

CHAPTER FOUR – PLANNING AND SCHEMING

“NO. NO! You can’t do that,” Tim shouted from 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!”

Setting his Logitech gamepad on the top of his desk, Tim sighed as fiery blue flames furiously engulfed the remains of his metallic white battleship, just before it exploded into billions of sub-atomic particles.

Two hours of unbelievable, ferocious battling – all for nothing.

After taking a moment to stretch the stiffened muscles in his legs, he then rose to his feet and proceeded to shuffle toward his bedroom. Once inside, he noticed that Paul was still lying underneath the guest bed’s dark blue cotton bedspread, dead asleep. He apparently had not moved even an inch all morning.

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

Paul blinked as a puzzled expression covered his face. “Huh! What are you talking about?” he groggily asked just before letting out a long, loud yawn. “What time is it?”

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

“N-O-O-N?” Paul repeated. His expression was one of disbelief. “It can’t be.”

“Oh, yes it can,” Tim replied as he took a seat on the edge of his maple-framed bed. “Just look at the clock. I’ve been up for a bit over two hours now. But since we stayed up till four in the morning working on Clash of the Battlestars, Mom insisted that I let you sleep in.”

“She did?” Paul said, frowning. “You should have woken me up anyhow. Now we’re not going to have much time together before I have to leave.”

“I’m afraid you’re mistaken, Paul. We’ve got all day to fool around.”

“All day?” Paul repeated. “Are you crazy, Tim? No, we don’t. Did you forget that I told you my mom is going to be picking me up at noon? She’ll probably be here any minute now.”

“No, she won’t.” A confident smile appeared on Tim’s face. “Shortly after I got up, the phone rang and it was your mom on the line. She wanted to ask my mom if you could stay here another night.”

“Cool,” Paul said, twisting around so he could hang his feet off the side of the bed. “But why would she do that? It’s unusual for her to let me stay out two nights in a row.”

Tim suddenly hesitated.

“I have a good suspicion why,” he eventually said. “But I really don’t think I should be the one to tell you.”

“Why?” Paul said, jumping to his feet. “If it’s something important, then I need to know.”

“I know, but...,” Tim paused for a moment as he tried to figure out what would be the best way to pass along the bad news his friend was wanting him to share. “Well,” he started, “after I handed the phone over to my mom, I pretended to be doing some work on the computer in the living room so that I could listen in on the phone conversation. After our two moms had been talking for a while, I heard the word ... DIVORCE. And I know for a fact that my parents aren’t thinking about getting one.”

“Oh,” Paul replied. He then remained on the bed without speaking a word. *Could this mean what I think it does? Did Dad finally go too far and now Mom is going to dump him? I surely hope not. I know Dad’s been a real pain in the butt recently, but he’s also happens to be the only father I have.*

“Mom washed your pants and shirt this morning so you would have something clean to wear today,” Tim said, trying to change the subject as he tossed Paul’s clothes next to him.

“Thanks,” Paul replied. “Do you really think my mom is thinking about getting a divorce?”

Tim gave him a weak smile, before nodding yes.

“From what I overheard, it sounded like your dad got drunk again last night, and it resulted with your parents getting into one heck of a fight.”

“They did?”

“Uh-huh. Now I can’t really say what might have happened after that, but I do know that this morning your mother asked if you could stay here until the two of you left on your trip tomorrow morning.”

“You know about my trip?” Paul’s cheeks turned crimson because he had failed to tell Tim about it.

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

“I know,” Paul said, exhaling in a depressing demeanor. “I meant to tell you about it yesterday, but I forgot. Do you think your mom could talk mine out of taking me? I really don’t want to go.”

Tim automatically began to shake his head. “I doubt it. Anyway, even if she could, why wouldn’t you want to go?”

“I hate being around my brother. The guy always acts like a bum hole when he’s near me. Not to mention, who would take care of Half Pint while I was gone? I certainly can’t depend on my dad to do it.”

