his side.

“Now let’s see what kind of trouble you’ve managed to get yourself into.”

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After rushing her son to the hospital's emergency room, Ellen was thankful to hear that all of his injuries were relatively minor.

However, the following afternoon when she returned to the barn to see what it was going to take to make it safe and usable, she wasn't happy with what she discovered.

"P-A-U-L!" a voice shouted, followed by the door to the living room being slammed shut so hard, even the picture on his bedroom wall shook.

"I'm in my bedroom," Paul said as he continued to type the program code he'd been working on.

A variance of reflective light on his monitor soon indicated his mother had stepped into the room.

"Paul," Ellen said, using an unusually low, forced, but calm type of voice.

In her hand was a small, red package, and she lifted it to a level where her son could easily see it.

"Do you know what this is?"

Paul briefly glanced at it and turned to face his monitor, as if he there was a great need to concentrate on the program he had been working on.

"Yes, Mom," he said, trying to cover the quiver in his voice. "That's a pack of cigarettes."

"Would you have any idea how they got into our barn?"

Paul continued to stare forward for a few seconds. "You know, that's strange," he quietly replied. "I asked myself the very same question yesterday."

"Oh? So you admit you knew about the cigarettes?"

"Yes. I found them lying on the floor of the hayloft. I guess whoever used to own this place must have left them."

A frown formed on Ellen's lips and she crossed her arms. "I see. And I suppose when you fell through the floor of the hayloft, this pack happened to be so close, it also fell through?"

*Uh, oh. I know where this is going.*

Slowly rising from the wooden chair where he was sitting, "Mom. Would you mind if I step out for a minute? I think I need to use the restroom."

Ellen displayed a predominate frown and pointed him back to his chair. “Oh, no, Paul. You’re not going to get away that easy.” And she moved to a position which would effectively block the passageway between where her son was sitting and the bedroom door.

“Answer this, son. How did this pack of cigarettes get opened?”

Paul shrugged his shoulders. “How should I know? Maybe the previous owner wanted a cigarette, then didn’t like the flavor and tossed the pack away.”

An unexpected period of complete silence suddenly prevailed.

Slowly turning his head to see why his mother had not responded, Paul discovered a wicked type of smile covered her face as she moved closer.

“Son. I’m going to give you one chance and one chance only to be honest with me. How did you know only one cigarette was missing?”

*Just calm down.* Paul said to himself as all kinds of sirens and alarms began to howl inside his head. *I know we can talk our way out of this. We just need to stay calm.*

“When I was in the hayloft and discovered the opened pack, I saw one was missing,” he said, feeling his stomach muscles tie themselves into a knot.

“I see,” his mother replied with a false smile.

It wouldn’t take a rocket scientist to realize, she wasn’t buying his story.

“If that’s true, then answer this,” Ellen said. “How come the clothes you wore yesterday had a hint of cigarette smoke in them?”

*Whoa here! I’m dead. I forgot there would be a cigarette odor in my clothes. ... Would somebody please be so kind as to let the local police department know there’s about to be a murder? And I’m going to be the victim?*

“Well. You see ...”

“P-A-U-L. Just answer the question,” Ellen said, raising her voice before he could utter another word. “Were you smoking in the barn, or weren’t you? Yes or no.”

“Well, technically.”

“Don’t you even think of trying to use that technical crap on me, young man.” The bright redness within Ellen’s cheeks clearly showed she was now quite upset.

“Did you smoke a cigarette, or didn’t you?”



*I was afraid of this. I've just been checkmated.*

“Could I ask a question first ... before answering that?” Paul asked, feeling his throat constrict. “Would my punishment get reduced any if I now honestly answered you?”

“I guess so,” Ellen said, releasing a small chuckle.

“Yes. I did try to smoke a cigarette,” Paul confessed. “That’s why I was so sick.”

“Good!” Ellen exhaled as if a huge burden had been removed from her back.

“Good?” Paul felt confused and subsequently raised his eyebrow. “What was so good about that?”

Placing her arm around the nape of her son’s neck. “Paul,” Ellen said in a loving tone. “How do you feel about smoking now?”

He instinctively scrunched his face and shuttered. “Mom, I would rather die than touch another cigarette.”

“That’s what I wanted to hear,” she said before turning like she was about to leave his bedroom.

Feeling even more confused, “Is that all? Aren’t you going to punish me, Mom?”

“Do you think you need an additional punishment?”

“No, ma’am. I learned my lesson about smoking.”

A wide grin formed on Ellen’s face. “I think so, too.”

A few seconds later, Paul could have sworn, he heard his mother humming “Amazing Grace” as she made her way toward the kitchen.

## **Chapter Seventeen - Clash Of The BattleStars**

Hearing the reverberating sound of metal clanging against metal which signaled the end of the school day, Paul sprang from his seat and proceeded to his locker.

Nothing could have sounded better.

“Hi, Paul,” Daniel said, the moment he saw his hero stepping out of his Civics class. “What’s with all the bruises?”

“It’s nothing,” Paul answered. He would have preferred to die, then let anyone know how he fell through the floor of a hayloft and landed in a stall full of manure.

“Are you going to the Computer Club meeting this afternoon?” Daniel asked as they started to walk down the hallway.

“This afternoon?” Paul stopped and gave Daniel a brief glance. “You didn’t tell me the meeting was today.”

“I wanted to. But, yesterday you left so fast, I never got a chance.”

“Hmm. That’s too bad, ‘cause it’s too late now,” Paul said as the two of them reached his locker. “I’ve already made plans for this afternoon.”

A panic expression covered Daniel’s face.

“Again? ... Isn’t there any way you could change them? My friends and I are depending on you.”

Paul tossed a couple of books inside his locker. “Why me? There’s bound to be plenty of other students who could program a computer as well as I do. Just ask someone who’s recently graduated from a programming class.”

Daniel stared at him and shook his head. “That’s the problem, Paul. Gibsonville doesn’t offer any programming classes, not even an intro one.”

*Excuse me. Did someone just shoot me through a time warp to the eighteenth century?*

“You’re kidding?” Paul slammed the door of his locker shut with a resounding bang. “How were they planning to have a computer club, if they don’t even teach any computer classes? It doesn’t make sense.”

“That’s easy,” Daniel said. “I convinced my mom that our school should have one, and she’s the chairperson for the PTA.”

“I should have known.”

As Paul continued his trek out of the building, Daniel stayed by his side while he climbed down the stairwell.

“I hate to tell you, Daniel. But as I said before, I already made plans for this afternoon. ... Maybe, next time.”

“Yeah. Next time.” Daniel slowly walked away - both shoulders drooping and looking like his best friend just kicked him in the gut.

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“Dang it!” Paul said, instinctively kicking the exit door open after watching the younger kid leave. “I hate it when people do that to me. It isn’t right!”

A blond female with blue eyes turned to face him.

“Excuse me,” she said, “Is something bothering you?”

Paul stopped in his tracks and his cheeks reddened.

“I’m sorry. I was just venting. It really wasn’t anything important.”

“Oh. Okay,” Cathy replied while Paul proceeded to walk past a row of parked buses.

However, seconds later while gazing to his side, he noticed the girl he recently spoke to was trailing him.

“You know,” she said, coming up to his side as the two of them passed bus number 27. “Whatever caused you to kick the exit door must have had to be important. Otherwise, you wouldn’t have been so upset.”

Instantly, Paul came to a halt.

“How would you know what’s important to me? You don’t even know who I am. Not to mention, you’re a girl.”

Cathy looked down the front of herself and giggled.

“I hope I am. ... And you’re right, I don’t really know you. But I think you’re cute.”

Paul unconsciously looked toward his feet while his cheeks become brighter than a cherry-flavored popsicle. “Me? Cute?”

“Of course, you are. And you’re sensitive, too.”

Paul glanced in her direction and partly frowned.

*Oh, brother. Just what I needed, a girl who thinks an all he-man guy like me is sensitive.*

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In the distance, the rumble of bus engines started loudly to reverberate.

“Now what in the world would have given you a crazy idea like that?” Paul inquired, feeling a bit perplexed.

“How about first telling me what has gotten you so upset?” Cathy countered, placing her hands on her hips.

Not wanting to offend his potentially new friend, Paul proceeded to tell his story, beginning with where he came from, all about Daniel, and everything else in between.

In the meantime, Bus 39 exited the parking lot – without him.

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“Just great. I’ve been so busy talking, I missed my bus” Paul said as watched his bus turn east onto Church Street. “Now I’m going to have to ride home with my mother.”

“Your mother?” The girl pretended to be surprised. “Who’s your mother?”

*Oh, no. Here we go again.*

“Mrs. Pontiac,” he replied while taking a sudden interest in a couple of robins flying overhead.

“The new guidance counselor?” Cathy said with a smile. “So what’s your name?”

“Paul. And you are?”

“I’m Cathy. Cathy Skinner.”

“The Principal’s daughter?” Paul noticed how a dimple formed on her cheek each time she grinned.

“That’s me. Was there anything particular you wanted to do until our parents are ready to leave?”

“No. Not really.”

“Great. How would you like to come with me then?” she asked as the two of them started to walk toward the main school building.

“Sounds okay. But where are you going?”

“To the Computer Club meeting.”

*Daniel! You devil you. You outsmarted me.* Paul thought as he grasped Cathy’s hand. *This must be your doing.*

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Upon stepping into the Office Skills classroom a few minutes later, they discovered the meeting had already started and Daniel was at the podium.

*This looks like a small international convention,* Paul thought as he scanned the room.

Besides the usual Black and White students, there were also a couple of Mexicans, one Japanese, and even a foreign exchange guy from Russia.

Daniel glanced at his friends and set down his written notes.

“...with that taken care of,” he continued. “I believe the time has come for us to elect a club president, vice president, secretary, and treasurer.”

Cathy quickly raised her hand. “I would like to nominate Paul Pontiac for president.”

“Good choice,” Daniel said, giving the two of them a grin as they took a seat. “Do we have any other nominations?”

“I think you should be the club president,” Paul shouted.

“Thanks for your support, Paul,” Daniel said with a smile. “But, I respectfully decline. When it comes to programming skills, you have me beat. However, I wouldn’t mind being vice-president.”

Paul unconsciously raised his eyebrow and paused for a moment.

“Hey! Wait a minute. How can you say that? There is no way any of you would have even the slightest idea how well I may or may not be able to write programs.”

“Have you forgotten something, Paul?” Daniel asked, turning in his direction. “We talked about your computer skills earlier.”

“I know we did,” Paul said. “However, I’m getting a very distinct feeling there’s something you haven’t told me.”

At once, a dead silence prevailed.

As Paul gazed at everyone in attendance, he rapidly got the impression he was dead right. There was some previously shared knowledge about him that everyone knew, yet no one dared to mention it.

“Okay,” he said after few seconds passed. “If and when any of you decide to tell me what’s going on, you know where you can find me.” He then started for the door.

“Paul. Wait,” Cathy exclaimed, climbing out of her seat. “There is something you should know. Tell him, Daniel.”

Paul did a 180° turn and began to tap his foot. “W-e-l-l?”

Daniel released a sigh. “It’s actually a long story, Paul. Are you sure you want to hear it?”

Paul looked at him and frowned, “I’ve got time,” and sat at an empty desk located near the front of the classroom, before folding his arms.

“Well ... last Wednesday,” Daniel said, looking nervous. “I somehow managed to short out the video card in my computer while trying to upgrade my power supply. ... However, I was able to convince my mom to take me to the mall so I could purchase a new one.”

He then gazed across the room.

“And of course, everyone knows whenever you enter Computers R Us, you’re never going to go there and just pick up the one or two items you came for. So after I got the video card I wanted, I decided to check out the latest PC games. ... That’s when I found the game Maximum PC recently awarded the sacred “Kicks Butt” review. And to my surprise, upon reading the box, I found out it was produced by Titan Industries – the same company sponsoring the software contest I think our club should enter.”

“That’s nice,” Paul said, closing his mouth after a short yawn. “But what does all of that have to do with me?”

“Everything,” Cathy said, making direct eye contact with him. “You don’t have to be modest, Paul. We’re all friends here.”

“Yeah,” a few other students added.

“I’ve even played the game,” the Russian kid announced. “It really kicks ass. You’re a programming guru, Paul.”

Paul turned to glance at him, looking perplexed. “I don’t follow. What game from Titan Industries are you talking about? And what does it have to do with me?”

“Do we have to spell it out to you?” the Japanese kid said, sarcastically.

“Yes, I would appreciate it if you would,” Paul said, ignoring the tone of the kid’s voice.

Daniel now appeared to be a bit irritated.

“Okay, Paul. If we must. . . . After looking up Titan Industries – Games Division on the web [www.titanindustriessgames.com](http://www.titanindustriessgames.com), I discovered it was headquartered at Ft. Lauderdale, Florida.”

“So?” Paul said, propping his feet on the side of the desk beside him.

“That’s when I began to investigate the names of the co-developers of the game I bought,” Daniel said, continuing. “Since one of them seemed to be familiar. It didn’t take long to discover, not only were both of the game’s developers high school students just like us, but until recently, they used to attend the same school.”

“So. They’re a lot of programming students in South Florida,” Paul said, crossing her arms in front of himself. “It just sounds to me like a couple of them created a game and got lucky.”

“I can’t believe this guy’s modesty,” one of the black students shouted, hitting his fist on the wooden desktop. “He’s famous, but he won’t admit it.”

“I’m not famous for anything,” Paul said, raising his voice in denial. “. . .except for somehow getting myself in trouble from time to time.”

“Oh yes, you are!” Daniel shouted back, accusingly. “Doesn’t the name Timothy Hegler ring a bell?”

Paul instinctively paused.

“Of course, it does. We used to be best friends. It’s also a fact that a few months ago the two of us created a computer game. So what?”

“Bingo!” Daniel screamed so loud it almost made the classroom windows vibrate. “Now, will you please admit that you’re a co-developer of the game I bought?”

Paul jumped to his feet. “What game? Tim and I haven’t sold the rights to any of the games we developed. At least not yet.”

“You had to,” Daniel said, giving his friend a hard glance.

Walking to the desk where his backpack was lying, he reached in and pulled out a typical plastic box used to package most computer games.

“It’s written right here,” Daniel continued, before reading the box label. “New from Titan Industries, Clash of the BattleStars.”

He then flipped the box over to its backside.

“And here it clearly states, ‘Developed by Paul Pontiac and Timothy Hegler.’”

Paul dashed to where his young friend was standing and abruptly yanked the plastic game box out of his hands.

“This can’t be right,” Paul muttered as he began to read the label for himself. “It can’t be.”

The truth then struck him between the eyes, like a twenty-pound sledgehammer.

“I can’t believe it.”

“Believe it, Paul,” Daniel said in a solemn tone. “And after accomplishing something like this. As far as we’re concerned, you’re a software god.”

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The moment the Gibsonville School Computer Club meeting ended, Paul stormed into his mother’s office – slamming the door behind him.

But upon seeing her on the phone, instead of interrupting, he decided to quietly take a seat in the wooden chair beside her desk.

“I see,” Ellen said into the phone, using a tone Paul recognized as the one she used when she didn’t want to reveal she was upset. “Did anyone survive?... Just Nathan, oh poor boy. Is he going to be okay? ... No?”

Roughly ten minutes later, his mother set down the handset and Paul could not help but notice how pale her face had become.

“Are you okay, Mom? What was that all about?”

Ellen presented him a false smile.



“It’s nothing for you to be concerned about, Paul. That was your father on the line and he was informing me that his brother had recently been involved in an auto accident.”

“Uncle Bob? Is he all right?”

“Let’s not worry about Uncle Bob right now, Okay?” Ellen said, clearly wanting to change the subject. “Now what’s on your mind? You seemed a bit upset when you came in.”

Paul nodded. “Mom. Are you aware Titan Industries is selling the game Tim and I created, Clash of the BattleStars?”

Ellen immediately looked into her son’s face and displayed a frown. “What gave you that idea?”

“Well. I missed the bus this afternoon, so I decided to attend the Computer Club meeting which was being held in the Office Skills classroom. And while I was there, Daniel showed me the latest game he purchased at Computers R Us. To my surprise, it was Clash of the BattleStars.”

Mrs. Pontiac turned and gazed at the ceiling as if trying to remember something. “Daniel?”

“Daniel Whitehouse,” Paul said, before pausing. “the Third.”

“Oh. That Daniel. He’s pretty smart for his age.” Ellen said with a smile.

Paul, in reply, hesitated for a second, before asking his next question.

“So what are we going to do about it?”

“Nothing.”

“Nothing?” Paul repeated as his eyes widened. He couldn’t believe his ears.

He then sat and stared directly into his mother’s face.

“We’re going to let Titan Industries get rich from my game and do nothing about it?”

“Did they list you and Tim as co-developers of the game?” Ellen asked, studying her son’s expression.

“Yes.” Paul nodded.

“Okay then. So what’s your problem, son? They’re giving you credit for co-developing it.”

“But, Mom,” Paul whined, in a high pitch. “Titan Industries is making fifty bucks a copy of the game and I’m not getting a dime from it.”

Ellen chuckled.

“I’m sure Titan Industries isn’t making a full fifty bucks a copy. That’s only the retail price. Anyhow, how do you know you’re not getting anything?”

Paul stopped and took a deep breath.

“I believe that’s obvious, Mom,” he said, clenching his fists so tight, his knuckles turned pure white. “I surely haven’t seen anyone around here holding a check in my name.”

“That’s true,” Ellen said with a single nod.

Getting up from her chair, she stepped over to the corner of her office and casually poured herself a cup of coffee.

“Paul, do you realize how many boys your age would give their eye teeth just to get the recognition you’re getting by having your name listed as one of the co-developers of the best selling computer game on the market?”

Paul gazed at her, momentarily. “No. I hadn’t thought about it.”

“I’m sure you haven’t,” Ellen said, now returning to her seat. “What you don’t realize, Paul ... by getting your name well known at your age, all the big software companies around the world are going to be asking you to go to work for them when you graduate from college. ... You’re going to be able to demand not only how much you want to be paid, but other major benefits, as well.”

Picturing the wondrous scenario his mother just described, his mouth fell open.

“WOW!” Paul exclaimed as his mother took another sip of coffee. “That would be super!”

Ellen motioned for her son to come closer as she got to her feet, and she put her arm around his shoulders.

“You see, Paul. What may not seem right at the moment can sometimes turn out to be one of the best things that could ever have happened.”

“True,” he agreed. “But I still would like to know how Titan Industries get the rights to sell the game without my permission.”

“Simple,” Ellen said, checking the top of her desk to see if she left a copy of the contract there. “Before we left Florida, Joe mentioned to me that he played the game you and Tim had been developing and thought it would be a big success if his company could market it. So with permission from both me and Tim, Titan Industries distributed a few copies for beta testing.”

“Unfortunately, soon afterward,” she continued, after taking a breath. “The company experienced a temporary setback. An unauthorized person got a hold of a few copies. However, things got back on track soon after they caught him.”

Ellen then paused for a moment so Paul could absorb all she said.

“Joe contacted me a few weeks ago and let me know the dark-haired guy you saw trying to sell a bootleg copy of the game at South of the Border has been prosecuted.”

Paul’s mouth immediately gaped open.

“Anyway,” Ellen said, ignoring her son’s shocked response. “After discussing the rights to the game, Joe and I reached agreeable terms that would provide the greatest long-term benefits for both you and Tim. And, since I’m your mother, I was legally allowed to sign the necessary forms to give Titan Industries the rights to sell your game.”

“Oh?” Paul stared at his mother in awe. “Wow. Thanks for looking out for my future.”

“No problem, Son,” Ellen replied with a broad grin.

“I do have one last question though,” he said, before they locked her office.

“What’s that?”

“Why didn’t you tell me anything about this before now?”

Ellen stopped and stared into her son’s eyes for a few seconds, wondering how much she should reveal. She then gave him a mystical smile.

“I had my reasons.”

## **Chapter Eighteen - Whose Cufflink Is This?**

Saturday. Paul Pontiac's favorite day of the week. Why? Because on Saturdays, there was no need to hurry up and get dressed. Nor did he have to catch a bus or listen to teachers all day. And best of all, on Saturdays, if he wanted to, he could sleep until noon. Unless...

"Good morning, Uncle Paul. Mr. Sun is high in the sky. It's time to get up." A high-pitched voice rudely announced as the footsteps of a familiar four-year-old unexpectedly echoed across the tongue-and-groove floor of his bedroom.

*Morning? Mr. Sun? Get up? ... What in the devil?*

"Allen? What are you doing here?" Paul asked, upon rolling over so he could locate the source of the aggravating sound that disturbed his peaceful slumber.

"Mommy and Daddy went to a furniture market in Hickory and I couldn't go. So I get to spend the day with you."

