

CHAPTER FIVE – THE BAD NEWS IN BURLINGTON

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

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

“A minor setback?” Ray repeated, pounding the top of his desk with his fist. “Have you lost your mind? Hearing that Paul had caught the flu or a bad cold would be a minor setback. From what you just described, there’s a good chance the kid might not survive – and even if he does, most likely he won’t make it back to school this semester.”

“I know. But all is not lost yet. We still have Tim Hegler and Daniel Whitehouse. They’re both good on computers. Couldn’t they complete the project?”

“Maybe, I’m not sure,” Ray replied. “Tim was one of the co-developers of Clash of the BattleStars. However, Daniel is just an eleven-year-old freshman, who happens to be a computer genius.”

“Well, there you have it,” the voice said, trying to sound reassuring. “If Tim utilizes Daniel’s help, then the two of them should be able to finish it.”

Ray took a semi-relaxing breath. “I hope you’re right. But I’m still going to have to consult with Mike and get his opinion. He knows software development far better than I do and would know if Tim and Daniel have the skills needed to complete the game. In the meantime, as soon as you’re done with lunch, I want you to get your butt back to Alamance Regional Medical Center. We need to know the instant Paul Pontiac’s status changes.”

“Will do, Boss.”

“I can’t believe it. ... I just can’t believe it,” Ray muttered as he stepped out of his office and began to head down the hallway toward the employee’s lounge. “Of all the dang things to happen.”

“What’s up?” George asked, walking up beside him. “Isn’t everything going as planned?”

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

“Yeah. What about it?”

“Well. Originally, everything was cool. With Clash of The BattleStars hitting the top of the gaming charts for the past couple of months and both Paul Pontiac and Tim Hegler

being in Gibsonville's computer club – the game the club was developing for Titan's Industries' contest was guaranteed to be a surefire winner. The only thing we needed to do was, steal of copy of it before the final version shipped."

"OK. So what's the problem?"

"Everything!" Ray verbally exploded. "Phillip just called and told me that Paul Pontiac was rushed to the hospital yesterday and is in critical condition."

George's expression instantly turned serious. "You got to be joking. Aren't you?"

"I wish I was," Ray said, as they stepped inside the employee's lounge. "Unfortunately, I'm not. According to Phillip, things are looking pretty bleak."

"So what happened to Paul?" George asked, as Ray took a dollar out of his wallet and slipped it inside the coffee machine. "Did he fall down a flight of stairs?"

"I wish. He would have been far better off." Stopping to push the large, square button labeled in front of him mocha grande, Ray then continued, "Apparently he pissed off some kid named, Butch McGuire, and the kid gave him a brutal ass-kicking."

"A brutal ass-kicking?" George repeated, raising an eyebrow. "What exactly did he do?"

"Well," Ray said, before pausing to get his coffee. "According to Phillip, not only did Butch work over Paul's face, chest, and abdomen. Just for fun, he also crushed part of his sternum – the part that lies directly over his heart."

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

"Just barely."

"Wow."

The two of them then started back down the hallway.

"Mostly likely, Paul will soon be shipped to Duke Medical Center. It's the only hospital near Burlington I'm aware of that could handle this type of injury. In the meantime, the only reason the kid's still alive is because Alamance Regional has him on life support."

"Have you told Tom about this?" George asked, as they came to a halt directly in front of Ray's office.

"No. ... not yet. How do you tell your boss that the main developer of the game you were planning to steal, just got an intensive ass-kicking and may not survive?"

Looking perplexed, George raised his palms in a manner that clearly expressed he really didn't know.

Stepping into his office, Ray stopped to take a sip of coffee – before grabbing the phone and typing Mike's extension. "Hi Mike. This is Ray. Would you mind stopping by my office. ... Something's come up we're going to need to discuss."

"Is it absolutely critical? ... I'm really busy at the moment, Ray."

“It’s important,” Ray coldly replied. “In fact, you might even say that Operation Chicken Hawk may soon be turning into Operation Dead Duck.”

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

“Let’s go outside and take a short walk,” Ray suggested the minute Mike stepped into his office. “That way there’s a smaller chance we’ll be interrupted or overheard.”

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

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

“Ray. Mike,” Tom cheerfully said, greeting them as he passed through the limo’s back door. “What are you two doing outside? Stepping out to get a breathe of fresh air? ... It is a beautiful time of year. Isn’t it?”

“Yes sir, it is,” Ray replied, taking a gulp. “Well, at least today is nice. ... I’ve heard a few storm clouds are suppose to be moving in tomorrow.”

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

“They sure did,” Ray replied, as both he and Mike gave their boss a false smile.

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

Ray stopped and glanced up at an oak tree. But before he had a chance to speak, a black crow passed directly above and left a lengthy, smelly deposit down the front of his shirt.

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

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

Mike paused to take a plug of tobacco out of the can of Skoal in his pocket – and placed it inside his mouth. “It all depends. ... If main modules of the game have already been completed, then Tim shouldn’t run into any problems. ... However, if they haven’t, we’re in trouble. ... Paul has always handled the more complex items and without him there, I’m not sure Tim has the skills to complete it – even with Daniel’s help.”

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

“Not when it comes to the integration of three-dimensional graphics,” Mike replied. “I’ve

only seen a small number of programmers who have the natural knack Paul seems to have been born with.”

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

Mike raised his hand to his lips. “No. ... Not right now. ... Let’s wait a while. We first need to get back in touch with Phillip in order to find out exactly what developmental stage the game has progressed to. Also, I would first like to know if Paul is going to survive or not.”

“And if he doesn’t?”

Mike immediately frowned. “We may be facing some extremely serious problems.”