“I’d be willing to keep an eye on her. Also, think about this. How often are you going to get a chance to fly somewhere? An opportunity like that doesn’t come around every day. Wouldn’t that make the trip worthwhile?”

“No. Not really, Tim,” Paul said, as he bent down to tie his shoelaces. “Besides my brother being an “A” Class, Number One, jerk. Being at my brother Jack’s house is so boring, even watching paint dry would be more entertaining. The guy doesn’t even own one of those antique Atari game consoles.”

“Unbelievable,” Tim exclaimed. “It’s no wonder you don’t want to go. Your brother must think that this is still the Stone Age.”

From down the hallway the sound of Mrs. Hegler’s voice calling their names began to make its way into Tim’s bedroom.

“Paul. Tim. Are you two about ready to eat?”

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

At once, the two of them began to dash through Tim’s bedroom door as if they were running a 100-meter dash in the Olympics. As they headed down the hallway, initially, Paul was in the lead. However, soon thereafter ...

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

“Are you OK, Paul?” Mary Lou asked, glancing downward at the floor next to her feet where the five-foot pile of skin-covered bones had unexpectedly come to a crashing halt.

“Yes, I think so,” Paul said, as he unconsciously began to rub the tip of his nose where it had slammed into the floor.

“What were you trying to do, Paul?” Tim asked, as he walked up beside him. “Kill yourself?”

Giving his friend an evil smirk, “Yeah. Right here in your living room,” Paul replied. “You are so very funny, Tim. A true lark.”

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

Now she tells me, Paul thought. *Anyway, how was I supposed to know they had recently placed a throw rug in front of their aquarium?*

Returning to Tim’s bedroom after they had finished their meal, the boys lackadaisically flopped down on the edge of Tim’s bed and began to do some serious thinking.

“So what do you what to do this afternoon?” Tim asked, as he picked up a nearby wad of scrap paper and tossed it inside the Miami Dolphins garbage can he kept in the far corner of the room. “Just hanging around here will get boring mighty quick.”

“If I had my spider bike here,” Paul began, while aggressively searching the room for something he could use to match Tim’s two points. “I’d say, let’s head over to the mall.”

“The new one on Hollywood Boulevard?”

“Yeah. I noticed that they have recently installed this huge sign on the roof of the Sears store, directly above its main entrance.”

“So?” Tim replied, leaning backwards.

“Well, if we were careful. We could hide behind it and drop water balloons on people as they passed underneath. What do you think?”

“That sounds like it might be fun. However, we don't have enough bikes to get us there, unless we borrowed one.”

“True. But who around here has an extra bike?”

“If we brought Harold along, there's a possibility that we could convince him to let us borrow his brother's.”

Paul lifted his arm and grasped his chin firmly in his right hand.

“Hmm. Harold is a good friend. But are you sure having him with us isn't going to end up being more trouble than it's worth.”

“W-e-l-l,” Tim slowly replied. “There's always a small risk.”

“Small risk?” Paul repeated, turning to face him. “How can you say he's a small risk? Friend or not, Harold is sometimes so unpredictable that he's literally a walking time bomb. Have you forgotten how he almost got us locked up in jail when he decided to moon a cop last year during our Halloween escapade?”

“No,” Tim said, sniggering at the memory. “But, bringing him along is the only way we're going to get you a bike.” He then paused. “So, do we bring Harold along or not? Or would you rather spend the afternoon hanging around here until it's time to head out to the horse ranch?”

“Well, if we have to bring Harold, then I guess we will,” Paul said, sliding off the edge of the bed 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 should have some.” Tim said as he began to head toward his dresser. “I put a new pack into my drawer just a few days ago.”

“Cool!” Paul shouted, simultaneously hitting a balled fist into his left hand.

Reaching inside his top drawer, Tim began to shuffle an untold number of papers and other miscellaneous items. Eventually he yanked out a fresh, unopened pack of party balloons. Soon afterwards, they made a beeline for the water spigot located behind Tim's garage.