Observing the glow radiating from his young nephew's face, Paul had no doubt his opinion of the two of them spending the day together was quite the opposite of what his nephew felt.

"Do you have any idea what time it is, Allen?" Paul asked, glancing out his window to see if the sun had risen above the horizon.

The young boy smiled. "No. But, I'll go ask Grandma."

Soon after hearing his bedroom door slam shut, Paul eased his bare feet onto the cool wooden floor, before plodding toward his maple dresser.

*What a way to start a Saturday morning,* he thought as he carelessly removed his P.J.'s.

When he started to reach for a pair of white cotton briefs out of his dresser's middle drawer, a creaking sound unexpectedly resounded from his doorway. It was soon followed by a childish giggle.

"You sure have a big butt, Uncle Paul."

Paul's cheeks glowed a bright red, and he quickly grabbed a pair of Fruit-Of-The-Looms and pulled them up to his waist.

“Allen,” he then said, turning in the direction where his nephew was standing. “Didn’t your Dad ever teach you to knock before you enter a room where the door is closed?”

Allen’s face flushed. “Oops. I forgot.”

Speedily dashing into the hallway, the four-year-old shut his uncle’s bedroom door and began to knock.

“Come in,” Paul yelled, with a shake of his head.

“How was that, Uncle Paul?” Allen meekly asked, before walking back inside.

“That’s better.”

After watching his uncle continue to get dressed, the moment Paul started to put on his tennis shoes, Allen questioned, “Can we go hiking, Uncle Paul?”

“I guess so,” Paul said, getting to his feet. “What do you know about hiking?”

Allen gave his uncle a serious look.

“Daddy said we need to exercise. And I heard him tell Mama that hiking would be fun.”

“O-K,” Paul said, slowly and distinctly pronounced each letter. “If that’s what you would like to do, maybe we’ll go after breakfast.”

“I’ve already had breakfast, Uncle Paul,” Allen proclaimed as the two of them started to head for the kitchen.

Ignoring his nephew’s comment, Paul took a seat at the kitchen table.

*Allen may not be hungry, but I sure am.*

Approximately twenty minutes later, the two of them set out toward the dark and wild forest.

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Since Paul couldn’t help but recall how the last time he traveled this way, not only did he get lost, he also ended up almost shooting his mother’s realtor, he thought it would be a good idea to maintain a careful eye on the various objects they passed as they continued to follow the narrow dirt path they were on. It was notorious for curving around a multitude of trees, ferns, and bushes.

“Uncle Paul,” Allen said, several minutes later after coming to a stop. “What’s a Doo-wop?”

“A Doo-wop?” Paul repeated. “Where did you hear that?”

“From my daddy. This morning.” Allen brushed a thorny vine aside. “He was singing in the car and he kept saying doo-wop.”

Paul grasped his chin and proceeded to think about the unusual word.

“I haven’t the faintest idea, Allen. Or if that’s even a real word.”

When the two of them came upon a large sycamore tree whose lower limb had cracked, causing its leafy branches to lightly brush against the ground, Paul felt ascertained that the two of them had finally crossed the farm’s property line.

“Some of the kids at school recently told me the winter wheat their dad planted was starting to come up,” he said, turning right to face his nephew. “And since we’re now on our neighbor’s farm, why don’t we run up the hill and check out his fields.”

Allen grinned, and eagerly nodded okay.

“Uncle Paul,” he exclaimed as the two of them began to approach the shadowy edge of the woods. “Look over there!”

Paul instinctively turned in the direction his nephew was pointing. “Wow!”

Instead of finding a freshly planted hundred-acre field covered with tiny bright green colored sprouts, he discovered what appeared to be a more than half completed, several thousand square foot home, surrounded by numerous near empty pallets of concrete blocks, bricks, and bags of mortar.

Behind it, at close to a forty-five-degree angle, another nearly finished, prefabricated building stood a few hundred feet away.

“Somebody is building a house and a barn here, Uncle Paul,” Allen said, pointing at one of the living room windows. “Can we go look at it?”

“Why not?” he replied, shrugging his shoulders.

*Gee. I wonder who bought this property?*

As Paul watched his nephew walk along the edge of what looked like an unfinished large pool, he noticed the boy unexpectedly came to a stop and was now picking up something.

“Uncle Paul,” Allen said, holding a gold colored object out in front of him for his uncle to see. “Look what I found.”

“What is it?” Paul asked as he began to walk toward him.

“I don’t know.” Allen raised the object to his right eye and appeared to be perplexed.

“Let me see it.” After carefully turning the mysterious object over in his hand a few times, Paul frowned. “It looks like a cufflink.”

“What does a cufflink do, Uncle Paul?”

“It’s something men sometimes use to keep the cuffs of a long sleeve shirt closed.”

“Oh,” Allen nodded as if he understood what his uncle was talking about. “Do you mean it’s like that metal thing Daddy uses when he wears a tie?”

“Sort of. But, cuff links are worn near your wrists.”

“Who could have lost it, Uncle Paul?”

“I’m not sure,” Paul said, taking one last serious look at it, before shoving the link into the front pocket of his jeans. “I saw it has the letter ‘H’ engraved on it. But, the only person around here whose last name starts with that letter is Mr. Henderson. And I don’t recall ever seeing him wear cufflinks.”

## **Chapter Nineteen - The Computer Mystery**

Weeks had passed since Paul spent time with Allen and it seemed like Fall was now rapidly flying by. One minute it would be Monday, and the next, it would be Wednesday or Thursday. However, one thing did remain consistent. With each passing day, the temperature became a little bit cooler and more leaves would have changed from a dull green to a bright orange or red.

“Paul,” Daniel said, walking up to the podium in front of the class at the close of another successful computer club meeting. “Do you have any big plans for Halloween? You know it’s this weekend.”

Paul bent over to grab his backpack off the floor and carelessly slung it over his right shoulder. “No. Not really. Since I live in the country there’s not a lot of people nearby. Also, Mom’s been reminding me recently that I’m getting a bit old for the trick or treat scene.”

“That’s true,” Daniel said with a nod as he shut the door of the Office Skills classroom. And the two of them started down the hallway toward the front of the school. “Once you start attending high school, you’re definitely too old for the door-to-door begging for candy thing. But, you’re never too old for a party.”

“You do have a point. But who’s having a Halloween Party, Daniel?”

“I am,” he replied, coming to a halt. “And you’re invited.”

“Oh?” Paul stopped and looked at him. “So who all’s coming?”

“Everyone in our computer club, except for Cathy. She hasn’t committed yet.”

“And why’s that?” Paul asked, making a quick right toward the administration offices.

“Well. It’s not like she isn’t. It’s just. Well. ... She would be more interested if you were going to be there.”

Daniel then paused. “Do you two have something going on I’m not aware of?”

Paul shook his head. “No. As far as I’m concerned, we’re just friends. However, I’ve been noticing that occasionally, ... she’ll look at me with this really strange expression.”

“I’ve noticed it too,” Daniel said. “Mom says I get the same kind of look when I see a freshly baked pizza with all the extras.”



“Oh?” Paul gave his friend a quick glance. “You don’t hang around the front door waiting for the delivery person each time your mother orders one, do you?”

Daniel chuckled as the two of them passed the school’s trophy case.

“No. I’m not that bad, yet. . . . By the way, tomorrow we need to talk about what we might do to get some computers for the school. . . . It won’t be long until we’ll need to merge the software modules each of us has been working on.”

“I know,” Paul concurred. “I’ve written to several hardware companies. But so far, nobody seems interested in donating any equipment. I guess everyone’s hard up for cash right now.”

A small crease formed on Daniel’s forehead. “There must be something we can do. Let’s think about it overnight and maybe we’ll have some good ideas tomorrow.”

“Okay,” Paul said, and soon afterward, his friend began to head toward the school’s front door. “See ya, tomorrow.”

“10 – 4.”

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Entering into his mother’s office, which was only a few feet away, Paul took note that even though her coffee pot was still on and the screen saver on her computer was running, Ellen was nowhere to be seen.

*I wonder where Mom is? It’s obvious, she hasn’t gone too far.*

He then dropped his backpack on the floor just inside the doorway and walked over to the Principal’s office to see if she was over there.

“Ms. Saddler,” Paul said to the dark-haired lady who worked in the Administration Office as he walked up to the front counter. “Have you seen my mom? She’s not in her office.”

Ms. Sadler, almost immediately, stopped typing on her computer and turned to face him.

“Why hello, Paul,” she greeted with a smile. “Mr. Skinner, Mr. Thompson, and your mother are in a meeting inside the auditorium.”

Paul raised a single eyebrow. “Oh? Thanks.”

*I wonder what’s going on in the auditorium? he wondered as he exited the administrative office. Maybe if I should peek.*

After inching toward the auditorium's door, he stopped for the briefest of moments and gazed through its small rectangular-shaped window. Unfortunately though, he didn't see anything but the usual numerous rows of empty wooden seats.

*That's strange. There's nobody in there.*

So he gently opened the door a crack and stuck his head inside.

*Hmm. They're obviously not in here. This place is empty,* he concluded as he pushed open the door and proceeded to walk toward the front of the stage. *Ms. Saddler must have been mistaken.*

Just as he was about to turn around and leave, he began to hear approaching footsteps. They were coming from behind a set of thick red curtains located near the front of the stage.

"This is what I was telling you about, Mr. Skinner," a voice sounding like the Office Skills instructor's said. "Isn't it amazing?"

"Amazing isn't the word for it," the principal replied. "Are you sure there's enough for a whole classroom of students?"

"If the paperwork the FedEx guy gave me is correct, there is. ... We not only have all the equipment and accessories we would ever need, but also a sufficient amount of software and textbooks, as well."

"That sounds almost too good to be true," Mr. Skinner said. "However, the question remains, who sent it?"

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"I can't answer that." Mr. Thompson said, unfolding the piece of paper inside his hand. "As you can see from this Bill of Lading, everything was shipped to us, prepaid. However, I did find it the Special Instruction section interesting. Someone wrote, 'This is no Trick. Please have a Happy Halloween.'"

The instructor then paused.

"This afternoon I called FedEx and according to them, this shipment came from a legit company. But, for reasons unknown, the corporation who sent these computers specifically instructed FedEx not to provide their company name, address, or general location. ... Apparently, they wanted this to be an anonymous gift."

"Ellen," Mr. Skinner said, turning toward Mrs. Pontiac. "Would you have any idea who's responsible for this?"

“I have a suspicion,” Paul heard his mother answer in a serious tone. “But until I make a phone call, I’d rather not state any names.”

“Okay. How checking your resource and then meet us in my office.”

The next thing Paul heard was a set of footsteps heading toward the backstage doors.

“So what do you want me to do about this equipment?” the Office Skills Instructor asked a second later. “I’d like to set these up inside my classroom as soon as possible.”

“I can understand your eagerness,” Mr. Skinner said. “But, until we take some of the mystery out of this gift, I’d prefer to keep it boxed up.”

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Knowing it would take less than a minute for his mother to return to her office, Paul dashed through the auditorium doorway and subsequently jetted down the hallway.

A millisecond later, in an attempt to give the appearance that he had been waiting in her office ever since his computer club meeting ended, he jumped into his mother’s chair and leaned backward – propping his feet on the corner of her desk.

“Boy. That was close,” he whispered, between gasping breaths.

Within a couple of seconds, the creak of his mother’s office door informed him his mother had arrived. And not unexpected, she appeared to be in a hurry.

“Have you been waiting long?” Ellen asked as Paul automatically transferred himself to one of her guest chairs.

“Not really,” he replied. “I spent some time talking with Daniel after the meeting.”

“Good.” Ellen turned and picked up her phone. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I need to make a call.”

Paul casually spread his arms over the top of the two chairs beside him and watched his mother dial.

“Hello. This is ....”

Five minutes later, she hung up.

“Did Mr. Hegler buy our school some computers?”

“I had thought so,” Ellen said, twisting to face him. “But the person whom I talked with didn’t seem to know anything about it. Additionally, Mr. Hegler left for a week-long business trip this morning, so he wasn’t available.”

“Where did he go?”

“His secretary wouldn’t say. She said it’s against Titan Industries corporate policy to provide information regarding the company or any of their employees.”

“Will the school be able to use the new computers?” Paul asked, watching his mother rise from her desk.

“I can’t say. I’m about to meet with Mr. Skinner and he’s the one who’ll make the decision.”

Paul followed his mother as she journeyed down the hallway. “How long do you think the meeting last?”

“I can’t really say. It shouldn’t take too long. Maybe ten minutes.”

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Not long after his mother entered the administration office, a substantial creak began to repeatedly echo down the long hallway as Paul paced between the two offices.

Boy, I sure wish Daniel were still here. Imagine how much fun we’d have checking out all the new computers they got backstage.

Paul then made a couple more rounds.

*Hey! Mom did say she’d be gone for at least ten minutes. Why don’t I go ahead and see what exactly the school got? ... That way, tomorrow I could tell Daniel.*

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First searching the hallway to see if any staff members could see what he was about to do, Paul slipped through the auditorium’s side door and rushed up the stairs which lined the left side of the stage.

“There you are, my sweeties,” he said, rubbing his hands together after slipping behind the forbidden red curtain. A mischievous grin soon covered his face as he eyeballed each of the cardboard boxes that someone placed near the back of the stage.

He then moved in closer.

“Dell computers? Alright!” he said, examining the box closest to him. “Whoever bought this equipment knows good quality when they see it. ... Now if I could only find the packaging list so I could see exactly what each box contains.”

Moments later, after opening the sealed list on a few of the boxes, “Oh, my lord!” Paul exclaimed. “These aren’t the discount systems Dell carries, they’re the top of the line models.”

“Excuse me, young man,” a man’s voice suddenly rang out from the rear of the stage. “Do you have any authorization to be back here?”

“Uh-oh, Mr. Thompson?” Paul replied, swallowing the knot that instantly developed in his throat. “I wasn’t expecting to find you back here.”

“Obviously not,” the Office Skills instructor said, coming to a halt about two feet in front of him. “And neither did I expect to be finding you, Mr. Pontiac. Would you like to explain why you’re here?”

“Well. I just ...”

“So you wanted to check out the new computers,” Mr. Thompson matter-of-factly stated as an I-got-you smile appeared on his face. “Mr. Pontiac, are you familiar with the cliché, ‘Curiosity killed the cat?’”

“Yes, sir.” Paul nodded.

“Good,” Mr. Thompson said, pointing toward the auditorium’s exit door. “Now follow me to the Principal’s office. Needless to say, you’ve just become the cat.”

*Uh. Oh. This will be the second time this semester I’ve been escorted to the Principal’s office. ... Mom is going to kill me.*

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After lightly knocking on school Principal’s door, Mr. Thompson had to wait a few seconds before it opened. When it eventually did, there was a brief conversation with someone and he motioned for Paul to follow him inside.

“So what do you think should be done?” Mr. Skinner said, addressing Mr. Little, the Assistant Principal.

“I agree with Ellen,” he said. “Since the company who donated this equipment was legit, I think we should utilize it. ... Not only would the computers enhance our Office Skills program, if we could get the county’s approval, we also might be able to offer our students a few basic programming courses next semester.”

Upon hearing those words, Paul spontaneously jumped to his feet. “Not only that, Mr. Skinner,” he added, “but the Computer Club would also benefit by having access to these computers.”

Then it suddenly it hit him, he was supposed to be quietly sitting down.

“Oops. Sorry,” Paul said, covering his mouth as he slid back into his seat. “I didn’t mean to interrupt, Mr. Skinner.”

The principal, in reply, gave the teenage a stare so cold, Paul felt Mr. Skinner’s eyes could have easily nailed him to the wall directly behind him.

“Mr. Thompson,” Mr. Skinner said, after turning his attention back to the adults. “Mr. Little, Mrs. Pontiac, and I have discussed everything we previously talked about regarding this matter. And even though this unexpected gift was given under very unusual circumstances, I do tend to agree – we shouldn’t look a gift horse in the mouth.”

And with that, he abruptly paused.

“So, Mr. Thompson. When do you think you could get this equipment set up in your classroom, without disrupting anything?”

“With a little help,” the Office Skills instructor said. “If I started early Saturday morning, I could probably have it done by five that afternoon.”

Mr. Skinner formed a steeple with his fingers.

“I see. Okay, that sounds acceptable. Let’s proceed accordingly.”

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As Paul watched, everyone nodded their head, yes, and the Assistant Principal promptly exited the Principal’s office.

However, Mr. Skinner, instead of leaving, turned to face his Office Skills instructor.

“Mr. Thompson. Would you like to explain what Paul Pontiac did that you thought was important enough to escort him in here while we were having a staff meeting?”

Mr. Thompson briefly gazed in Paul’s direction.

“Mr. Pontiac, it seems, has an uncontrollable curiosity streak,” he answered. “A few minutes ago, I caught him in an unauthorized area. Specifically, he was eying our new computer equipment, backstage.”

“Oh?” The principal turned and stared at the teen, with a frown. “Paul. What do you have to say for yourself?”

“I didn't go there with the intent of damaging anything, Mr. Skinner, sir. I just wanted to take a quick peek at what came in.”

“If I may interrupt, Mr. Skinner,” Mr. Thompson interjected. “I do know for a fact that, Paul. . . . Ahem. Mr. Pontiac, not only is the President of the Computer Club, but he also has a rather extensive knowledge of computer hardware and software. So if I may, sir. I would like to recommend as punishment for entering a non-authorized area, that he be required to assist me this Saturday in setting up these new computers.”

Mr. Skinner tilted his head upward and started to gaze at his perforated ceiling.

“That wasn't the punishment I had in mind, Mr. Thompson. But since you are going to need assistance from someone who is computer literate, it sounds like it might be a good idea.”

After pausing, he then added. “You may also want to talk to Daniel Whitehouse the Third and ask him if he would be willing to volunteer his time.”

“Good idea, sir. I will,” Mr. Thompson said, before turning back toward his teenage victim. “Do you think you will have any problems fulfilling this punishment, Mr. Pontiac?”

“No sir, Mr. Thompson,” Paul said. His face displayed a smile as wide as it would allow. “Thank you, sir.”

Ellen fumed as she swiveled to face her son. “Now wait just one minute, Paul. There is no way you're going to deliberately break rules like this and then get off easy. . . . As soon as we get home and you've had time to change clothes, young man. I expect you to start shoveling the manure out of the tobacco barn.”

Paul looked at her and whined, “Aw-w Mom.”

“Don't you 'Aw Mom' me, young man. A little hard work never hurt anyone.”

Paul instinctively bowed his head. “Yes, Ma'am.”

## **Chapter Twenty - Problems In Paradise**

“It's working ... It's ... Ah, man! We just got doo-wopped again!” Daniel screamed, abruptly tossing the game controller onto the white Formica-topped computer table.

Gazing at Daniel's twenty-four-inch flat panel monitor with both eyes wide open, Paul looked for an error code, a warning message, or at least something that would be of help in determining the cause of this problem.

Unfortunately, there wasn't anything. The only thing staring back at him was Microsoft Window's infamous blue screen of death.

“Dang it!” he yelled, upon realizing it had to be the game, Plutonium's Revenge, which both Daniel and he had been struggling all evening to debug because it tend to cause Daniel's desktop to lock up.

“I guess I'm going to have to double check the numbers I placed in the second dimension of the third array,” Daniel said, grabbing a nearby plastic bottle and taking his last sip of soda. “Some way or somehow, every single time it needs to recalculate our phaser power, the game manages to corrupt the whole array. ... I just don't understand it.”

Paul glanced at him and shrugged his shoulders.

“Just keep working on it,” he said, diverting his attention to a two-by-four-foot mock layout of the game's main starship hanging on his friend's bedroom wall. “I'm sure you'll figure it out.”

“That's true.” Daniel smiled. “I haven't found a programming problem yet, I wasn't able to fix.” He then opened the front cover of his computer so he could hit its restart button. “The only trouble is, I was hoping to get this module finished within the next couple of days. Thursday's Thanksgiving, and my family and I will soon be leaving for Wilmington – where my aunt Claire lives.”

“Oh?” Paul said. “It a shame it's not summer then. That way you could have spent some time on the beach.”

“I know. Last year when we were there for the Fourth of July, not only was I able to take in the scenery – I also had one of those tables with an umbrella in it, my own lounge chair, and unlimited use of my dad's laptop. It was cool!”

Paul grinned at his friend's reply.

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As Daniel's computer continued its rebooting process, "Daniel. Mrs. Pontiac is here," Mrs. Whitehouse shouted from their living room.

"Okay, Mom," Daniel replied while Paul turned to glance at his watch. It was 8 P.M.

*Man. Where had the time gone?*

"I guess I've got to go," he said. "It's too bad I can't stay another hour to two. We might have been able to fix this."

"I know. But, at least your mother lets you stop by on a school night. Maybe soon we'll be able to talk her into letting you stay overnight one weekend."

Paul immediately frowned. "I doubt it. Ever since the day we moved to North Carolina, my mother's been acting like an old mother hen around me."

Daniel let out a chuckle and the two of them soon started down the hallway.

"Oh? Does she picture you as her egg and she worried you're about to crack?"

"Very funny, Daniel," Paul sarcastically replied as he lightly punched his upper left arm. "That was a real yolk."

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While the Paul and his mother were exiting Gibsonville's city limits, he couldn't help but notice that instead of being the talkative, happy person she normally was, tonight, she remained unusually quiet. The complete silence was almost eerie.

"Do you mind if I flip on the radio?" he asked, reaching to push its silvery button.

"I'd prefer you didn't," Ellen said. "There are a couple of things I need to talk to you about. But I just haven't figured out how to begin."

Paul hit the button once again and leaned back in his seat. "What's bothering you, Mom?"

Ellen remained silent ... just staring at the black pavement in front of their Impala as they continued down Highway 61 west.

Her eyes may have been focusing on the road ahead, but Paul could tell her thoughts were elsewhere.

"It regards your father."

"Did something happen to him?" Paul asked, turning to look in her direction.

“No, it’s nothing like that,” Ellen said, tightening her fingers to the point where they began to turn white. “It’s just. Well. He called tonight and asked if he could spend Thanksgiving with us.”

“So what did you tell him?”

“I told him, he could. But only if he would agree to two conditions. . . . One – He had to be sober when he arrived, and Two – he would have to remain sober the whole time he was here.”

“And what did he say to that?”

“He claimed he has not had a drink in over three months. He also stated he’s been actively participating in Alcoholics Anonymous ever since the day we left.”

Paul paused. “Do you think it’s true?”

“I don’t know,” Ellen said, her lips forming a small frown. “However, I’m going to try to find out. It would be nice if it was.”

A moment of silence then silently passed between them.

“There is also something else you should know.”

“What’s that, Mom?” Paul said with a serious expression on his face.

“Do you remember your Uncle Bob, his wife, Lora, and their son, Nathan? They live in Michigan.”

“I know about them.” Paul nodded, wondering why his mother brought them up. “But I’ve never met them.”

“That’s true,” Ellen said with a distant stare in her eyes. “A few weeks ago, I received a call at school. And if you recall, you were in my office at the time and overheard a bit of the conversation. I don’t know if you remember questioning me about your Uncle Bob, the moment I hung up.”

Paul indicated he did.

“Well. I think it’s time you should know what the call was about.” Ellen said, before taking a deep breath. “Your uncle and aunt were in a major auto accident and neither of them survived.”

“Oh. No!” Paul declared, mouth wide open. “Did Nathan survive?”

“Yes. But he has suffered substantial injuries and is currently in a coma. The doctors don’t know if he’s going to make it.”

A small tear silently coursed down Ellen’s cheek.

“And even if he does, can you imagine how he’s going to take the loss of both parents? Not to mention, his legs.”

“His legs?” Paul gasped, and shook his head. “The next time you talk to Dad ... would you tell him I’m sorry.”

“I sure will, Son.”

“Thanks.”

“By the way, the last time you talked with Dad,” Paul began, changing the subject. “... did he happen to say anything about Half Pint?”

Ellen hesitated as if trying to recall something.

“Yes. And I’m glad you reminded me. Your father said to tell you the Hegler’s had no trouble selling her. She brought us a nice tidy sum.”

“W-H-A-T?” Paul screamed.

Staring at his mother’s calm, but somber expression, his body trembled as the atom bomb inside him exploded.

“You told them to sell her? You lied to me! You told me that...”

“Calm down, Son,” Ellen said, lightly chuckling. “I was only joking with you. A little bit of humor, every now and then, is good for a person’s soul.”

“But, Mom,” Paul said, still fighting to catch his breath. “Even the remote thought of Half Pint being sold isn’t funny. ... You know how hard I’ve been working in the barn. I’ve literally spent days fixing and painting so it would look good by the time we bring her here.”

“And you’ve done a good job.”

“Thanks.”

Paul took a moment to re-gather his thoughts.

“Is there anyway Dad could bring Half Pint with him?”

“Unfortunately, not right now, Son. We’ve have had a lot of unexpected expenses recently and there is no way your dad could afford the cost of renting a horse trailer.”

Paul shifted so he could stare at his mother as he frowned.

“So when are we going to rent one? I had no idea when we left Florida, I was going to have to be away from her this long.”

“I know. But even with using the gift card we got from Burlington Mall, Paul, it’s cost a fortune to make our house livable.” Ellen acknowledged as she turned so she could examine her son expression.

“Now I know you’ve worked hard on the barn and would like to bring Half Pint here as soon as possible. But, before we can do it, there are a couple of items the two of us first need to resolve. ... One – Where do we want her pasture? ... And after that’s figured out, how are we going to fence it.”

“So how soon can we do all that?” Paul questioned.

Ellen shook her head. “I don’t know.”

## **Chapter Twenty-One - The Day Before Thanksgiving**

In the Piedmont region of North Carolina, all the local meteorologists were in agreement – Clear and sunny skies for the next few days. However, what their forecast could not have predicted was the emotional storm rapidly approaching the Pontiac farm.

“It’s Wednesday. There’s no more school ‘til Monday,” Paul shouted, dashing toward the front of the bus the moment it came to a stop near the edge of his mother’s farm driveway. “Thanksgiving has finally arrived. Ya-hoo!”

Eager to see the black furry friend he knew would be waiting for him, he flew down the steps without even stopping to see if the bus driver had even opened the door.

“Hi, Midnight,” Paul said as he leaped off the last step and saw his faithful companion sitting next to his older brother. “Hi, Jack.”

Then unexpectedly, he stopped in his tracks as it suddenly dawned on him what he just said.

First taking a step backward, he blinked and took a second look. Sure enough, his eyes weren’t lying. Standing three feet in front of him, wearing a green and white plaid flannel shirt, a pair of bib overalls, and tan work boots, stood his older brother.

A thousand questions instantly began to flash before his eyes and he wondered which he should ask first.

“Ah, Jack,” Paul eventually said. “What are you doing here?”

“Mom asked me to be present when the farm equipment she purchased arrived. Therefore, I thought I would show you where everything is before I left.”

“What farm equipment?” Paul asked as two of them started down the driveway.

Jack stopped and pointed toward the barn. “It’s right over there.”

For the first time in his life, Paul could visualize a life-size version of the green and yellow farm toys he used to play with. “Wow!” he exclaimed as his mouth dropped open. “Is that stuff for real?”

“Of course it is, city slicker,” Jack said, trying not to chuckle. “That’s a John Deere tractor and next to it is a mower, plow, and disc.”

Paul stopped so he could glance across the front lawn and both of their side yards.

*Unbelievable! Instead of wasting hours slaving with our dang push mower, I could take a couple sweeps with the John Deere and I'd be done.*

“When can we connect the tractor to the mower?”

“Just as soon as we’re done with the post-hole digger Mom rented.”

“Post-hole digger?” Paul raised an eyebrow. “What’s that?”

Jack gave his brother a quick smirk and commenced to shake his head.

“A post-hole digger is a tool needed to put a fence post in the ground,” he replied as they reached the John Deere.

“But Jack. We don’t have any fence posts.”

“You do now. I brought in a whole trailer full. It’s parked in front of the barn.”

Paul turned and stared at a trailer full of fence posts “This is amazing. Where are we going to put all these?”

“Little Bro,” Jack began, putting his right hand on top of one of the trailer’s side rails. “There isn’t any ‘we’ in this project.”

Paul glanced in his brother’s direction and paled.

“There isn’t? Mom’s surely not expecting me to stick all of these in the ground all by myself, is she?”

“I would hope not,” Jack replied. “If she did, most likely Hades would freeze over before you finished.”

Paul ignored his brother’s snide remark and proceeded to study the woods surrounding them. “So exactly where is this fence supposed to go?”

“From what Mom mentioned, Jack said, using his forefinger to point toward various perimeters as he spoke. “It’s going to start at the edge of the barn, then head straight through the woods – all the way to the stream. From there, the fence will turn left, and continue all the way to the property line. Afterward, it will be following the edge of the ten-acre field out front until it arrives back at the barn.”

Paul released a high-pitched whistle. “Wow! That’ll give Half Pint plenty of room to graze in.”

First nodding, Jack moved to the front of his trailer and proceeded to turn a hand crank – which caused an unusual type of steel stand to lower.

“Now if I were you, I wouldn’t go off and get my hopes up too high. Mom didn’t say anything about doing all of this for that horse of yours. In fact,” he added, pausing long enough to wipe his brow, “from what I understand, Mom wants this fence up so she can get a cow.”

“A cow? You must be joking. Mom expects me to work myself to death, so she can get a cow?”

Jack gazed at his younger brother and chuckled.

“Don’t worry, Paul. You’re not going to have to do all the work by yourself. Dad will be here to help you.”

As Paul was about to respond, he overheard the sound of rumbling car tires rolling over loose gravel. When he turned to see who was coming, he saw a dirty blue sedan with a long, thick, gray dust cloud trailing behind it.

“Mom’s home.”

“Do you want to walk to the house, or would you like to wait for me to finish disconnecting this trailer and catch a ride?” Jack asked as he disconnected the last safety chain between his truck and the trailer.

“I think I’ll walk,” Paul said as a gray, murky cloud of disappointment started to overtake him.

“Suit yourself.”

For a moment, Jack searched his younger brother’s eyes as if trying to read his thoughts. He then reached into the back corner of his truck and began to unhook the wiring harness that controlled his trailer’s taillights.

After several milliseconds had passed, “Paul,” he said, raising his head so he could look at him square in the eye. “I know you never bother to listen to me. But if I were you, I wouldn’t let all this cow business get to me. Mom hasn’t forgotten about Half Pint.”

“Yeah, right!” Paul said as he continued up the small incline which led toward their tree-lined driveway.

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As Mrs. Pontiac’s vehicle began to creep down the pathway that led to their home, Midnight suddenly appeared and started to run beside it as if he was engaged in a race for his life. Paul consciously decided to ignore both of them and quietly entered inside.

“I’m home, Paul.” He heard his mother cheerfully yell from the kitchen a few seconds later. “Did you have a good day at school?”

*Why should you care?*

Dropping himself into the wooden chair in front of his computer desk so abruptly it loudly squeaked, Paul opened the desktop’s front cover and jammed his finger against its Power On switch.

“Is there something wrong, Son?” Ellen asked the moment she entered his bedroom.

“Something wrong?” Paul sarcastically repeated while twisting around. “What possibly could be wrong? I live in a no man’s land where the nearest neighbor is a mile away. I haven’t seen Tim or Half Pint in ages. You have me going to this two-bit medieval school where the only friends I have are computer geeks, and everybody else hates me because I’m the guidance counselor’s son. Then to top it off, I just found out you bought a bunch of farm equipment that I’m expected to use to install a fence – just so you can buy a cow, instead of fencing off a pasture area for Half Pint like you promised we would.”

With his moisture-laden cheeks now a bright shining red, he turned back to face his monitor.

Several months of hurt and anger that he had been forced to bottled up deep inside had finally been released. Yet, as he quietly sat, staring at the blank screen in front of him – the inner depths of his teenage soul continued to tremble.

Ellen mutely approached him and gently grasped his shoulder.

*I must not cry*, Paul mentally repeated to himself.

However, the loving touch of his mother’s fingers gently caressing him was enough to start a never-ending flow of hot, salty tears to course down both cheeks like a raging waterfall.

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“Hello? Is anybody home?” a familiar voice began to yell from the kitchen, a few minutes later.

“Oh! Isn’t this just great,” Paul said as he began to wipe his face. “It’s bad enough you had to see me cry, but now Dad is going to know about it, too.”

“Don’t worry about it, Son,” Ellen said. “Just go to the bathroom and wash your face. I’ll keep him distracted for a while.”

First giving her son a smile, she turned and walked out of the room.



## **Chapter Twenty-two - Dad's Home**

“So here’s the new man of the house,” John said, getting up from the leather couch where he had been sitting, conversing with his wife, when Paul entered the living room. “Come and give your old man a hug.”

*Do I really want to allow him to get close to me?* Paul mentally asked as countless scenes from his past rapidly flashed before him like a DVD movie stuck on fast forward. *I do love him, but...*

He then recalled how his mother told him on their way home from Daniel’s that his father supposedly had changed.

“Sure, Dad.”

John smiled. And after the two of them manly embraced, he stepped back and gave his son a once look over.

“Paul, I swear, if I didn’t know better, I’d swear you’ve grown a couple inches since the last time I saw you.”

“I seriously doubt it,” Paul said, taking a seat across from his mother’s wooden rocker. “With the way Mom works me around here, I never get a chance to do any growing.”

John chuckled, before resuming his seat on the couch.

“Now, before we get started,” Ellen interrupted. “John, wasn’t there something you wanted to share?”

Her husband nodded.

“Paul,” he said, becoming serious as he slid a few inches forward. “I know during the last few months we lived in Hollywood together, I made life extremely difficult for both you and your mother. But like I explained to your mother last Monday when I called to ask if I could visit – the day the two of you left, I experienced a major awaking. ... You see, I forgot how much both of you meant to me. And ever since then, not only have I quit drinking, I’ve also been attending Alcoholics Anonymous and have been getting Anger Management treatment.”

*Wow. Mom was right,* Paul thought, recalling the discussion he had with his mother inside of the U-Haul a few hours after they left Hollywood.

“That’s great, Dad. Does that also mean you’ll be able to move here soon? Mom knows how much I have wished we could be a family again.”

“No, not necessarily. Life is not always that simple, Son,” John said, momentarily glancing downward. “Before an option like that could even be considered, your mother and I are going to have to have a serious discussion.”

“Oh?” Paul looked first at one parent and then the other.

“Yes. And if your mother and I can reach an agreement,” John continued. “We will then have to see if there are any job openings in this area and if Seaboard Railroad would be willing to transfer me.”

“Oh?” Paul turned to gaze out the window. “You should be able to get a job around here, Dad. Every once in a while, whenever I’m in the woods, I can hear a train blowing its whistle.”

“Is that so?” John asked, tilting his head while raising an eyebrow.

“Yes, sir. And I’m sure Mom wouldn’t have a problem letting you move in. Would you, Mom?”

He then turned to face Ellen, and a vast cloud of silence instantly prevailed.

“Son,” John said, after an awkward period passed. “Wouldn’t you like to come and help me bring in my suitcase?”

“Ah. Okay, Dad.” Paul looked somewhat perplexed.

*That’s strange. Why would a strong, healthy man like my dad need help with a suitcase? ... I’d make a bet he’s doing this just to let Mom off the hook.*

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Shortly after sunrise the following morning, an outlandish roar which sounded like a super-sized lawnmower, began to reverberate from the edge of the farm’s ten-acre field. Paul, in response to this unusual disturbance, flopped over in his bed and tried his best to ignore it.

“Paul, you need to get up,” he heard an echo of his mother’s voice resound from down the hallway several minutes later when the giant lawnmower noise abruptly died.

“But Mom,” he whined from underneath his covers. “It’s only seven o’clock. Isn’t today a holiday?”

“Yes, it is a holiday,” Ellen confirmed as she stepped into her son’s bedroom. “It’s Thanksgiving, and today you’re going to learn to be thankful that we own a tractor.”

*Wait a minute! Did I just miss something here? Did Mom say I was going to learn to be thankful that we own a tractor?*

After contemplating for a moment what price he would pay if he chose to stay in bed, Paul haphazardly tossed his covers and slowly placed his feet on the cool wooden floor.

“Good morning, Son,” John said from the head of the table, upon his arrival into the kitchen. “Do you always walk around the house naked? Or, did you decide to do so this morning?”

“Naked?” Paul’s eyes immediately flashed downward toward his bare abdomen. “I’m not naked. I’ve got my pajama bottoms on.”

John looked at him, then unexpectedly dropped the half cup of coffee he had been drinking from and began to violently cough.

“Are you going to be okay, John?” Ellen asked.

“Yes. I’ll be fine,” he croaked. “A bit of coffee apparently decided to go down my windpipe.”

“You ought to be more careful while drinking that stuff,” Paul proclaimed in a serious tone. “Something like that could kill a person.”

John nodded his agreement.

After taking a second to recompose himself, John asked, “Are you also planning on wearing those PJ’s when you’re working with me on the tractor?”

“I don’t think so. Why?”

“Hmm. It’s a shame. You do look kind of sexy in them,” he said, jokingly. “In fact, I’d make a bet that if you did, you’d probably attract a least a couple of female squirrels.”

Paul’s cheeks turned at least a hundred different shades of pink, red and purple, and he leaped up from the side of the table.

“Okay! Okay! I’ll get dressed, Dad. ... Geez! You didn’t have to go off and embarrass me.” He then stormed toward his bedroom.

“Wow!” John said with his mouth gaped open. “I really didn’t mean to ...”

“You forget. He’s a teenager now, John,” Ellen interrupted. “You’re going to have to watch what you say around him. ... He’s even been sensitive around me, recently.”

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Paul re-entered the kitchen a few minutes later, this time wearing a faded red T-shirt, denim jeans, and an old pair of tennis shoes.

“Now, here’s my handsome young man,” Ellen said in an overly cheerful manner as her son walked toward the kitchen table. “Are you about ready for breakfast?”

“I guess so,” Paul answered, and turned to face his father. “Does this outfit get your approval?”

“You look fine,” John said, motioning for him to come closer. “Except for one thing.”

“What?” Paul frowned. And the instant John started to lean toward him, he instinctively jerked away and took a seat at the table.

In seeing his son’s reaction, a glimmer of hurt and sadness appeared within John’s eyes.

“Considering the past, I guess I deserve that. ... I’m sorry, Paul. I was just trying to discreetly tell you your fly is open.”

“Oh. Sorry,” Paul said with a slight blush while raising his zipper.

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“Would you like something hot for breakfast, Son?” Ellen asked. “Or a bowl of cereal?”

“Cereal will be fine, Mom.”

“I’ll tell you what,” John said, taking the last sip of his coffee before slipping out of his chair. “I’m going to get post-hole digger attached to the tractor so we can begin working just as soon as you’re done. Okay, Paul?”

“OK, Dad.” He nodded as his mother placed a bowl, spoon, and a box of Sugar Pops in front of him. “Is putting in fence posts the only thing we’re going to be doing today?”

His father, straight away, turn back in his direction and gave him a smile.

“No,” he said, placing his calloused hand around the kitchen door’s brass-colored doorknob. “This afternoon, when our stomachs has digested some of the turkey and all of the other goodies I know your mother will fix, I am going to need for you to get on the tractor so I can teach you how to plow and disc. Not to mention, you are also going to need to learn how to drive a tractor while pulling a trailer.”

“What about the mower?” Paul asked, half-grinning. “Are you going to teach me how to use that, too?”

“Yep.”

Opening the door, John unexpectedly stopped midway. “You know Son, your mother and I might make a country boy out of you, yet.”

*I surely hope not, Paul thought, as his father chuckled just before he left. Then again, maybe if I became a country boy ... Mom might let Dad move in with us, and we could become a real family.*

## Chapter Twenty-three - Thanksgiving Day

After finishing the huge spread his mother prepared for Thanksgiving dinner, the only thing Paul wanted to do was to rest on the couch and watch the Turkey Bowl on TV.

Unfortunately though, his huge bloated stomach kept distracting him. It just wouldn't stop complaining. Not to mention, the round metallic snap on the front of his jeans felt like it was trying to bore a hole through his abdomen.

"Would you like another piece of pumpkin or pecan pie, Son?" Ellen proposed from the kitchen. "We've got plenty left. Or perhaps you'd like some more homemade ice cream with my special chocolate fudge syrup."

"Thanks, Mom, but I'm so full, I'm afraid if I eat another bit I'd burst," Paul replied, over the back of the couch.

Ellen quietly walked over to the couch where her young teenage son was lying, and a heartfelt smile spread across her face.

"What? My son, who normally has a bottomless pit for a stomach, is full? Heaven forbid! We must be going to have an earthquake."

"Yes, Mom," Paul said, trying to focus on the football game he was watching. "Despite your past failed efforts, today you succeeded in cooking so much good stuff, I actually got full."

Ellen gave him a wink. "Amazing. I think I'm going to have to record this."

"Yeah. Whatever." *Mothers*

Except for the ongoing play-by-play commentary coming from the TV, a couple moments of silence swiftly passed.

"Do you know where your father is?" Ellen asked, glancing out the front door.

"He said he was going to unhook the auger from the tractor, then call me."

"Auger?" A question mark formed in Ellen's pupils and she gave Paul a puzzled look. "I didn't think you knew that word."