“Do you think thirty will be enough?” Tim asked, as he set another about-to-burst balloon down on the soft Bermuda grass next to him.

“It should be,” Paul replied. He then began to double-check the end of the last balloon Tim had just filled to make sure that it had been tied tight. “That'll give us ten apiece. Any more than that and we'd be risking having the mall's security people all over us.”

Almost at once, Tim gave his friend a puzzled look.

“You know. I hadn't thought about that.”

“About what?”

“The mall's security guards,” Tim said, as a wrinkle formed across his forehead.

“You are a fast runner, aren't you?” Paul said, as he set the red balloon he had been holding, down onto the ground.

“Yes. But...,” Tim replied, his eyes now widening.

“You could also jump off the roof of the mall if you had to. Couldn't you?”

“Yes,” Tim replied. However, from the way the pupil of his eyes were narrowing, it was clear that he was starting to have some serious concerns about what they were thinking about doing.

Paul ignored his friend's appearance and continued to act as if there wasn't anything to worry about.

“So what's the problem? Most likely, we'll be long gone before the security guards even realize what we were doing.”

“I guess there isn't one then. ... Except...”

“Except for what?”

“Well. For one – how are we going to carry all these balloons to the mall?”

“H-m-m. I hadn't thought about that.”

Gazing across the yard in the direction of the coconut tree located in the far right corner of Tim's property, Paul looked for something that could securely hold thirty balloons. Not finding anything, he then looked at Tim and asked, “Doesn't your mom keep a few extra plastic grocery bags around the house?”

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

“That's no problem. We're bound to come up with something.”

After carrying the water-filled balloons inside the garage and sitting them on the floor, one-by-one they carefully stashed them under a worn army tarp located inside of an old, rusty footlocker that someone had stored under Mr. Hegler's workbench.

“Have you figured out what we're going to tell my mom?” Tim asked, as they stepped through the doorway between the garage and kitchen.

“How about this?” Paul replied. “Why don't we tell her we need them because we'd like to collect some aluminum cans to recycle?”

Tim stood and thought about that for a moment.

“You know,” he eventually said, “that just might work since she's big time into going green.”

“Hey, Mom. What are you doing?” Tim shouted, after finding his mother sitting in front of the large, mahogany desk located inside her private office. She appeared to be busy doing something on her computer.

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

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

“Not right now. I was busy working on my latest manuscript,” she said, tapping the fingers of her right hand in front of the keyboard on her desk. “So what do you kids want? I'm in a hurry. My

editor wants me to have this book finished by the end of August so hopefully we can get it published in time for the Christmas shopping season.”

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

“What do you need them for? It's too early to start making Halloween masks.”

“Very funny, Mom,” Tim replied. “Paul and I thought we would try to find some aluminum cans to recycle.”

Mary Lou paused so she could contemplate her son's reply. *I wonder what these two are up to. I know what they are telling me, but*

“I guess so, if that's the real reason you want them,” she finally replied. “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'll be back in time,” Tim said, trying to conceal a large grin. “Thanks, Mom.”

“You're welcome. And by the way, Paul?”

“Yes ma'am?” he said, stepping a foot backwards.

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

Sadness immediately ran through him just as if he had swallowed a bitter potion.

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

Mary Lou just smiled at him. It was a sad type of smile, and it caused Paul to wonder what exactly his mother must have told her. It made him glad when she turned back toward her flat screen computer monitor a few seconds later and resumed working on her book. She might have been wanting to question him about a few personal things he really didn't want to talk about.

Quickly leaving Mrs. Hegler's office before she had a chance to change her mind about the grocery bags, the two boys snatched a handful from underneath the kitchen cabinet and proceeded for the garage. Once there, they quickly filled them with the balloons they had stored and hurried out of the house.

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

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

Changing his voice so it would sound like his mother's, “What do you boys need my grocery bags for?” he then squeaked.