“I didn’t until Dad told me. But it still makes a lot more sense to me to call it a post-hole digger, since it’s what you use it for. ... I mean, why call it an auger? We’re certainly not using it to stick a bunch of ‘augers’ in the ground.”

“You should be thankful, you’re not. Otherwise, you might have to go outside every evening with a bucket full of slop and yell ‘sue-wee.’”

“What? I’d have to go outside and yell sue-wee?” Paul repeated as an eyebrow rose.

“Of course. Can’t you see?” Ellen began, crossing her arms in a display of confidence. “Augers. It’s just like hogs. And I just told you the proper way to feed them.”

Paul shook his head in disbelief.

“Mom, have you been watching that TV show ‘Green Acres’ on TV Land again?”

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A short time later, a John Deere approached the house and came to a halt in front of their living room door. Then, not long afterward, one could hear work boots pounding the wooden front steps and the screen door creaked open.

“Are you ready to go?” John asked from halfway inside the doorway.

Though he wasn’t much taller than his teenage son, John’s muscular stature could easily make someone believe he could lift the whole world with only one hand.

Paul glanced in his father’s direction and quickly slipped on his tennis shoes.

“I am now,” he said and dashed toward the door.

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“Now the hardest thing to learn,” John proceeded to instruct as the two of them approached the John Deere’s huge left rear tire, “is how to operate the clutch.”

“A clutch?” Paul took a quick glance underneath the tractor’s steering wheel and immediately noticed there were only two pedals. “All I see is a gas and brake pedal.”

“Just climb on up and I’ll show you what I’m talking about,” John said, almost chuckling.

Paul moved close to the left side of the tractor and in doing so, observed the rear wheel’s axle was about the same height as his belt.

*This can’t be right. There’s nothing here to climb up on.*

He then continued toward the other side of the tractor.

“Where are you going?” John asked as his son walked up to the right rear wheel.

“You said to climb up. I’m looking for a set of steps or something.”

“Ah, Paul,” John said, trying to conceal a smile. “Why don’t you grab the back of the seat with your hand and, with your foot on the rear axle, pull yourself up?”

“Like this?” Paul asked, following his father’s instructions.

“W-H-U-M-P!”

“Wow. That was rude. ... You know, Dad,” Paul said after he landed on the steel seat so abruptly, his buttocks began to sting. “That’s kind of rough.”

“I can imagine it was considering the way you did it,” John said, releasing a chortle. “You’re supposed to pull yourself up and slide into the seat – in one smooth motion.”

*Now he tells me.* “Perhaps after I’ve done it a few times, I might get better at it.”

“I have no doubt that you will,” John said, giving his son a wink. “You’re a smart kid and I’m proud of you.”

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For the next hour, John pressed onward with his Tractor Basics course. And contrary to what Paul initially believed, he was starting to think his turning into a farm kid might not be all that hard.

Among other things, he learned on a tractor, the clutch was on the left of the steering wheel and the brake was on the right. And instead of a gas pedal, there was a lever near the steering wheel you used to speed up or slow down.

Wiping his forehead with a red handkerchief which had a purple design along its edges, “Paul,” John said, “since you appear to have a good handle on changing gears and working the clutch ... why don’t you drive this thing to the back field? I’ll walk along beside you.”

“Why would you want to go there, Dad?” Paul asked, staring at the back of his father’s railroad cap with adoration. “There isn’t anything thing back there but an empty field.”

“That’s what I was hoping to find,” John said, before starting down the path toward the tobacco barn. “If there aren’t too many rocks, I’m hoping I can teach you how to plow and disc. ... I would like to get some winter wheat planted before going back to Hollywood.”



Upon hearing those last few words – words which vividly reminded him that unlike a “real” family, they were a separated one and his father would soon be leaving, Paul felt an invisible dagger slice into his heart and a lone tear coursed down his cheek.

“Well, aren't you coming?” John asked, watching his son linger a few feet away.

Paul wanted to say “no.” Yet, he also knew if he let himself get upset, it wouldn't change a thing, so he reached down and turned the ignition key.

The tractor's engine immediately roared to life, and soon afterward, a slight scraping-type sound resounded the moment Paul yanked attempted to yank the gearshift into first.

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“Son, you are going to need to take it easy as you cross over the stream,” John instructed, now standing near the front of the tractor. “However, if you go real slow, I believe this natural bridge-like area will be wide enough for you to cross.”

Paul looked at his father and a determined look flashed across his face. “Yes, sir.”

Not long afterward, after waiting for his father to ease over a few loose rocks large enough to break the water's, Paul reached and pulled the gas lever toward him a few notches – and hoped the speed he chose would be slow enough to allow him to safely cross.

“Now take it nice and easy,” John said, watching his son from the opposite side.

“Okay, Dad,” Paul said and released the clutch.

Soon thereafter, Paul's foot unexpectedly slipped off the bright green pedal and the tractor lurched forward.

*HIT THE BRAKE*, he mentally screamed to himself as the tractor continued its forward motion.

However, before he had a chance to slam the clutch down, the tractor listed sideways, causing his arm to hit the gas lever and his chest to strike the tractor's steering wheel.

“Dad. Help!”

“Kill the ignition,” John yelled. And almost at once, Paul groped between his legs so he could grasp the key.

However, his efforts soon proved to be fruitless. The moment the tractor tilt roughly forty-five degrees, his body raised off the seat and the engine abruptly died.

*Oh, man. What have I done?* Paul thought as he gazed at the rushing water below. *Dad's gonna kill me.*

Feeling a very familiar fear from the past course throughout his body like a collection of octopus's tentacles, he slowly raised his head. "I'm sorry, Dad. I didn't mean to ..."

John immediately stuck his hand out in a distinct "Stop" position.

"I know, you didn't," he said, using a tone of voice so calm it completely caught his son off guard. "Let's deal with the important things first. Are you hurt?"

Paul remained silent and his father jumped into the stream and climbed over the tractor's huge tire.

"Answer me, Son," John commanded, his deep concern clearly echoing in his voice. "Are you all right?"

Paul braced his hand against the steering wheel and slowly pushed himself back toward the tractor's seat. "I think so. However, I'm just a bit confused."

"Confused?" John said, showing his puzzlement. "What are you confused about, Son?"

"You're not yelling at me. ... Back in Hollywood, anytime I messed up or you thought I had messed up, you'd always yell at me and call me all kinds of stuff."

John's gazed into his son's face.

"I know," he eventually said. "That's how I used to be and I'm sorry. But please try to believe me Paul when I tell you those days are gone. ... From now on whenever you think about me, I'd appreciate it if you'd see me as the new father I'm trying to be. One, who not only loves you, but is also understanding and will always try to support you."

Almost at once, Paul's lips trembled and his eyes began to water – even though he worked hard to prevent himself from crying.

"Do you actually mean it, Dad? Are you saying that not only have you quit drinking, but you're really going to become the type of father I always wanted?"

John slowly nodded yes. "That's what I've been trying to tell you ever since I've arrived."

Holding each other momentarily in a physically awkward embrace, the two of them carefully climbed down the side of the tractor and began walking side by side ... father and son ... up the wooded path which would lead them toward their wood frame home.

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“What’s so dang funny?” Ellen asked, the minute Paul and his father barged through the kitchen door, laughing, hooping, and hollering.

“Well,” Paul stammered.

“For the first time in his life, Paul actually drove a tractor,” John proudly announced.

“That’s great,” Ellen said, smiling as she headed for the fridge. “Let me break out our special bubbly grape juice.”

Then suddenly, she came to a halt.

“Aw, John. How come I didn’t hear the John Deere when he drove up?”

At first, Paul and his father only stared at each other and then both burst out laughing.

“It’s kind of parked, a distance away from here,” Paul replied.

Ellen gave him a questioning look. “I don’t understand.”

“The tractor is sort of getting washed right now.”

“The tractor’s getting washed?” Ellen said, and a ghastly look swiftly appeared. “What did you do, Son?”

“Nothing much. Things happened and ... Well. At least one of the back tires is getting a thorough washing.”

Ellen turned and proceeded to stare at her husband.

“So exactly what happened, John?”

As Paul listened to his father’s lengthy explanation, their telephone rang.

“Pontiac Data Control. Our bits don’t byte,” he said, picking up the receiver.

“Hi, Paul,” Daniel said. “What are you up to?”

“Just listening to my Dad explain to Mom what I did with the tractor.”

“Oh? What did you do?”

“Not much. I just found a new way to wash it.”

“That doesn’t sound too exciting.”

“It wasn’t. But Dad did say that we’re going to have to use his truck to get it free.”

“Get it free?” Daniel repeated. “Where is your tractor?”

“Would you believe, it’s in the middle of one of our streams?”

“Oh?” Daniel paused to contemplate what Paul just said. “What in the devil is it doing there?”

“I accidentally drove it there.”

“I see,” Daniel said. “How about doing me the favor of reminding me not to ride with you whenever you get your driver’s license? Okay?”

“Very funny, Daniel. So what did you call about?”

“Have you been on Titan Industries website recently?”

“You know I haven’t, Daniel,” Paul said with a frown. “Have you forgotten, We still can’t connect to the Internet?”

“Oh. That’s right. I keep forgetting you’re still living in a cave from the Stone Age. Have you seen any large, carnivorous dinosaurs recently?”

“Ha-ha,” Paul sarcastically answered. “So, what’s so important on Titan Industries website? Did they change the contest date?”

“No. However, they just officially announced they’re about to relocate their gaming division.”

“So? Why should I care?”

“Three of the places they’re considering moving to are Charlotte, Greensboro, and the Research Triangle.”

“Where else are they thinking about relocating to?”

“Boulder, Colorado, and Richmond, Virginia.”

“So in other words, they haven’t made a final decision yet.”

“That’s correct. But with three of the five sites nearby, they’re bound to come to North Carolina.”

“I wouldn’t be too sure about that,” Paul said before remembering his friend was calling from his aunt’s house in Wilmington. “By the way, how are things at the beach?”

“It’s the same old thing – sand, sun and salt water. I can’t wait ‘til I get home to my own computer.”

“I thought you said you liked your father’s laptop.”

“I do. But since I upgraded my desktop, it’s a lot more powerful. Not to mention, it has a lot more software on it. So how has your holiday been going since your dad’s there?”

“You wouldn’t believe it,” Paul said, his voice revealing his excitement. “He’s nowhere near the way he used to be. He’s really cool now.”

“Really? I’m glad to hear it.”

“Thanks. Would you like to know what’s even better?”

“Sure. What’s that?”

“I heard Mom say if things kept going the way they have since he’s arrived, it may not be long before Dad will be living with us – permanently.”

“That’s great!”

“You got that right. I can’t wait until we’re all a real family again.”

An unexpected silence then unexpectedly prevailed over the phone line.

“Gee, Paul,” Daniel said, trying to suppress a giggle. “I didn’t know I was a part of your family.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well,” Daniel resumed. “You just said, you can’t wait until we’re ALL a real family.”

Paul looked up and realized what his friend was getting at. “Very funny, Daniel. More than twenty thousand comedians are currently unemployed and you decide to become one.”

“W-h-a-t?”

“Never mind. Mom’s motioning for me to get off the phone. So I guess I better be going.”

“Okay. You will be at school, Monday. Right?”

“I should. Unless some freak snowstorm shows up.”

“I doubt if that happens. See you, then.”

“You got it, Geekus Emeritus,” Paul said, humorously picking at him. “Later.”

As he hung up the phone, he could still hear Daniel’s voice yelling.

“What do you mean, Geekus Emeritus? I’m not a . . .”

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After John described to his wife everything that had happened, Paul thought his mother was going to have a heart attack.

She ranted and raved for several minutes about how the tractor could have been ruined. And, not only that, since it was her son’s first time driving that thing, he shouldn’t have been allowed to cross the stream – along with a few other things.

In watching his father’s reaction while all of this was transpiring, Paul could tell that everything his mother was yelling was literally going inside one ear and right out the other.

Later on, when Ellen finally wore herself down, John gave his son a small nod and said, “Paul. Are you about ready to go?”

“Go, where?” Ellen asked in a harsh tone.

“Well. Since you’re so upset about the tractor,” John said. “I figured Paul and I had better get ourselves back to the stream to get it out.”

Ellen immediately gave her husband a deadpan stare and placed her hands on the sides of her hips. “And how exactly are you planning to do that?”

John turned and gazed out the kitchen window, toward his truck.

“That’s not going to be a problem. With the chains I got in the back, I’ll move my truck down to the stream and pull it out.”

“I see,” Ellen said. “And I suppose you think our son will be able to help you, without turning the dang thing over and killing himself?”

Paul walked over to where his father was standing.

“I won’t get myself killed, Mom,” he said, trying hard to sound confident. “After we get it sitting upright again, I’m pretty sure all I’m going to need to do after Dad tightens the chains, is put the tractor in reverse and give it a little gas.”

Ellen stared directly into her son’s brown eyes.

“And what exactly are you going to do if it starts to turn over while you’re trying to get the tractor upright?”

“You don’t have to worry about that,” Paul said, shaking his head a couple times. “Dad would never let anything like that happen.”

“Yeah, right. ... John. Don’t you think it might be better if I changed clothes and helped you with that thing? I know Paul’s eager to help, but he doesn’t have any experience.”

“True,” John agreed, gently placing his arm around his wife’s waist. “However, dear, you haven’t been on a tractor for at least fifteen years, and the only way Paul is going to learn how to get out of jams like this is by experience. ... So what better time is there for him to learn something than right now?”

Ellen released a worried sigh.

“I guess you’re right. I’m just troubled that he could easily end up getting seriously hurt. You know, things haven’t been easy these past few months with me trying to be a single parent in a totally new environment.”

“I know,” John said, before giving his wife an affectionate kiss.

And as Paul watched his parents embrace, he began to feel a warm, kind of mushy feeling totally engulfed his very soul.

*Maybe, Mom w-i-l-l let Dad move back in with us, he thought. Wow! That would truly make this one Happy Thanksgiving. Just imagine if we all ended up with us becoming a real family again someday.*

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Time passed quickly with Paul learning how to use the tractor and all its equipment, helping his father put in the fence his mother wanted, and planting winter wheat in both fields located at the back of their property. And before he realized it, Sunday arrived and his father was going to have to return to Hollywood.

“So,” Ellen said, handing her husband a full thermos of steaming hot coffee from the kitchen counter. “Your truck’s all packed and you should be ready to go.”

“I am,” John said, carefully taking the thermos from her hand.

He then stopped for a moment to glance at the floor and then toward the ceiling.

“...but you know, dear. I’m going to miss being around you two.”

“I know,” Ellen said with a short nod. “We’re both going to miss you, too. We are so very proud of you.”

John’s cheeks instantly blushed.

“Mom,” Paul said, gazing at his mother from inside the dining room doorway. “When can Dad come back?”

“When would you like him to come back?”

Paul gazed at his father, before turning back to face his mother.

“I wish he didn’t have to go. The past few days he’s been here has been like a fantasy come true. He’s now the father I’ve always dreamed he would be.”

“You hear that, John? Paul’s given you one mighty high recommendation.”

“That he did,” John said, showing an ear-to-ear grin. “And I’m glad that not only has he enjoyed the time we’ve had together this holiday, he’s also willing to give me a second chance. ... But what about you? You still haven’t told me anything yet.”

“John.” Ellen hesitated. “To be honest, I’m worried. I’ll admit that everything you’ve been doing these past few months to improve yourself has been true – and ever since you’ve been here, you’ve proven to us you can be the man, the father, and the husband I used to know and love years ago. I literally couldn’t have asked for any better. ... However, I do have a few questions I need to be answered.”

“What’s that?”

“John. If I let you move in with us, will you promise you’ll attend the local AA meetings on a regular basis? And would you also promise me you’ll remain totally sober from here on out – no matter how good or how difficult things may become?”

Paul’s father nodded yes.

“I also am aware of the psychological assistance you’ve recently been getting,” Ellen added. “Therefore, are you willing to continue your therapy with a doctor here?”

John looked first at his wife and then toward his son.

“Yes, Ellen. If you two would be willing to give me a second chance, not only would I do everything I’ve been doing in Hollywood. I would be willing do anything else that possibility could benefit our family.”

“Do you mean like having all of us attend family counseling?”



“Yes. My therapist back in Hollywood showed me how my disease has not only hurt me, but both of you as well. That’s why he recommended it. ... The question is, would everyone be willing to go?”

“I’m not too sure if I really need something like that,” Paul abruptly interjected. “You can ask Mom. I’m doing okay.”

Ellen gave her son a brief smile. “I’m afraid we’re going to have to discuss this family counseling thing some more when you get back, John. Okay?”

John nodded his agreement. However, Paul got the impression his mother was going to discuss the topic with him at some later time. But for the moment, she wanted to change the subject.

“So, Mom, are you going to let Dad come to stay with us?”

Ellen smiled. “I believe I just said that. Didn’t I?”

“W-h-o-o-p-i-e,” Paul hollered, and ran toward his father and gave him a huge bear hug. “You hear that, Dad? Mom’s going to let us become a real family again! I’m so happy! I can’t wait to tell Daniel.”

After repeatedly jumping up and down numerous times, Paul soon discovered he needed to catch his breath.

“So how soon can you move here, Dad?”

“I don’t know, Son,” John said, squeezing his son tightly. “I’ll have to talk with my boss and ...”

Ellen quickly interrupted when she saw her son step backward.

“Excuse me, John. But as soon as you called, asking for permission to visit, I checked out your story with both your therapist and your A.A. sponsor. ... However, what I didn’t tell you is, I also contacted the Seaboard Railroad office here in Greensboro and they told me not only were they interested in having you transfer here, they’d also be willing to offer you a raise. ... Therefore, the only thing left to do is for me to contact them Monday morning and for them to get in touch with your boss in Hollywood. ... According to Mr. Taylor, if your boss doesn’t have any qualms, the railroad would also be willing to purchase our old house in Florida and you should be ready to relocate here by the end of the week.”

John turned and stared at his wife – and his mouth formed a large “O”.

“Unbelievable. So you somehow knew how things were going to work out and went ahead and got everything taken care of without saying a word to the rest of us? ... What am I going to do with you, woman?”

Ellen gave her husband a sexy wink.

“You could give me a kiss, big boy.”

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Verifying, once again, that her husband had enough coffee and food to last the eighteen hours of non-stop driving ahead of him if he wanted to make it back to Hollywood in time to shower and shave before heading off to work, Ellen walked her husband back out to his truck.

“Dad. Are you going to bring Half Pint with you when you come back?” Paul asked, now standing next to his mother.

“Let me ask you this first?” John said with a crooked smile. “Now that the pasture is ready, do you think you can put those last finishing touches on the barn we talked about – before next weekend?”

Paul’s lips formed an ear-to-ear grin. “I sure can, Dad.”

“Well. If that’s so. Then I believe you’re going to have one very pregnant horse arriving soon.”

“Pregnant?” Paul wondered, *What in the world is Dad talking about.* “Dad. We are talking about Half Pint, and not some other horse – aren’t we?”

“I am talking about Half Pint,” John confirmed. “I knew how much you liked her. So, I thought you’d like to have a colt from her.”

“I had never thought about that. Gee. Thanks, Dad.”

“There is one last thing I need to ask you before I leave, Son,” John added as a serious expression flashed across his face.

“What’s that, Dad?”

“What do you think about possibly getting a younger brother?”

Paul glanced skyward, in reply. “I don’t know. I have never considered it. I guess it would be okay. Why?”

John paused.

“I just thought I’d ask,” he replied as he opened the driver’s side door. “Well, folks. As much as I hate to say this, I’ve definitely got to be going.” He then turned to face his son and opened both arms.

Paul, in reply, quickly came closer. And after manly kissing each other on the cheek, they shared a tight embrace.

“I love you, Son,” John said, just above a whisper. “Now you take good care of your mother until I get back, you hear?”

“I will, Dad,” Paul replied in a quivering voice. “Goodbye, Dad. ... You know, I love you too.”

Paul slowly stepped back a foot or two and watched as his parents also kiss and hold each other close.

“Please drive safely, John,” Ellen instructed. “Even if it means you arrive late.”

“I will,” John said, giving her a smile.

“Good. And don’t forget. If you get too tired, I want you to stop at a motel and get some sleep. ... Arriving there late is far better than not arriving at all.”

John nodded and unexpectedly turned to face his son.

“Is this what you meant when you said your mother’s been like an old hen around you?”

Paul grinned, in reply. “I said like a hen, Dad. Not like an old hen. Remember, I still have to stay with her.”

“All right you two,” Ellen interrupted, pursing her lips. “You both know I work hard trying to take care of you two boys.”

“Boys?” Paul turned to face his father.

“Yes, boys,” Ellen repeated. “You men always think you’re all grown up just because your body is. However, what you don’t realize is, on the inside, you’ll always be a boy.”

“Women,” John said, giving his son a wink. “What do they know?”

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After everyone said their goodbyes one last time, Paul stayed by his mother’s side, and the two of them watched the trail of dust behind his father’s truck become continually thinner – until it eventually disappeared.

“Mom,” Paul said as they slowly walked toward the house. “Do you think this week will pass quickly?”

“I think so,” Ellen replied, looking down at him. “Why?”

Paul took hold of the knob and opened the kitchen door. “I already miss Dad.”

Ellen immediately paused. “It’s funny you would say that, Son. I miss him, too.”

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Paul worked with his mother in the barn after supper until sunset. Afterward, he packed his school supplies, took a shower, and spent a quiet evening with her in the living room watching TV until nine PM arrived.

“Paul,” Ellen said. “Tomorrow’s a school day. You’d better be heading for bed if you’re going to do well.”

“Yes ma’am.”

*Will Mom ever let me grow up?*

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The instant Paul woke up the next morning, he didn’t know why, but he got the sensation like something wasn’t right.

According to his clock, the time was eight o’clock.

*This is weird. Not only has Mom not woken me up, but I’m already late for homeroom class. What’s going on here?*

He quickly stopped by the bathroom, and then proceeded toward the kitchen.

*Uh, oh. This isn’t good.*

Ellen was sitting at the table, tightly clutching her coffee cup in a most unusual fashion. And he couldn’t help but notice that her eyes were blood-shot red, as if she had been crying.

Right away, he rushed to where she sat and placed his arms around her.

“What’s wrong, Mom?” he asked, while not able to imagine what could have caused her to get this upset.

Ellen slowly set her coffee cup on top of the table, and slowly rose to her feet.

“I don’t know how to tell you this, Paul. And I’m afraid there’s not an easy way to do it.”

“Tell me what?” Paul asked, as his skin began to prickle.

“Son,” Ellen said as tears resumed coursing down her crimson cheeks like a never-ending waterfall. “I hate to tell you this, but ... your father’s dead.”

Paul instantly paled and he gasped.

“No! It can’t be,” he screamed, swiftly tearing himself out of the loving arms trying to hold him close. “Dad can’t be dead!”

“I’m afraid he is, Son. I got a call from the Hollywood Police Department a couple of hours ago. Your father was in an auto accident.”

Standing in total silence, Paul felt like his world instantly ended. Everything he had ever loved or cared about – suddenly vanished. Now – deep within his heart where love, warmth, and happiness once lived, nothing resided – except the futile throbbing of extreme sorrow and emptiness.

“Was he drinking?” Paul eventually asked.

“No, Son,” Ellen answered with a sigh. “And the accident wasn’t even your father’s fault.”

“So how did it happen?” Paul queried, futilely trying to hold back his tears.

“Do you remember where the Florida Turnpike exits for Hollywood Blvd.?”

“Yes.” Paul nodded.

“Well. According to the officer who called. Shortly after your Dad paid the toll fee, he reached the red light at the intersection, and since it was green, started to turn left.”

“And?” Paul impatiently interrupted.

“That’s when it happened. A drunken young man, who was speeding home after an all-night party, didn’t stop for the red light. He slammed into your father’s pickup, directly into the driver’s side door.”

“It can’t be,” Paul insisted, as tears resumed gushing down his reddened cheeks. “We had plans. We were going to be a real family again.”

“I know.” Ellen wrapped her arms around him and Paul rested his head on her shoulder.

“It’s just not fair,” he repeated, multiple times. “I’m too young not to have a father.”

“You’re right,” Ellen sadly agreed, as she softly patted her son’s back. “And I’m too young to be a widow.”

## **Chapter Twenty-four - Feelings**

It had been 24 hours since Paul learned of his father's passing. Yet, the pain of losing him felt as sharp as ever.

Since Ellen was fully aware of the depth of anguish her son was experiencing, even though today was Tuesday, a normal school day, she encouraged him to stay home.

However, there was a major problem with this recommendation – One) everything on their twenty-seven-acre farm carried strong memories of the loving and caring father his dad recently become and Two) the bright and wonderful future they were about to share. Now, it was doomed to remain a fantasy.

Thus, hoping at school he would be to obtain a few hours of mental peace, Paul got dressed and ran to meet Bus 39 the moment it pulled into their driveway.

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“Paul. You're back,” Daniel yelled, seeing his friend entering the first-floor hallway. “I didn't think you'd return until Wednesday or Thursday – if at all this week.”

Paul gave his younger friend a brief glance, then deliberately choosing to ignore him continued walking toward his locker as if the boy didn't exist.

“Paul. Are you okay?” Daniel asked after following him halfway down the hallway.

Paul shook his head, no. “Daniel, would you please go away for a while. I'm not really in the mood to talk.”

“But I just wanted to tell you that I'm sorry about your dad,” Daniel said as the two made a quick turn so they could climb the stairs leading up to the second floor. “I can imagine what you're feeling.”

Paul's internal anger over his father's death instantly erupted, and he stopped in his tracks.

“How can you even begin to say such a thing, Daniel?” he retorted so loud, his voice reverberated up and down the stairwell. “There is no possible way you can know what I'm feeling. Both of your parents are still alive. .... Now, please. Get your geekish ass away from me. I need some time alone. Okay?”

Daniel's mouth instantaneously flew wide open, and he just stood and stared at his friend.

“Okay, Paul. If that’s what you really want. Sure. But you didn’t have to scream at me. I was just trying to ...”

“I know. I’m sorry, Daniel,” Paul said, in realizing he just verbally attacked the closest friend he had in North Carolina. “I didn’t mean to yell. I’m just upset about my dad.”

He then paused.

“How about walking with me? I need to stop by my locker before the bell rings.”

For a second Daniel didn’t move, and instead, gazed at his friend as if in contemplation if he really should.

“OK,” he eventually said, and the two of them resumed heading down the hallway.

As they traveled up the stairwell toward his locker, Paul appeared to be in deep thought, as if there was something he was wanting to say, but was having trouble translating his feelings into spoken words.

When they reached his locker, “Listen, Daniel,” he said. “I know what I did a moment ago wasn’t right and I want to say I’m sorry.”

“You are?” Daniel’s lips rapidly parted and puzzlement began to reflect in his eyes.

“Yes, I am.” Paul then opened his locker and took out the books he was going to need for his first three classes.

“Does that mean you really don’t view me as a geek?”

“No. I’m not going to say that,” Paul answered, shutting the metallic gray door. “Because there’s absolutely no doubt, you are a geek. However, with as much programming as I do, I’m probably one too.”

Daniel swiftly wrapped his arms around his friend’s waist and gave his friend a strong squeeze.

“I love you, Paul.”

Paul replied, by shaking his head and pulling a step away.

“Daniel!” he said, using a firm voice. “Didn’t I tell you never to do that in public? People will see it and think we’re gay or something.”

A contrite look precipitously washed across Daniel’s face. “I’m sorry, Paul. I keep forgetting. You do know I’m not gay, don’t you?”

“Yes. I know you’re not gay.” Paul sighed. “You’re just one of those emotional, touchy-feely kind of people. But please. Try not to let it happen again. Okay?”

“Okay.”

Minutes later when they approached the door to Ms. Bass’s classroom, Daniel asked, “Will I be seeing you later on this morning?”

“Of course, you’re going to see me this morning.” Paul said as he flinched in disbelief that Daniel would ask him that. “Have you forgotten we’re in the same second and fourth-period classes?”

Both corners of Daniel’s mouth turned upwards. “That’s right. I guess I’ll see you then. . . . I have told you that you’re my hero, haven’t I?”

“Yes, Daniel,” Paul said, sighing once again before he entered Ms. Bass’ homeroom.

*What am I doing to do with this kid? He’s two years younger than I am and has an I.Q. of 195. Yet, in many ways, acts just like a kid who might be seven or eight. In fact, sometimes even Allen acts older – and he’s only four. I just don’t get it.*

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Time passed quickly that week for Paul and before long, Friday arrived. However, instead of it being a Friday evening full of fun and relaxation, this one was going to be sober.

That morning, Ellen asked him to join her for his father’s wake that evening at Gibsonville’s one and only funeral home - and at first, he didn’t want to go.

*Had not this week been difficult enough without my having to face the empty shell of the man who was going to be my loving father – at least until time permitted me to become an adult?*

However, after dwelling on the thought, his eyes moistened and he recalled how difficult this week had also been for his mother as well. Even though she smiled each day and acted as if she was strong, there were subtle signs of the immense suffering.

Therefore, figuring she probably could use the emotional support, he agreed to go.

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Dressed in a black suit, white shirt, and maroon colored tie, Paul was quietly stood next to his mother inside the “viewing” room at the funeral home waiting for the wake to begin, when the mortician unexpectedly approached them.



“Would you like to have one last private moment with your husband, before we start letting the guests inside?”

“Guests?” Ellen repeated, as if temporarily confused.

“Yes,” the mortician said in an assuring voice, while pointing to the dozens of wreaths and other floral displays surrounding both sides of her husband’s gold trimmed, onyx casket. “There must be at least a hundred people waiting outside. Mr. Pontiac must have been a very popular person.”

*How ironic, Paul thought. This guy thinks my dad was popular. However, there’s probably not a single guest here who knew him. ... Furthermore, if they knew the type of father and husband he had been before we left Florida, they probably would not have wanted anything to do with him.*

He then stopped to study the reflection on the top of his father’s closed casket and a lump developed in his throat, as a mixture of grief and anger began to brew inside.

*I just wish I could understand. Why? ... Why, when my dad finally became the type of father I always wanted, did he have to get killed?*

Paul’s lips quivered and a tear silently began to course down his cheek.

*I hope the guy who murdered my dad burns in Hell!*

A few minutes later the mortician gently opened the casket, and instantly, Ellen began to intensely gaze at her husband’s body as though she was required to do one last inspection.

“He looks so natural. It’s just as if he were lying there sleeping.”

“Why thank you,” the mortician said. “I tried to do the best I could, Ellen. His injuries were so extensive, I was concerned I might not be able to provide the caliber of workmanship your husband certainly deserved.” He then turned in the direction of the viewing room’s entranceway. “Now, if you would please excuse me.”

Ellen nodded as if she understood the words left unspoken.

Moving closer to his mother’s side, Paul watched as his mother gave her husband, his father, one last kiss. However, the moment her lips touched his, something compelled him to look away.

“Don’t you think your father looks good?” Ellen asked, glancing at him.

Not wanting to express his true feelings, he mutely focused on the area below his feet and began to analyze the unusual pattern in the dark, low-pile carpet.

“Paul. Didn’t you hear me?” Ellen said, now using a more resolute tone. “I asked you about your father’s appearance.”

Paul knew this wasn’t the time to express what he was really feeling, however...

“What do you want me to say, Mom? Does Dad look good? Absolutely not! He looks dead. There’s nothing natural about his appearance at all. ... And by the way, where’s Jack? You’d think with all that has happened, he would at least make one of his grandiose appearances.”

“I’m right here, little brother,” Jack said as he slid up from behind.

Paul quickly swiveled around to face him. “And where were you earlier this week when Mom really needed you?”

“Not that it’s any business of yours or you’d really care,” Jack began. “But I’ve been in Hollywood taking care of the necessary arrangements. You know, things like transporting the body, etc.”

“Oh,” Paul said with a cringe.

*Let’s see, how do those instructions go? Lift foot. Insert in mouth. Swallow all the way to the kneecap.*

“I’m sorry, Jack. I didn’t know.”

Jack placed his arm across his younger brother’s shoulders.

“You know, Paul. Someday you’re going to figure out, I’m not half as bad a person as you sometimes make me out to be.”

Doubting that and not wanting to continue this discussion, Paul thought it would be best if he just stood there and kept silent.

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The following Sunday, Ellen was concerned. The local TV stations were calling for a winter storm to arrive that afternoon and she hoped it would hold off at least long enough for her husband’s burial to proceed as scheduled.

They did, and while standing by his father’s casket just minutes before they lowered his earthly body to where it would forever reside - trapped within a solid concrete vault and surrounded by clay and mindless earthworms, Paul tried to remain calm as adults and countless students (some he had never previously spoken to) came up to shake his hand and express their sympathies.

The service, once it began, was full of clichés like ashes-to-ashes and dust-to-dust and shortly afterward, having already given their final condolences, the majority in attendance returned to their

cars and started on their way home or wherever they might have been going – perhaps a bar, or maybe even to go shopping.

In a way, Paul was glad to finally be alone, even though in reality, he wasn't totally alone. His mother, Jack and his wife, the preacher, and some of the staff from Gibsonville School were still there, conversing in quiet tones, under a green canvas canopy the funeral home provided earlier.

Before the service started, Paul asked his brother about Allen and was told they left him with a babysitter.

*This whole service was a waste, he started to think. Except for the few comments Mom gave, what everyone else said was nothing but words spoken from a hypocrite. These people didn't know my dad. So how dare they get up and tell everyone how good a man he was? Who were they trying to impress, the other people of the community?*

*Even Jack spoke about how good a man Dad was. To use an old expression granddad would say, "What a bunch of horse hockey." Jack didn't even see him the day he arrived. The minute Jack unhooked the trailer full of fence posts, he hightailed it back home so quickly that he didn't even stop by the house to say "Hi" or "Goodbye" to Mom. Therefore, he never got to know the father I loved and adored.*

Stopping to glance skyward toward a bright ray of light shining between a couple of approaching dark winter storm clouds, Paul sighed.

*Yet, does it really matter now? The bottom line is, Dad's gone. And no matter how much I love him, I can never have him back as long as I live on this cold, cruel planet.*

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Now lost in an eternal sea of grief, Paul quietly stood and stared at his father's floral covered casket, and after an undetermined amount of time passed, heard a set of familiar footsteps behind him.

Seconds later, they came to a halt directly by his side.

"Are you going to be okay, Paul?" Cathy asked, gently enveloping his hand with hers.

"I guess so," Paul said, shrugging his shoulders. It's just that right now everything seems so meaningless."

"I'm sure it does," Cathy said with a small, encouraging smile while brushing a newly fallen snowflake from her face. "This must have been especially hard since it's so close to Christmas."

“Yes. You’re right, Cathy. It does make it worse. But, how would you know what it’s like to lose a parent? You still have both of yours.”

Cathy looked at him and the two of them visually connected, and soon afterward, a knowing smile appeared as her blue eyes sparkled.

“Believe me, Paul. I know exactly what you’re going through. ... It was only a few years ago I had to go through the same thing.”

Paul’s mouth abruptly flew open. “You did?”

Cathy nodded. “Yes. The mom I have now is actually my stepmother.”

“Really? I had no idea.”

“It’s true,” Cathy said, clutching his hand. “She used to be one of my parents’ church friends. However, about a year after my mother died, the two of them started dating and eventually decided to get married.”

“Didn’t you resent having someone try to replace your mother?”

“At first, I did,” Cathy said with a nod. “But after she explained to me that she couldn’t even begin to be the person my mother was, we’ve gotten along really well.”

Paul let out a whistle. “Wow! I’m not sure if I could ever accept another dad in my life.”

## **Chapter Twenty-five - New Beginnings**

Over three weeks passed since his father's funeral, yet, inside his teenage soul, the pain of losing his father still lingered.

Paul wanted to be alone. No. He needed to be alone. Thus, after letting the screen door in the kitchen loudly slam shut behind him, he took off for the woods.

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Several minutes later, after mindlessly wandering throughout the back fifteen acres of his mother's farm, he found himself sitting against the base of an old maple tree on a long miniature island in the middle of one of their streams.

There, Paul closed his eyes and began to reminisce about the last few days he was able to spend with his Dad.

Unfortunately though, despite how comforting this activity might have been, his moment of peace was not going to last. Four-legged footsteps were approaching, and seconds later, something moist began to lick his cheek.

"Oh. It's you, Midnight," Paul said, opening his eyes while leaning to hug his furry friend's neck. "How long have you been here?"

"Woof. Woof," Midnight replied and began to alternate between staring directly into his master's face and turning toward the woods.

Paul got the distinct impression Midnight was trying to tell him something like, "Hey stupid, isn't it about time you got your bony rear end off the cold, hard ground?"

"You're probably right," Paul, pulling himself to his feet. "Reminiscing about the past isn't going to change one dang thing."

Midnight smiled and wagged his tail side-to-side in reply.

While Paul took a sec to brush himself off before trekking back toward the house, a good idea suddenly flashed.

*Hey. Since I'm so close to the neighbor's property and I don't have anything better to do, why don't I check out the new house our unknown neighbor is building. ... Yeah. I think I'll just do that.*

It didn't take long to reach the edge of his neighbor's front field and after arriving there, the sight of the freshly built, colonial-style home standing before him caused Paul's mouth to gape open.

"Can you believe this? This place is almost finished," he said to Midnight. "Whoever is building it must be using at least two or three construction crews."

"Woof. ... Woof. Woof."

"Okay, Boy. We'll move in closer."

To no one's surprise, when he approached the front door and tried to open it, he discovered it was securely locked. However, not wanting his curiosity to be denied, Paul began to look through some of the windows.

In the kitchen, he detected someone installed a collection of high tech appliances he previously read about in "Popular Mechanics." Not only could they talk to each other through a wireless network server, they could be accessed via the Internet.

"Wow. Look at this," Paul said to Midnight, who was now standing directly below the kitchen window. "I sure wish Mom had something like this in our kitchen. Then I could be working in my bedroom and use my computer to see if there was something good to snack on."

Upon moving to a dining room window, he discovered the room had a tongue-in-groove wooden floor. And above it, its ceiling held a medium size, gold-colored chandelier with what appeared to be a collection of crystal teardrops.

However, what really caught Paul's eye was the natural stone fireplace in the living room. With matching cedar-colored, floor-to-ceiling bookcases on each side, it looked quite elegant.

After passing the multi-car garage, Paul proceeded to peer inside the bedrooms. Two of them were pretty much the same size he was used to. However, the master bedroom was much larger. There was space not only for a king size bed and some furniture, but also enough for an adjoining bathroom with a matched set of His and Her doors.

Behind the house, he found a tennis court – which was something he considered to be halfway understandable. But Paul could not even begin to imagine why anyone would want a Jacuzzi/swimming pool combination in North Carolina – unless it was heated.

*At least they had enough sense to have it enclosed.*

He then diverted his attention toward the back of the property, where shortly after his arrival in North Carolina, he tried to shoot a chicken hawk. There, not only had someone spent a small fortune fencing in a huge multi-acre pasture, but to his surprise, they also set up a corral like the one at the Sawgrass Horse Ranch.

“Well, Midnight,” Paul said, trying to catch his breath after all the running around he was doing. “Have you seen anything interesting?”

Midnight let out a single bark and dashed toward the side of the barn just like a jackrabbit with his tail on fire.

“Where are you going?” Paul yelled, running behind him.

When he finally caught up, Midnight was busy marking a small maple tree as his territory.

As he waited for his four-legged friend to finish, Paul began to study the building’s red, wooden sides. That’s when he noticed a small shiny object attached near its roof, which looked quite familiar.

“Well, I’ll be dang. You see that, Midnight,” Paul said in awe. “Somebody has installed a Wi-Fi extender.”

Midnight ignored him and began to run towards the woods. However, not long afterward, he stopped and let out a loud, “Woof.”

“Whoa. I see it, too,” Paul said. “There’s no doubt these people must be well to do since they can afford a satellite dish built for both 3-D HD TV and high-speed Internet.”

He then turned to gaze toward the western horizon. And after doing so, he noticed the sun’s position.

*Hmm. It must be about time for ...*

“Paul.” Ellen’s voice called from a distance. “You need to come home. It’s supper time.”

“You hear that?” Paul said, turning to face his shaggy friend. “We need to get going.”

Midnight gave him a mouth-open eager look and began to wildly wag his long black tail.

“Oh, no. There is absolutely no way I’m going to race you all the way back to the house in this cold weather.”

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When the two of them reached the end of his neighbor's new cement driveway, Paul noticed something several feet above him brightly reflecting the afternoon sun rays.

“Look Midnight,” he said, pointing near the top of one of the telephone poles. “These folks must have really wanted to make sure they could use their computer anywhere on their property. That’s another Wi-Fi extender.”

Minutes later, Paul entered the doorway of his home.

“Hi, Mom. I’m home,” he said, pulling out a chair before taking a seat at the kitchen table.

Ellen gave her son a smile and continued to stir a pot of sauerkraut on the stove.

“I hope you’re hungry. You haven’t eaten much during the past few weeks so I decided to fix your favorite – BBQ beef ribs with sauerkraut on the side.”

“Thanks for cooking it for me, Mom,” Paul politely replied. “But to be honest, I’m still not very hungry.”

Ellen ignored him and after taking a couple of plates out of the kitchen cabinet, she set one down in front of him.

“You need to eat,” she said in a serious tone. “You have lost so much weight these past few weeks, Son, I can see every rib in your chest. I’m getting worried about you.”

“You don’t need to, Mom. I’ll be okay,” Paul replied, giving her a small smile. “By the way, have you looked closely at the garage you had built?”

Ellen took a seat, after setting everything she had cooked in the center of the table. “No, not recently. Is there anything wrong?”

“W-e-l-l.” Paul paused. “Let me ask you this. Did you tell the contractor to install a Wi-Fi extender near the roof of our new garage?”

Ellen took a solid look at him, as if perplexed. “A what?”

“A wireless network range extender.”

“I’m sorry, Son, I have no idea what you’re talking about. ... Let’s pick this up after we have the meal’s blessing.”

“Okay.”



Seconds after he heard his mother say “Amen,” Paul placed a lonely rib in the middle of his plate and hoped by eating at least one, it would make her happy.

“You know, Mom,” he said while grabbing his knife. “I think I like the prayer Granddad used to say a lot better.”

Ellen looked at him and lowered her cup of coffee. “And which one was that?”

“The one that goes – Pass the bread. Pass the meat. Oh my Lord, watch us eat.”

Ellen smiled, before releasing a small chuckle.

“Oh, yes. I remember when your grandfather came up with that. He is definitely some character.”

Paul grinned in reply and began to nibble on his food.

“Talking about Granddad,” he said, moments later. “Why didn’t he show up for Dad’s funeral?”

Ellen gasped and set her fork and knife down.

“Oh, my word,” she said. “With all that was going on involving your father, I plumb forgot to tell you.”

Paul lowered his glass of ice tea. “Don’t tell me he’s died, too.”

“Oh. No. No. No,” Ellen said. “It’s not that bad. Your grandfather’s in the hospital because of another mild heart attack.”

Paul released a sigh. “Couldn’t the doctors just give him a heart transplant so he wouldn’t have this problem anymore?”

“They probably could,” Ellen answered, before resuming to eat. “But the reason they don’t is, your grandfather is seventy-four years old. He’s an old man, Paul.”

“He may be old, but he’s a good man.”

Ellen nodded her agreement. “I won’t deny that. But when people get to be his age, doctors aren’t willing to help them out the same way they would if they were younger.”

“Oh?” Paul paused so he could contemplate what his mother said. “So when you get old, they would rather let you die.”

Ellen stopped and remained silent for at least half a second.

“Let’s not think about it that way,” she eventually said. “Let’s just say, the doctors involved in that type of situation are more willing to help someone reach their eternal paradise.”

Paul stuck his silverware on top of his now empty plate.

“I see. So in other words, instead of having to worry about you, they would rather make it God’s problem.”

Ellen gave her son a dirty look and shook her head. “Paul. I swear. With an attitude like that, if you don’t watch it, you’re going to end up getting a stocking full of coal for Christmas.”

Paul eased from the table and began to put his dirty dishes away.

“I don’t think so, Mom. The way I’ve been feeling, I doubt if I will even bother to hang a stocking this year.”

## **Chapter Twenty-six - Guilford County Prison Farm**

Signs of the upcoming Christmas holiday were abounding throughout the countryside in the Piedmont region of North Carolina.

Holiday specials were being broadcast. Each city had their own special array of lights running up and down the main thoroughfares. And most stores appeared to be packed with shoppers, each trying to get that last-minute gift at a price their budget could afford.

Yet, this Sunday evening as Paul sat in the hard, wooden pew next to his mother and listened to the minister convey a message, which focused on the necessity of the Savior's birth, he could not help but close his eyes and wish this once joyous holiday would soon become another dust covered page in ancient history.

"So, what did you think about the sermon?" Ellen asked her son, as the two of them walked down the main aisle toward the front of Ossipee Baptist Church at the end of the evening service.

"I don't know," Paul replied, moving another step closer to where the minister was shaking everyone's hand. "It was okay, I guess. But to be honest, I didn't really pay much attention to it."

Ellen frowned.

"You know, Son," she then said. "I realize it's been hard for you since your father's passing, but ..."

"Hey, Paul. Paul Pontiac," a teenage female voice unexpectedly hollered from across the chapel, interrupting Ellen. "Could you meet me out front at the bottom of the stairs? I need to talk to you before you leave today."

At first, Paul could not see who might be trying to communicate with him. However, after turning in the direction of the minister's pulpit, he smiled. It was Cathy Skinner and she appeared to be overly excited about something.

"Sure, Cathy," he yelled back in her direction. "I'll see you in a few."

"Great."

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“So what did Cathy want?” Ellen asked later that evening as the two of them took their favorite seats in their living room in order to watch 60 Minutes on TV. “I thought you would have told me by now, but so far, you’ve remained quiet about it.”

“I know.” Paul shrugged his shoulder. “It’s just that. Well. She wants me to get involved in something I’m really not interested in.”

The sudden rise of Ellen’s eyebrow silently revealed her curiosity.

“Oh? What’s that?”

Taking a moment to turn on the TV, Paul noticed that WFMY was currently playing a commercial.

*Dang it, he thought. I was hoping CBS would already have started the show so I could have avoided this discussion. ... Oh, well. I might as well get this over with.*

However, just as he was about to speak, the jingle of his mother’s new cell phone interrupted.

At once, Ellen slipped her hand inside of her handbag and placed it next to her ear.

“Excuse me, Son,” she said. “This is an important call I’ve been expecting.”

“No problem.” Paul enjoyed the moment’s reprieve, before becoming curious. *Hmm. I wonder who’s calling Mom on a Sunday night? It really must be important.*

“Yes, this is Mrs. Pontiac. ... I see. So he’ll be flying out of Grand Rapids early Wednesday morning. ... Yes. ... No problem. ... I’ll tell the principal I’m going to be late and will meet him at the airport. ... I can imagine, poor thing. ... Okay, then. ... Thanks for all you have done and the assistance you provided. ... Good night.”

“What was that all about?” Paul asked, now facing his mother.

Ellen paused.

“It was about something your father and I discussed before his passing,” she said, setting the phone back inside her purse. “However, I am not quite ready to go into the details with you now. ... You can be assured though, that I will tell you everything you’ll need to know in the near future. Okay?”

Paul nodded.

“So. Where were we before I got interrupted?” Ellen said, composing herself.

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With five inches of rain having fallen since early morning, the Tuesday before Christmas was turning out to be a rough one.

The skies were gray and overcast. All of the gravel roads were muddy, and a constant breeze was blowing a moist, cold chill that rapidly penetrated one's clothing.

*At least tomorrow is the last day of school, Paul thought, sticking his arm inside the sleeve of his blue, white, and black winter coat. I wonder if there are going to be any special activities, like a Christmas program? I surely hope not.*

He then proceeded to the kitchen.

"Are you ready to go, Son?" Ellen asked, removing her umbrella from its hook in the utility room. "You don't want to be late."

Paul glanced through the window in their front door and immediately noticed numerous huge mud puddles the continually falling rain had created inside their front yard.

"Do I really have to go?" he asked as he opened the kitchen door. "Having one more person there isn't really going to make a big difference."

"How can you ask me that, Paul?" Ellen replied before the two of them scrambled toward her car. "You're the one who told Cathy you would be there to help. Therefore, she's depending on you. ... Not to mention, the poor people your Sunday school class is delivering presents to are going to be very appreciative of your efforts. ... Heaven knows, if it wasn't for what you kids are doing, they probably wouldn't have a Christmas."

"That might be true. But it still doesn't change the fact that I personally wish Christmas would just go away," Paul muttered under his breath as his mother started the engine and proceeded to back up.

"What was that, Son?" Ellen asked, glancing in his direction.

"It was nothing important. You already know how I feel about Christmas."

"I know," Ellen said with a frown. "And it's a darn shame. You used to love Christmas. And I'm sure if your father were here, he would want you to celebrate the holiday, despite what has happened. After all, the real reason we celebrate Christmas is to honor our Savior's birth."

Feeling ashamed, Paul hung his head.

"If Dad was here, I WOULD be ecstatic about celebrating Christmas."

Ellen shook her head, but chose to remain silent while the two of them continued toward Ossipee Baptist Church.

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“Paul, you made it,” Cathy yelled, running up and giving him a big embrace the instant he walked into the recreation area of the church. “I’m glad you’re here. I was afraid you wouldn’t show.”

“I almost didn’t,” Paul said, returning her hug. “But Mom kept insisting I come since I promised I would.”

Cathy looked at him and smiled. Then after taking his hand, she led him toward one of the tables with a decorated tree on it.

Underneath the tree sat an assortment of cardboard boxes. Each of them was full of various wrapped presents waiting to be delivered. And next to the presents stood a box full of new, paperback copies of the New King James Bible.

“I know you’ve been down on Christmas this year,” she said. “And it’s understandable considering what you recently have gone through. . . . However, perhaps after this evening, you’ll feel a little better. We do have a lot of needy families to deliver presents to.”

“Oh?” Paul raised an eyebrow.

“Yes.” Cathy nodded. “In fact, we have so many families this year, we’re going to have to divide up into groups.”

“Am I going to be in your group?” Paul asked, after gazing around the room at the other teenagers hurrying to complete the last-minute preparations.

“You know it, sweetheart,” Cathy said, displaying a large, you-are-going-to-me-mine-someday grin.

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Soon after Wayne’s mother (their Sunday school teacher) unlocked the doors of their mid-size sedan and both of his parents climbed in, Cathy, Wayne, and Paul entered the back seat.

“So where are we going?” Paul asked, after getting himself situated.

“Our first stop is the Guilford County Prison farm,” Cathy answered while buckling her seatbelt. “If you would have paid attention to what we discussed in class, you would have known we are going to be putting on a nativity show there. And once that’s completed, while the inmates are getting their refreshments, we’re going to hand out Bibles and a small gift to each of them. . . . Afterward, our class is going to break into groups and each carload will visit a few families.”

“What type of gift can you give an inmate?” Paul asked, shifting in his seat.

“Not much,” Wayne said, joining the conversation. “We are only going to be giving them a travel size, men’s hygiene kit, a Bible, and a Christmas card. That’s about the only thing the warden would allow.”

“What about the inmates who are Muslim?” Paul asked, turning toward him. “I doubt they would appreciate getting a Bible.”

“No problem.” Cathy reached into a box located next to her foot. “We’ve also brought a few copies of the Quran.”

Upon hearing the car’s engine start, Paul wondered what it would be like to have to live in a prison.

*And I used to think they were just farm workers. ... Wow.*

“Are you kids settled in, back there?” Mr. Barber asked, looking over his shoulder into the back seat.

“Yes, sir,” Wayne enthusiastically answered. “Let’s go spread some Christmas cheer.”

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Having passed through the prison farm’s inspection area, Paul, Cathy, and Wayne briefly stared at each other and shook their heads.

“Can you believe that inspection?” Wayne asked while they waited for their adult counterparts. “You would think we were trying to bring in a bomb or something.”

“Dad said to expect this,” Cathy replied. “He also told me I would be surprised at some of the things people sometimes try to bring in.”

“Oh?” Paul asked as Mrs. Barber walked up. “What kinds of things?”

“Drugs, cell phones, and other prohibited items.”

“That certainly would be dumb,” Wayne said, noticing the guards had just finished padding down Mr. Barber. “Don’t they know anyone trying to bring in something like that could end up in prison?”

“I’m sure they do,” Cathy said. “But that’s life. Sometimes people do really dumb things.”

“Okay kids,” Wayne’s father said as he and his wife walked up to where most of the teens gathered. “We’re all done here. And, the guards said to follow them to their visitation area. That’s where the inmates are going to be waiting for us.”

“And don’t forget,” Mrs. Barber added. “Let’s all be wearing smiles when we walk in.”

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Soon after the play was completed, almost the whole collection of 134 men eased out of their seats and proceeded toward the row of tables, where they would be offered the numerous goodies brought that evening.

As they lined up, the unusual sound of laughter and jeers started to echo all around the room – something rarely heard within this area.

Near the front of the line, where a Christmas tree adorned with various colorful paper ornaments proud stood, several adults were busy getting ready to serve ice tea, soda, holiday-frosted cakes, as well as various types of decorated cookies. At the end of the short line of tables, a combination of youth and adults gathered to distribute Christmas cards, Bibles, and hygiene kits to each individual present.

“Well. If it isn’t George McGuire,” Reverend Graham said, noticing a fortyish, black-haired, blue-eyed inmate approaching him. “How are you doing? It’s so good to see you.”

The man smiled.

“Thank you, Reverend,” George replied, shaking the minister’s hand while holding his collection of goodies with the other. “It’s good to see you, too.”

“So how much longer do you have to serve?” Reverend Graham asked.

“About three more years,” George answered. “Since this wasn’t my first offense, the judge was rather rough on me this time.”

He then paused.

“I thought he would have taken into consideration that instead of stealing for profit, as I had done in the past, I was trying to put some food on the table for my family since I lost my job and nobody would hire me. ... My kids do have to eat, you know.”

“I know,” Reverend Graham said with a nod. “It’s sad when things like this happen. However, it might cheer you up a little bit to know that your family is one of those we are going to visit tonight and deliver presents.”



“Really?” George displayed a crooked grin. “Thank you, sir. Knowing that will make this holiday easier to endure. . . . Your church has always been so kind to our family. And we really don’t deserve it since we never attended on a regular basis.”

“No problem, George,” the reverend said, noticing the line was starting to get backed up. “It’s what Christ would have done if he was still walking on this earth today.”

“You’re probably right,” George said, showing a small grin before becoming serious. “By the way, before I head back to my dorm, could I ask for a big favor?”

“What’s that?”

“Could you say ‘Hello’ and ‘Merry Christmas’ to my family for me? And tell Butch ‘I love him’, and for him to be a good boy while I’m gone.”

Seeing the pastor nod yes, Paul began to ponder the conversation he overheard.

*Wow. I had no idea Butch McGuire’s dad was in jail or that his family was so poor, his father tried to steal food for them. It’s no wonder he’s the way he is. And I thought I had it bad.*

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Later that evening Paul, Cathy, and Wayne went with the Barbers to visit the Johnson’s, the Howerton’s, and Mrs. Walker. Mrs. Walker was an elderly Christian lady in her mid-80’s, who had multiple health problems. Some of them included congestive heart disease, COPD, and severe tremors that were the result of a stroke.

Regrettably, most of her kids didn’t live near her so she didn’t get to see them often. Her oldest son, however, lived just a few miles away and would occasionally stop by. But, as things sometimes happen, he did not really care about his mother and had expressed on numerous occasions that he wished she would hurry up and die so he could collect his inheritance.

*Can you believe this?* Paul thought, as they left her small, barely maintained house. *This guy’s mother gave all that she had to raise him and this is the way he treats her. . . . I would never treat my mother like that. No matter what.*

Before the Barbers reached the Johnson’s and Howerton’s, Paul overheard his Sunday school teacher tell her husband that both families were victims of the latest recession. The men in both families previously worked in manufacturing, which was the industry hardest hit.

On top of that, Mrs. Johnson recently had been diagnosed with an advanced stage of breast cancer.

To make things worse, when Mr. Johnson lost his job, the family also lost their health insurance. That meant Mrs. Johnson could no longer afford to get the treatment she badly needed,

and consequently, it appeared that within a matter of months, several young children would lose their beloved mother.

The family did apply for assistance with Guilford County Social Services. However, the state was currently so overloaded with requests for assistance, it was unable to help Mrs. Johnson in a timely manner.

Fortunately, the Howerton's situation wasn't quite as bad as the Johnson's. Their young son was born with severe disabilities, which caused him not only to be mentally challenged, but also confined to a wheelchair.

Thanks to being eligible for food stamps, the family did have a minimal amount of food on their table. However, since Mr. Howerton's unemployment benefits did not even cover the mortgage payments for their home, the idea of purchasing gifts for their two kids was totally out of the question.

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"What are you thinking about?" Cathy asked, noticing the sober expression on Paul's face as he stared out the side window.

"Stuff," Paul answered. "You know. Like how life has been so unfair to me recently. And how much I have really wanted to get Christmas done and over with."

"Oh?" Cathy said, displaying a small smile. "Do you still feel the same way?"

Paul paused, as if in deep thought.

"Well. Things have been bad," he eventually said. "But tonight, I have come to realize, there are a lot of people whose life is an awful lot worse."

## Chapter Twenty-seven - Nathan

As Paul stood in the doorway of his mother's office, any staff or student who happened to be walking by would have only needed to glance at his stern expression to determine he wasn't a very happy camper.

"Paul," Ellen said, turning her chair so she could face him. "Since today is the last day of school this semester, it's certainly not going to kill you to ride home with me this afternoon, instead of taking the bus."

Paul sighed.

"But that's the problem, Mom. You're not going directly home. Didn't you just tell me you wanted me to help you pick out a Christmas tree?"

"So what's wrong with that? Usually at this time of year, you can't wait for the day we put our tree up."

"I know, Mom. But this year, it's different. I think I would be happier if I simply ignored the holiday and spent the time concentrating on my computer game."

For a moment, Ellen sat and stared at her son. She then took a deep breath and slowly exhaled. The wrinkle in her forehead clearly revealed that she was about at wit's end.

"And what about honoring our Savior's birth? How is working on your game going to that?"

Paul looked upward, as if the answer he was seeking may have been floating next to the ceiling.

"Hmm. You do have a point. ... Let me think about it and I'll get back to you. Okay?"

"Thanks, Son."

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Shortly after stepping into Gibsonville's main hallway, Paul stopped to check his watch. It was 12:20. If he hurried, he possibly could make a quick trip to his locker before the tardy bell for his next class rang. However, before he could take a couple steps forward, the school's P.A. system unexpectedly began to blare.

Crackle. Crackle. Crackle.

“Mr. Paul Pontiac. I repeat. Mr. Paul Pontiac. Would you please report to the Office Skills classroom? Thank you.”

*Wouldn't you know it? I'm running short of time so I get paged to the Office Skills classroom. ... Couldn't Mr. Thompson have waited a few more minutes until class started since I'm heading that way anyhow?*

When Paul reached the nearest of two doors one could use to enter inside, he automatically turned the doorknob.

“So where’s Mr. Thompson?” he said out loud, even though no one was present to give him a reply. “It doesn’t make sense for him to have me paged and then not be here.”

He then gazed around the classroom and noticed it recently been redecorated. A six-foot spruce pine was now standing in the far-right corner of the classroom.

Each limb held either a string of multicolored miniature lights or one of the green and red chains someone made from construction paper – and countless various colored homemade ornaments in different shapes and sizes filled each empty space.

Additionally, hand-drawn posters depicting Christmas scenes now lined each wall of the huge classroom and an abundance of holiday greeting cards now hung from the classroom’s white-tiled ceiling.

Paul stared at all this décor and shook his head. *Good grief. I heard of getting things ready for Christmas. But, isn't this overdoing it a little bit.*

Not much time had passed when the sound of a loud, clanging bell began to reverberate throughout the building. Fourth-period classes would be starting soon.

“Hi, Paul,” Daniel said, removing his cap as he strolled through the classroom’s entranceway. “What are you doing here?”

Paul watched as his young friend tossed his backpack on top of the chair he usually sat in.

“What do you mean? This is our fourth-period class. I’m supposed to be here.”

“No, you’re not,” Daniel said, showing a display of confidence Paul wasn’t accustomed to.

Paul gazed at his friend as if the younger kid had gone crazy.

“Yes, I am. Not to mention, if I’m not supposed to be here ... then why are you here?”

Daniel waited for the tardy bell to finish, before answering. "I thought I'd drop off my books before I go to the auditorium."

"And why would you be going to the auditorium?"

"Didn't you hear the announcement during lunch? The school's having a special Christmas pageant this afternoon. And all students are supposed to report there after lunch."

"Isn't that just great," Paul said and frowned. "I couldn't go even if I wanted to. Mr. Thompson paged me here, so I'm going to have to sit and wait for him."

Daniel walked up to his older compadre and put his hand on his shoulder.

"Let's go anyway, Paul. It'll be fun. Mr. Thompson can see you after the show. And you never know, this may be what you need to get into the Christmas spirit."

Paul nodded. "You're probably right. But what if Mr. Thompson decides to show up and I am not here. I could end up in detention again."

"I really don't think it was really Mr. Thompson who paged you, Paul. I just saw him a couple of minutes ago entering the auditorium."

"You did?" Paul became perplexed. "That doesn't make any sense. Why would Mr. Thompson have me paged and then go to the auditorium?"

Daniel shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know. But if we don't hurry, we are going to miss the beginning of the pageant."

"You go ahead without me," Paul replied. "I think I would rather miss a pageant than risk having to serve another week in detention."

"Okay. If you insist." Daniel's lowered eyes clearly revealed his disappointment. "You have yourself a Merry Christmas. Just in case I don't see you before I leave today."

"Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Merry Christmas to you, too."

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As soon as Daniel shut the classroom door, Paul turned on the Dell computer located on top of his desk. And after grabbing his mouse, he clicked on the directory where a couple of days previous he copied the game module he brought from home.

"Dang it," he shouted, upon realizing this computer wouldn't have the latest updates he made to the copy of the module on his home computer. "I wonder what am I going to do now? Redoing

all the work I've done would be a waste of time.... Oh, well. I might as well sit back and relax until Mr. Thompson finally shows up."

While listening to the soft Christmas music now playing over the school's P.A. system, Paul's eyes began to feel heavy.

Seconds later - when they closed, his mind magically took him back in time to when he was a young boy living in South Florida – about to celebrate another warm, joyous holiday with both of his parents.

"That's a pretty song," a young male voice abruptly said from behind him. "Don't you think so? It's one of my favorites."

Paul quickly turned around and found a brown-haired, blue-eyed eight-year-old, who had rolled up next to him, smiling. His steel wheelchair appeared to be relatively new.

"Why, hello," Paul said, giving the lad a look over. "Who are you? And what are you doing here? I thought everybody was supposed to be in the auditorium."

"They are," the boy said. "But Mr. Thompson told me to meet you in here."

"O-K." Paul really wasn't sure what to make of that. "So who are you? I don't recall seeing you around."

"I'm Nathan, Nathan Pontiac. My friends where I used to live called me either Nat or Nathan."

Paul's jaw instantly fell open. "You're who?"

"I'm Nathan. Nathan Pontiac," the boy repeated while holding his palm out for Paul to shake. "I'm new here. In fact, today is my first day at this school. My teacher is Ms. Williams."

Paul felt a bit bewildered, but grasped his hand anyway. "I'm Paul. Paul Pontiac."

"It's good to finally get to meet you, Paul," Nathan said as the two of them shook. "I know a whole lot about you."

Paul raised an eyebrow. "You do?"

"Sure," Nathan said, his face gleaming with excitement. "I saw your name on the game, 'Clash of the BattleStars.' Also, Titan Industries has a short bio about you on their website. ... You're famous. And did I mention my parents used to talk a lot about you? Dad was always telling me that when I grow up, I might turn out to be just like you."

"Whoa! Whoa!" Paul said, wondering what in the world did he do to unleash this data storm. "That's too much information at one time. Slow down a minute. Who're your parents?"

“You mean, who were my parents?” Nathan said, correcting him.

Paul couldn't avoid detecting the sad look which flashed across the younger boy's face.

“Oh? What happened to your parents?”

Nathan stared downward for a second and involuntarily took a deep swallow. His now moisture-laden eyes distinctly revealed the hurt and sorrow he was attempting to keep inside.

“I'm sorry,” Paul said, before the boy could respond. “I didn't mean to hurt you.”

“I know you wouldn't deliberately hurt me,” Nathan replied, looking deeply into Paul's face. “You're my hero ... and all I have left.”

*Another Daniel?* Paul thought as Nathan continued to gaze at him. “What do you mean, I'm all you have left?”

“Just what I said,” Nathan answered. “Now that my parents are gone, you're all I have left. A few weeks ago, on our way to the zoo, I was in the back seat of our car playing with my Game Boy, when suddenly, there was a big crash. ... Then the next thing I knew, I was in a hospital and my legs were gone. ... For a long time, I kept asking to see my mom and dad – but nobody would let me.”

“So what happened then?”

“I cannot remember exactly when, but one day a nice lady came to visit me. She told me about the accident and about my parents,” Nathan continued, unable to control the tears rapidly streaming down his cheeks. “And after I stopped crying, she told me I soon would be living in a new home.”

*Wow!* Paul thought. *I can imagine how traumatic that must have been.*

“So what were your parents' names?”

“My dad's name was Bob. My mom's name was Lora.” Nathan said, repositioning himself.

“So you must be my Uncle Bob's son,” Paul exclaimed. “I remember my mom telling me about your parent's accident a few months ago.”

“Did she also tell you that we're brothers?”

Nathan then unexpectedly paused and looked at the ceiling.

“I'm sorry. I made a mistake. I'm actually your half-brother. We have the same father. But not the same mother.”

Hearing that, Paul sat and gawked at him for a moment.

“Now wait a minute. That can’t be right. My dad married only one woman. And that was my mom.”

“I don’t know anything about that,” Nathan said. “But if I wasn’t your brother, would it mean you wouldn’t want me to go home and live with you?”

“Who said anything about you coming to live with me?” Paul asked, giving Nathan a stern look.

A sheepish grin quickly appeared on Nathan’s face.

“Your mother. On our way here from the airport this morning. She told me we were going to live together. And that North Carolina was going to be my new home.”

The airport? This morning? “What airport?” Paul asked, even though he was sure he already knew the answer.

“The one in Gre..., Green...”

“Greensboro?”

“Yes. Greensboro.”

“Okay.” Paul still wasn’t feeling exactly happy about this situation. “So. According to my mom, you’re going to be living with us now.”

Nathan gave him a big grin and began to repeatedly nod his head.

“Would you like to see the Christmas present I got you?”

“Not quite so fast,” Paul said, feeling his chest muscles tense. “I would first like to know why Mom didn’t tell me you were coming, or even bother to ask if I would like a younger brother.”

Nathan turned in Paul’s direction and his skin became a ghostly white. “You don’t want me to live with you?” he meekly responded, wrapping his arms tight around his small chest, while simultaneously lowering his head. “That must mean you don’t like me and don’t want me to be your brother.”

“Now wait a minute, Nathan. You’re jumping to conclusions,” Paul said, seeing how upset the youngster was getting. “I didn’t say all that.”

“But isn’t that what you meant? ... You don’t like me.” Nathan suddenly released a loud sob. “I wish I could go away. I should have been killed in the auto accident with my mom and dad. Then, I never would have had to come here.”



While Paul stood nearby, watching the young boy weep, a change started to occur within his soul. With the recent passing of his own father, he could identify with the deep sorrow and sense of loss a boy Nathan's age would feel. And as compassion started to take root deep inside, the bitter ice which surrounded his heart since his father's death began to slowly melt.

"I'm sorry, Nathan. I do like you and I didn't mean to get you all upset," Paul gently told him as he fell to his knees so he could look directly into the young boy's face. "I've just been overly sensitive about things ever since I lost my own father."

"My natural dad also died, recently?" Nathan asked, raising his head.

Not uttering a word, Paul silently nodded yes. And within a twinkling of an eye, Nathan leaned forward and raised both arms toward him.

Paul immediately picked him up, and the two shared a tight hug.

"I'm sorry, Paul," Nathan said in a voice filled with the true sincerity only a child his age could give. "I was hoping to get to know him."

"That's okay," Paul replied, softly patting his back.

Moments later, "I got you a present," Nathan said with a smile.

"You did?" Paul instinctively glanced toward the classroom's garlanded Christmas tree.

Nathan nodded. "I brought it with me from Michigan."

Upon reaching inside of his jacket, he soon discovered his small gift had become slightly damaged.

"Oh, no. I didn't mean to crush its bow."

Paul smiled and released a little chuckle.

"You shouldn't worry about little things like that, Nathan," he remarked. "From here on out, we are going to have each other, and that is far more important than a crushed gold colored bow."

Nathan leaned back and stared into his half-brother's face.

So you do want me to be your little brother?"

"If I was going to have to have a younger brother, Nathan," Paul said in a confirming tone. "I think you will do."

Nathan grinned from ear-to-ear and the two of them shared a long affectionate hug.

Soon afterward, the distinct squeak of the classroom door being opened echoed throughout the classroom.

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“Merry Christmas, Paul,” he heard his mother’s voice say. “I hope you like my gift.”

Experiencing an immediate loss of words, Paul stood there, totally speechless. Not only was his mother inside the classroom, but also Mr. Thompson, Principal Skinner, and every single one of his friends from the Computer Club – all smiling at him.

“Merry Christmas, Paul,” they shouted.

Paul could not help but feel stunned.

“I don’t know what to say,” he eventually said, almost dropping his half-brother. Then quickly wrapping his arms tightly around Nathan’s waist, he continued, “You know. I cannot remember a time in my life when I was given anything which meant this much to me.”

A short time later, Daniel walked over to where his friend was standing. “Does this mean that over the holiday season you’ll begin to do some serious programming on our game?”

Nathan, in reply, twisted his thin torso around so he could face his brother. “Are you creating another computer game, Paul?”

Paul nodded yes.

“Wow!” Nathan loudly exclaimed with a beaming smile bursting across his face. “You really are my hero.”

Everyone instantaneously erupted in laughter.

“Gee,” Daniel said. “Haven’t I heard someone else use that expression before?”

“I think so,” Paul confirmed, giving his friend a wink.

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Above all the noise and conversations that followed, “O Holy Night” could be heard playing from the school’s P.A. Speaker, high above their heads.

As Paul listened to the melody, he couldn’t help but close his eyes, if only for a couple of seconds.

*Dad, he mentally called out. I wish you could have been here to share all of this with me. ... Please say "Hi" to Uncle Bob for me and tell him I'll do my very best to keep watch over his son. He seems to be a good kid.*

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Later, after they thanked all their friends and told everybody Merry Christmas and goodbye, the newly expanded Pontiac family got inside their blue sedan and began the ten-mile journey toward the twenty-seven-acre farm located in the no-man's-land they called home.

However, at the moment Ellen turned off the pavement onto Summerdale road, "Mom," Paul said, from the back seat where he was sitting next to his new, half-brother. "Nathan told me earlier that Dad was his real father, instead of Uncle Bob. Is that true?"

Ellen glanced at her son through the rearview mirror, and a serious expression washed across her face.

"Yes. It is, Son."

"How could that be?" Paul asked, once again, feeling confused. I thought Dad had only been married to you."

"You're right. I was his only wife. However, about nine years ago your Uncle Bob and his wife wanted to have a baby, but couldn't due to certain medical reasons," Ellen said, gazing off and on at her son's reflection within the mirror. "Therefore, he asked your father if he could assist them by providing a necessary donation."

"A donation?" Paul continued to stare at her, still feeling perplexed. "I'm not sure what you mean. What or how ...?"

"Paul," Ellen interrupted, using an extremely serious tone. "What you are wanting to ask is too sensitive a subject to discuss right now. I think it would be a lot better if we postponed this conversation until later – when the two of us can be alone."

Paul turned toward Nathan and could tell his brother had been acutely listening to every word spoken.

"Why is that? Is someone in the car a little bit too young to be hearing about this?"

Ellen gave him a smile. "You might be able to say something like that."

Paul looked first at Nathan, and then at his mother, and grinned.

## Chapter Twenty-eight - Christmas Eve

It was the night before Christmas and all through the house, not a creature was stirring, except ...

“Mom!” Paul yelled as he tromped down the hallway toward the living room where his mother was gently swaying in her rocking chair as she worked on an afghan she was knitting for their couch. “Could you please talk to Nathan? He’s won’t listen to me.”

Ellen looked up and glanced in his direction. “What’s the problem?”

“I’m trying to make something special on the computer for ... well ... you know who, and he won’t leave me alone,” Paul exclaimed, briefly glaring down the hallway. “Can’t you entertain him for a while so I can get this done, or at least make him play in his bedroom?”

“Okay. Let me see what I can do,” Ellen said with a smile.

Paul nodded.

“Nathan, darling. Come here. ... I need you.”

“Coming, Aunt Ellen.”

Standing next to the living room couch with his arms crossed, Paul watched as his younger brother rolled his wheelchair into the room.

“Your brother’s really busy right now, Son, and he shouldn’t be disturbed,” Ellen said as Nathan parked his chair just a couple of feet away from her. “So how about staying here and giving me a hand?”

Nathan swiftly turned to face Paul, and then back toward Ellen. “Why can’t I be with Paul? I don’t know anything about knitting.”

“You don’t need to know how to knit,” Ellen said, ignoring his question as she set her afghan into a light blue wicker basket where she always kept all her knitting supplies. “Now. What I would like you to do is...”

“Thanks, Mom,” Paul said, before starting back toward his room.

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Taking a seat at his computer desk, Paul gazed at the flat screen monitor as his Windows screen saver drew multicolored, three-dimensional designs across the screen.

*Gee, I wonder what Tim is doing tonight? He must have been real busy the past few weeks since I haven't even received a call or Christmas card from him. ... Maybe if Mom's in this good of a mood tomorrow, as I'm sure she will be, I'll ask permission to give him a call.*

With that thought in mind, Paul smiled. And shortly afterward, he grabbed his wireless mouse and resumed working on the project he had been trying to complete all evening.

"Are you done yet?" Nathan cheerfully asked, about an hour later as he rolled his chair through the doorway of his older brother's bedroom.

Paul glanced over his left shoulder. "Yes. I finished about ten minutes ago. Why?"

Nathan came to a stop right next to where Paul was sitting. "I'm bored. Helping your mom knit isn't a lot of fun. ... By the way, did you know I used to have a computer? But I haven't seen it since the accident."

"Oh?" Paul clicked on the icon that would start 'Clash of the BattleStars II'. "Would you like to play the latest version of my game?"

From the way his half-brother's eyes widened and his mouth dropped, Paul instantly got the impression he just fulfilled his brother's greatest wish.

"You're going to let me play the beta version of your new game? On your computer?" Nathan said, still bug-eyed.

"Sure. Why not?" Paul said, and then stood up and moved his chair to the side. "After all, you are my little bro. ... But I need to warn you, this version's a lot different from the original."

Nathan rolled his chair in as close as he could to Paul's computer desk and locked its brakes. "It is? How?"

"Let's just say what you are looking at here will eventually be version 2 of my game," Paul said, placing his hand on one of his brother's shoulders. "In this version, there are a lot more ships to choose from. Not to mention, the way wormholes affects the ships in the game is now a lot more realistic. ... I've also added a few new weapons. And, unless you select 'Easy' mode, the game's a lot harder."

Stopping for a second so he could see the "amazed" expression on his brother's face, Paul continued, "And that's just a few of the changes that I've made."

“Wow!” Nathan enthusiastically replied.

As Paul stood behind him, Nathan slowly maneuvered his starship through each of the obstacles within the game’s first level. However, when he reached Level II, Paul noticed how his brother diverted his attention to one item on the starship’s computer control panel.

“Paul,” Nathan said, showing a puzzled expression. “What does the green button with the red dot in the middle do?”

Paul leaned forward and pretended he needed to scrutinize the screen. “I can’t remember. Why don’t you push it and find out?”

Nathan gazed at him, suspiciously.

“Are you sure that isn’t the ship’s self-destruct button?”

Using his index finger, Paul pointed to a bright red button that was much larger than the others. ... A skull and a pair of crossbones boldly displayed across its center.

“This is the ship’s self-destruct button.”

Nathan stared at his brother as if he didn’t really trust him. He then turned back toward the computer screen.

“So what does the green button do?”

“Like I told you, Nathan. I can’t remember,” Paul said, crossing his fingers behind his back. “Just push it.”

Nathan grimaced.

Microseconds later, he slid the mouse forward and to the left so the arrow was pointing to the button and clicked.

Almost at once, the computer screen flashed as if the monitor had died. Then soon afterward, in a large, red and green Old English Script font Paul recently created, the words “Merry Christmas Little Bro” began to randomly dance across a holiday-decorated screen, while “Jingle Bells” softly played in the background.

Nathan’s mouth, once again, flew wide open, and his eyes began to sparkle. “Did you do this just for me?”

“I sure did.”

“Wow. Thanks!”

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In no time at all, Ellen’s voice began to echo from the far end of the hallway.

“Boys. Would you please join me so we can begin our Christmas Eve festivities?”

“We’re coming, Mom,” Paul yelled in reply.

As the two of them entered the living room, Paul observed how their Christmas tree was brilliantly aglow.

A vivid display of blinking, multicolored lights softly reflected on the tree’s long silver-colored icicles, while porcelain ornaments, some which dated back before his birth, hung from several limbs in full majesty.

Additionally, small brightly colored plastic windmills had been carefully hung where the heat from a nearby Christmas bulb would make them spin and on top of the tree, a white-haired angel stood against a tall golden background, producing a soft heavenly glow that reminded every one of their creator.

As Paul studied the tree, he could not help but admire its natural beauty and reflect on the day the three of them had gone Christmas tree shopping – the afternoon following the last day of school.

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The moment Ellen parked their car inside an empty space in the parking lot of the large Christmas tree lot, Nathan almost exploded with excitement as he stared at the various types and sizes of trees available.

When Paul and Ellen lifted his wheelchair out of the trunk, he immediately started to roll from tree to tree so he could examine each of them.

“This one’s too big. This one’s too little,” he kept repeating as he continued his inspection. “This one has some limbs missing. The branches are too far apart on this other one.”

And after looking at what seemed to be at least a couple of dozen trees for almost thirty minutes, Nathan finally came to a stop in front of a six-foot blue spruce whose shape looked like a professional carefully designed it. . . . He then leaned forward.

“H-m-m,” he said while raising and lowering his head as he scrutinized every limb. “Paul. Could you bring this one out in the aisle so I can see it better?”

Paul watched as his mother, who was now standing behind Nathan, try to suppress a giggle. He then wrapped his hands around the tree’s narrow trunk and pulled it a few feet away.

At once, Nathan proceeded to roll his chair around its perimeters. And with each circle that he made, he just barely missed running over his older brother’s foot.

“I think this is the one,” he eventually said, in a dead serious tone.

“How much is it?” Ellen asked her oldest son.

Paul reached into the base of the tree so he could examine a red tag someone placed there. “O-K,” he slowly said, upon discovering the tag was blank. Then raising himself back up, he started to search the lot. “I wonder if ...”

Sure enough. At a forty-five-degree angle from where he was standing, stood a large white sign with different colored paper tags attached to it. To the right of each tag, someone had written a price.

“According to the sign, it’s seventy-five dollars.”

Ellen’s hand immediately rose and covered her mouth.

“Oh, dear. That’s too expensive,” she said, before turning to speak directly to her youngest. “Nathan, I’m afraid we’re going to have to find another one. The price on this one is a bit too high.”

Though his lips smiled, Ellen detected the hint of sadness he was trying not to display, and knew the young boy was disappointed.

“I’m sure we’ll find another good tree, Aunt Ellen. One that is less expensive.”

Just a short distance away from where Pontiacs were doing their tree shopping, a chubby looking man wearing gold-rimmed spectacles, a dark gray winter coat, and a green ski mask pulled over the top half of his ears stood and watched.

Even though Paul had previously seen him, he had not really paid any attention to him ... until.

At the instant Nathan resumed his tree search, the stranger unexpectedly frowned, then quickly walked over to where Ellen was standing.

“Excuse me, ma’am. Is this your son?” he asked, pointing toward Nathan.

“Yes, it is,” Ellen said. “Why?”



“Ma’am,” the man began. “I’m the owner of this lot and I’ve been watching him go through our selection of trees. . . . And from what I observed, it seemed like when he finally found the one he really liked, a problem developed.”

Paul mother’s cheeks instantly blushed.

“That was a nice tree,” Ellen said, pointing toward the spruce Paul set aside. “But . . .”

“We need a tree with a blue or white tag,” Nathan interjected.

“I see.” The man said, rubbing his chin. He then walked over to the spruce and inspected its tag. “I’m afraid the young man here,” he began, placing a hand on Paul’s shoulder. “Has made a mistake regarding the price of this tree, ma’am.”

“What kind of mistake?” Nathan asked.

“You see,” the man responded with a smile. “The price on the sign does not include the discount we’re offering since it’s the week before Christmas. . . . On top of that, as a Christian, I’m providing an additional discount to families who have ‘special children’. . . . And I personally think your son, Nathan, is one heck of a special boy. Therefore, ma’am, if you’d kindly point out which car parked out front is yours, I’ll gladly have my men load this tree onto its roof for you.”

“That’s mighty nice of you, sir,” Ellen said, looking at him and then at the tree. “But, how much would I owe you?”

The man presented Paul’s mother a large ear-to-ear smile.

“Let’s just call this a Christmas present from the Grace United Methodist Church, here in Greensboro, ma’am.”

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“Is everybody ready to start our family’s Christmas Eve traditional reading,” Ellen asked, bringing her Oldest attention back to the present.

*No. I’m not, Paul thought. Dad isn’t here. How can we begin to celebrate Christmas without him?*

As he glanced toward Nathan, he noticed his brother was sitting on the couch with an aluminum TV tray sitting in front of him. Underneath, was a pair of gold colored legs, which crossed to form a pair of X’s. . . . The top of the tray had a picture of Frosty the Snowman marching through town, with a collection of smiling kids of all colors, shapes, and sizes following close behind.

Clutching a star-shaped, frosted sugar cookie in one hand, Nathan held a cup of steaming hot chocolate in the other. . . . His upper lip wore a telltale white mustache, from the melted marshmallows inside his cup.

“I’m ready,” he said, looking anxiously at Paul’s mother. “But what about my Mommy and Daddy?” he quickly added as a panicky expression spread across his face. “Won’t they get upset? I never had Christmas without them.”

Ellen gazed up from the large family Bible she carefully held across her lap.

“I’m sure your mom and dad are very happy you are able to spend Christmas with us, Nathan. Otherwise, they would not have left instructions for you to live here should something happen to them.”

She then turned to face her oldest.

“Paul,” Ellen added, “though your father cannot be with us physically, it would not surprise me if he is also watching us from Heaven above, if not present with us inside this room.”

“Do you really think Dad might be here?”

Ellen gave him a solemn look and nodded. “Always remember, Son – Through Christ, all things are possible.”

“Guess what, Aunt Ellen?” Nathan exclaimed. “My real mommy used to tell me that, too.”

*I wonder if Dad really is here?* Paul thought as he watched his mother take a sip of her hot, black coffee and began to read.

*Dad, he mentally said. If you are with us tonight, I wish you could somehow let me know.*

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“Even though at this time of year you see a lot of shopping in the stores and hear talk about Santa Claus, as well as many other things – let me read to you out of the Good Book one of my favorite stories, which will tell us what Christmas is really all about,” Ellen began, with a smile on her face.

Shortly after Ellen started reading, the living room became so quiet, anyone could have easily heard a mouse squeak and a certain reverence enveloped over the room – just as if the three of them were sitting in a church. But, unlike a church, the way Ellen read the story, the boys’ minds were instantaneously taken to a time long ago, and to a place – thousands of miles away.

A slight chill could now be felt and they could hear the sounds of sheep occasionally bleating as they rested in the nearby pasture.

What is this? What’s happening? Is it possible an angelic messenger has actually come to visit us?

As songs from the heavenly chorus began to fill the countryside, the boys felt an internal beckoning to see the heavenly miracle that transformed what was spiritual, into human form.

Every Christmas that Paul heard his mother tell this story, his whole body would shiver. And when the traditional storytelling ended this evening, he proceeded to get up from his chair and help his brother slide into his wheelchair.

That's when, unexpectedly, the sound of a small object falling from the top shelf of their bookcase unto the wooden floor directly behind his mother's rocker, rapidly filled the room.

Ellen immediately got up and stepped around her chair and picked up the small cylinder-shaped object.

"I wonder how this got here?" she said, looking at her oldest son present with both eyebrows raised.

Being naturally curious about what fell, Paul asked, "What is it, Mom?"

Ellen positioned the object between her fingers and then stuck out her left hand so he could read the name imprinted on top of the object's metallic lid.

In doing so, Paul's mouth straightaway flew wide open. "That's a can of ..."

"That's right," Ellen confirmed. "It's a can of your dad's chewing tobacco."

She then paused and studied its lid.

"This is strange. How would one of your father's cans of tobacco get on the top shelf of our bookcase? And what would make it suddenly fall?"

Paul immediately gazed toward their ceiling, as if he could see into the heavens above. Deep inside his soul, he knew the answers to both of his mother's unanswered questions.

"Thank you, Dad," he whispered.

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Moments later, he rolled his still excited brother into what was formerly the guest bedroom and helped him get ready for bed.

"You need to fall asleep real soon, little Bro," he whispered in Nathan's ear as he pulled up his covers. "Santa Claus could be coming anytime now."

Nathan, in reply, quickly closed his eyes and smiled.

## Chapter Twenty-nine - Christmas Day

Christmas morning. The air was crisp. Sunlight was reflecting off the frost covered ground and frozen tree limbs – and a hidden chorus of cardinals was singing of the peace and harmony the morning brought to them and the rest of the world.

Inside the Pontiac residence, a coffee pot started to perk, while Ellen stirred the pancake mix. Plates, cups, and silverware already had been placed on the table, and breakfast would soon be ready.

Since everyone had been informed there would not be an opening of presents until breakfast was completed, Nathan decided to occupy himself with his favorite video game.

However, just as he was about to press the Enter key on his brother's computer, the screen in front of him suddenly began to wildly flash and a sound, like a fire engine's siren, started to blare from its speakers.

“Paul. Come quick,” Nathan yelled as he zoomed toward the bathroom's doorway. “Something's wrong with your computer.”

“My computer?” Paul frowned. “What did you do, Nathan - hang the game again? I swear. You remind me of Daniel a few weeks ago when he had an array corruption problem. ... **Plutonium's Revenge** would kill Windows every time he fired the starship's primary phasers.”

“I didn't do anything, Paul,” Nathan said. “I swear. I was busy calculating the course for my ship's next target when...”

Not waiting to hear the rest of his brother's explanation, Paul proceeded toward his desk.

Since his computer couldn't access the Internet, he was sure his first impression would be correct. Most likely, Nathan accidentally hit the combination of keys which triggered the testing of his PC's security system. However, if he was wrong...

The instant he entered his room, Paul rapidly determined this wasn't a security test.

Someone was attacking his system. And whoever it was, they changed his color scheme to the same one Microsoft used for its infamous Windows blue screen of death.

However, unlike the error message Microsoft would display, in the middle of the screen in bold, bright yellow characters, the words, “Your system is being Doo-Wopped” repeatedly flashed like a never-ending strobe light.

“What’s going on in here?” he heard his mother yelled as she entered his bedroom.

“Somebody’s attacking my computer,” Paul hollered back while sliding into the chair in front of his desk. “But I can’t imagine how.”

Turning his attention back toward his monitor, he brought up the Users, Processes and Performance Sections of the Task Manager on his screen.

“This can’t be. Whoever this is, they must be a genius,” Paul shouted to no one in particular. “According to this, someone has not only broken into my system, but they’re copying all the data on my hard drives.”

“Can’t you stop them, Son?” Nathan asked, moving a bit closer so he could read the screen.

“I’m trying,” Paul said as he continued to enter commands as rapidly as his system would accept them. “But, somehow, this person has gained access through my wireless router and has taken Administrator control of the computer.”

“Didn’t you change the generic password which originally came with the router?”

“Yes. Months ago,” Paul replied, noticing the attacker had finished copying his files. “And, the only person I gave my new password to was Tim. But, I know it couldn’t be him doing this – he still lives in Florida.”

Moments later, Paul saw a bright red, level-five security alarm in the shape of a stop sign pop up on his screen, and instinctively, he gazed over his shoulder at his mother — with the knowledge that his worse fears would soon become a reality.

“Whoever this is, he’s going for the kill,” he said while turning back toward his monitor.

“Paul,” Nathan shouted, the whites of his eyes clearly visible. “Power down the computer.”

“I can’t. I may not be able to bring it up again.”

“Can we shut down the router?”

“No,” Paul said. “This guy’s installed a Trojan which will cause the computer to self-destruct should the system lose its network connection.”

Using the limited computer knowledge he possessed, Nathan stopped for a second and studied the screen before him, and his face transformed into one in deep thought.

“I’ve got it,” he said. “What if we unplug the Wi-Fi extenders? That way, the local network would still be active.”

“What Wi-Fi extenders?” Ellen asked Paul.

“Don’t you remember me telling you about them a few weeks ago?”

“No. Not exactly. Are you referring to those box-shaped things that let us take our laptops outside and still be able to access our network?”

Paul nodded. “However, I don’t know which one they’re using so we’re going to need to unplug both of them. The one in our garage and the one I recently discovered in our barn.”

“You just keep trying to stop the hacker,” Ellen said before heading down the hallway. “and I’ll take care of those extenders.”

“Paul,” Nathan said as his brother resumed trying to break the hacker’s connection. “Will you be able to stop this guy?”

“I don’t know,” Paul told him as he continued to type in various administrator level commands. “Whoever this person is, he’s good. He logged into the system using my Master ID, and so far, he’s managed to work around everything I’ve tried to do to stop him.”

Five seconds later, a loud pop reverberated throughout Paul’s bedroom and his monitor went dark. Then not long afterward, the stench of burning electrical components began to penetrate the air surrounding them.

“Dang it,” Paul yelled, pounding his fist on his desk.

“Is it dead?”

“Yes, Nathan. It’s dead. The blasted dog fried my motherboard and heaven knows what else.”

A distant screen door slammed shut a few short minutes later, and Ellen dashed into her son's bedroom.

“I’m sorry, Paul. I couldn’t find ...”

She then realized what had transpired.

“It’s too late, isn’t it?”

Nodding, Paul continued a solemn stare at his fried desktop. “Yes, Mom. They fried it. Whoever did this knew exactly what he was doing and I couldn’t stop him.”

Following his mother and brother as they filed out of the bedroom, Nathan asked, “Paul. Are you going to get a new computer now?”

Not knowing how to reply, Paul looked at his mother.

“Let’s discuss our options over breakfast,” she said. “Is there any possibility I could convince someone to enjoy some of my homemade blueberry pancakes with lots of whipped cream on top? It might make you feel a little better.”

A smile appeared on Nathan’s face. “I would like some!”

Paul frowned. “How can you be hungry after what just happened?”

Nathan promptly lost his smile and followed Ellen toward the kitchen.

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Once breakfast was completed, Nathan unlocked the brakes on his wheelchair and speedily rolled toward the living room.

Paul and his mother soon followed.

“Try to cheer up, Son,” Ellen said as they exited the kitchen. “Things usually have a way of...”

“Santa made it. I see presents,” Nathan interrupted. “Do you think any of these are mine?”

Ellen grinned. “I don’t think you have anything to worry about, little one. If Santa can tell whether you’ve been naughty or nice, I’m sure he knows you now live here.”

Paul, in response, deliberately decided to simply ignore the two of them. His half-brother might be all excited, but the number of gifts under the tree only provided another reason for him to feel depressed. ... His mother did previously mention that the past few months were financially rough. However, he didn’t expect things to be quite this bad.

Thus, releasing a sigh, he took a seat on the couch. However Nathan, still smiling, rapidly rolled himself next to his mother’s rocker.

*There is absolutely no way I’ll be able to get a new computer anytime soon.*

“Paul,” Ellen said, looking at their tree and glowing. “Would you like to turn on the Christmas tree lights and start playing Santa for us?”

“Well. Ah-h-h.”

He wanted to tell his mother, no. However, in catching the gleam in his half-brother’s eyes, he recalled what his friend Cathy told him.

*Would it make sense for me to ruin Mom and Nathan’s Christmas just because someone fried my computer?*

Therefore, returning his mother radiant smile, he proceeded to hand out everyone’s presents.

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About a half hour later, when Ellen started to pick up the colorful holiday paper scattered across their living room, “Paul,” she said, “While Nathan and I are cleaning up this mess, why don’t you go to the barn and garage and unplug those Wi-Fi extenders you said someone used to break into your computer? That way they couldn’t use them to break into mine.”

“Okay, Mom,” Paul said with a shrug of his shoulder.

Carelessly throwing on his lined denim jacket and placing his dad’s cotton, black and white striped railroad cap on, Paul halfheartedly began to follow the frost-covered path which would take him to the tobacco barn. However, upon reaching the halfway point, a loud whinny, along with the sound of horse hoofs stomping against a wooden stall, abruptly distracted him.

“It can’t be,” he said, trying to convince himself he only imagined what he thought he heard.

Midnight ran by his side, as Paul dashed toward the barn door and turned the two-by-six-inch plank which kept it closed – not noticing it wasn’t in its usual position.

“Oh my gosh,” he said, the moment the door opened and a beautiful, but very pregnant, quarter horse came into view.

Immediately, he could not help but run into the stall where she was standing.

“Half Pint? ... This can’t be true. Mom would have told me.”

Half Pint responded to his voice with a guttural neigh and gently turned her head toward him.

“It is you, Half Pint,” Paul joyously exclaimed, wrapping his arms around her neck. “I’ve missed you so much.”

Instinctively, she gave him an affectionate grunt in reply.

“Hey, down there. It’s about time you showed up,” Paul heard Tim’s voice call down from the hayloft. “I was about to freeze to death up here.”

Paul instantly did a 180-degree turn and looked at the hay loft’s entrance.

“Tim? Timothy Hegler? What in the heck are you doing here? You’re supposed to be in Florida.”



Tim scrambled down the logs on the side of the barn and met his friend near the barn's front door. Then soon afterward, they shared an embrace, while Midnight stood nearby and barked.

"Excuse me, Tim," Paul said, glancing downward at his four-legged friend. "Somebody wants to be introduced. ... Tim, this is my dog, Midnight. ... Midnight, this is my best friend, Tim Hegler."

Giving Paul's friend a big open-mouth doggie smile, Midnight walked up and started to sniff his hand. ... Seconds later, his long black tail began to wag.

"Boy, this sure is a no-man's-land," Tim said, now surveying the dried wilderness outside the barn's door.

"You got that right," Paul agreed. "So, how long are you going to be here? A couple of days, or will you be visiting the whole holiday?"

Tim gave his friend a puzzled look. "Visiting here? What in the world are you talking about? I'm stuck here, just like you."

"You are?" Paul said, open-mouthed.

"Yeah," Tim said. "But at least I'm lucky enough to be living next door."

Paul seemed to be confused. "You live close to me?"

Tim gazed at his friend as if he was an idiot or something.

"Boy. You must never get out, do you? Haven't you seen the new house going up across the street?"

"You live there?" Paul didn't believe a single word his friend was saying.

"You're darn right I do. Several months ago, Titan Industries decided to relocate its gaming division to Greensboro."

"Hmm," Paul replied. "My friend, Daniel, told me about Titan's possible relocation a few weeks ago. But, I didn't know they already made their final decision."

"That's because the company didn't want the price of everything to skyrocket," Tim informed him. "The official announcement of where they're moving to will be made public January second."

"That's cool," Paul said, picking up Half Pint's brush and taking a step toward her.

"You do know that since you shared the info about how Data Graph Execution processing worked with my dad, the company was able to majorly benefit from it. ... That might have affected their decision to promote him from V.P. to President of their Gaming Division."

“Really?” Paul said while continuing to groom his horse.

“Sure. Didn’t you read about it on their website?”

“No. My mom hasn’t been able to get us a high-speed Internet connection, Tim. So it’s hard for me to keep track of things like that.”

Tim unconsciously put his hand across his chin.

“Hmm. So that’s why you weren’t responding to my email.”

Paul nodded. “Yep. So how’s Brave Boy?”

“He’s fine. He’s busy grazing in our pasture.”

A moment of silence then passed as Paul appeared to be in deep thought about something. “You know, Tim. I just can’t believe it,” he exclaimed. “This is all Mom and her doings.”

“What in the world are you talking about?”

“My mother. She must have known for a long time that you and your family were in the process of moving here, and she’s never mentioned a single word to me about it. I wonder what else she’s hiding?”

“Did she tell you Titan Industries provided the new computers for your school a few months ago?”

“Yes, a couple of weeks after they arrived. However, I never could figure out why. But now that you’re here, it makes sense.”

Tim nodded.

“Did she also happen to mention we’re supposed to go to MIT as soon as we graduate from high school?”

“MIT?” Paul looked at his friend and chuckled. “Who in the devil told you that joke, Tim? There’s no way my mom could afford a college like that. Since we’ve moved here, I was hoping to get a scholarship to either North Carolina State or the University of North Carolina.”

Tim placed his hands on his hips. “Didn’t you read the contract my dad got for us since we gave his company the rights to our game?”

“No. I never even seen it.”

A moment of silence prevailed.

“Paul,” Tim said, in a serious tone. “I think you’d better start comparing yourself to a mushroom.”

“Oh, as in being left in the dark?”

“That’s the general idea.” Tim then pointed his finger at the side rail of Half Pint’s stall. “I think we need to sit so I can fill you in on a few things.”

After listening for several minutes to what his friend had to say,

“You’re kidding?” Paul said, jumping to his feet. “Aren’t you?”

“Nope,” Tim calmly replied. “Besides paying our way to MIT, Titan Industries has guaranteed both of us jobs as video game software engineers – as soon as we graduate. That is, if we still want to work for them. Not to mention, we’re both getting a percentage of our game’s sales, which is being placed into a couple of trust accounts our parents set up. ... The day we turn eighteen, we’ll be loaded.”

Paul shook his head in disbelief. “Unbelievable.”

“Do you think that’s unbelievable? Wait until you hear this.”

“What else could there be?”

“Paul,” Tim replied. “Have you started on a Version 2 of our game, yet?”

Paul nodded. “I started a couple of months ago and the first beta is almost complete. I only have a few more features I would like to add.”

“I had a feeling that’s what you’d be doing,” Tim said. “From what my father has told me, ‘Clash of the BattleStars’ has sold so well worldwide, Titan Industries wants to release Version 2 of the game next year.”

Tim then paused.

“Can you imagine what that would mean?”

Paul let out a whistle. “You must be kidding me?”

“No, I’m not,” Tim then motioned for his friend to follow him. “In fact, to prove everything I’ve been telling you is true, let’s head toward your place. I want to see how your mother answers a question I’d like to ask.”

Paul put down the brush he was using to groom Half Pint's coat and the two of them started to stroll toward the house. When they entered the kitchen, they noticed Ellen was busy washing breakfast dishes.

"Hi, Mrs. Pontiac," Tim said, the moment Paul and him took a seat around the table.

"Hi, Tim. Did you get too cold while waiting in the barn?"

"No, ma'am. I had only been in the hayloft a few minutes when Paul arrived."

"That's good." Ellen nodded as she placed a couple of cups of hot chocolate in front of them.

Paul let out a sigh.

"Mom. Why didn't you tell me Tim and his family were moving here and was bringing Half Pint with them? And why didn't you tell me about ..."

Ellen turned to face her son and was about to respond when ...

"Not now, Paul," Tim interrupted. "You and your mother can go over that later. I still have a point to prove."

Paul looked at his friend and grimaced.

"Mrs. Pontiac?" Tim said, deliberately changing the subject.

"Yes."

"Have you ever told Paul who owns the property next door?"

A guilty look instantly flashed across Ellen's face. "No. I haven't. He's never really asked, so ..."

"Would you please do so now?"

"I know it belongs to your father."

For a second Paul stared at his friend. "Okay, you were right. I believe you. You do live next to me. Are there any other surprises I should know about?"

"W-e-l-l." Tim briefly glanced at the ceiling, while Ellen placed a steaming cup of black coffee on the table and took a seat.

"Have you told Paul about...?"

“No, not yet,” Tim said, before turning to face his friend and taking a deep breath. “I’m sorry about your computer. But, since you won’t be needing it anymore, your mother thought ...”

“You asked Tim to destroy my computer?” Paul yelled, turning to face his mother. “I can’t believe it.”

“Guilty as charged,” Ellen confirmed. “The way you’ve been complaining how it’s not advanced enough to do what you need to do, I figured I’d pull a holiday prank on you since Titan Industries bought you a brand new, five thousand dollar, top-of-the-line model. It’s been waiting for you at Tim’s house. ... It’s also why I asked him to copy everything from your hard drives before annihilating your old one.”

“That wasn’t funny, Mom,” Paul said, before taking a sip of his chocolate.

He then turned to face his friend.

“Answer this, Tim. How did you know I hadn’t changed my password? And, who told you about the Doo-wop thing?”

Tim gave his friend a quick smile.

“Boy, you sure have a short memory, Paul. Apparently, you forgot that ever since we started letting each other know our network passwords, we agreed to only change them once a year. And in regards to the Doo-wop thing, when your mother called and asked me to help with your Christmas surprise, she mentioned how you and your friend Daniel used the term every time something went wrong. So I thought I would use it while killing your system.”

Paul shook his head in denial. *Wouldn’t you know it? Another one of Mom’s well-thought-out schemes that she considers to be humorous.*

He then sighed.

*She did it to me, again.*

“Where’s Nathan?” Paul asked after a few moments passed, upon hearing the unmistakable sound of a wheelchair rolling across the wooden floor in his bedroom.

“He’s in your bedroom,” Ellen said. “Why?”

“Nothing important. I just wondered where he was. A few days ago we were talking about the original ‘Clash of the BattleStars,’ and he mentioned he saw Tim’s picture and bio on Titan Industries website and would like to meet him.”

“I asked him to unhook your old computer so we could throw it out,” Ellen said.

“Throw it out?” Paul repeated. “I’m sure there’s a few parts I might be able to salvage.”

“I doubt it.”

Paul frowned. “Hey, Nathan,” he then yelled in the direction of his bedroom, “How about coming to the kitchen for a minute?”

“Okay,” Nathan’s voice answered from down the hallway.

A few seconds later, “Oh my gosh!” Nathan exclaimed, all flustered as he rolled up to the table where everyone was sitting, enjoying either their hot chocolate or coffee.

“I’ve got both of my heroes here with me for Christmas. I really must have been a good boy this year.”

**The End**

Thanks for reading, **The Question**.

JW