

laptop #7

choke hold

They Must Not Surrender to Fear's Grip

by Christopher P.N. Maselli



Zonder**kidz**

To Tina Davis for her creative support,
and whom, I think, isn't afraid of anything.

Zonderkidz[®]

The children's group of Zondervan

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Choke Hold

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Summary: Thirteen-year-old Matt is not supposed to use his laptop computer for two more weeks, but he is sure that using the computer's amazing power is the only way he will be able to keep Hulk Hooligan from maiming him on the wrestling mat.

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Contents

1.	Spinning Around	5
2.	The Con Game	19
3.	Bein' Sneaky	32
4.	Not So Smart	50
5.	Upside Down	59
6.	The Trouble with the Laptop	69
7.	The Snap Heard Around the Gym	81
8.	The Final Bout	92
9.	Strength	101
	<i>Epilogue</i>	115
	<i>The Truth</i>	116
	<i>About the Author</i>	117

Spinning Around

Discovering truth puts fear to rest. One inventor had discovered the truth long ago about those who stole her invention. Now it was time to share that truth with the only person who could stop the evil from happening again. . . a teenage boy who was wrestling with challenges of his own.



Flashes of blue, red, white, yellow, and black. Flashes of light and concrete. Flashes of his life up until now.

As thirteen-year-old Matt Calahan spun through the air, his arms and feet flailing like a puppet's, flashes were all his mind could process. Well, flashes and three words: "I hate wrestliiiiiing!!!"

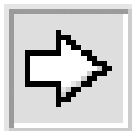
Ker-thump! Hulk Hooligan stopped spinning Matt around as if he was a set of helicopter blades . . . and let him drop to the ground. Matt's body hit the canvas like rubber, bouncing up slightly before coming to rest.

"Tails!" someone shouted. "I told you he'd land face down!"

Matt rolled over slightly, his head still spinning. He tugged at a few strands of wet, black hair which were plastered to his forehead.

"No one messes wit' da *Hooligan!*" Hulk gloated to his classmates.

Matt's eyes nearly crossed as the two-hundred-and-something-pound-bully-with-bleached-hair hooted and hollered and growled like a rabid dog.



Matt grimaced, pushed his torso up, and pulled his knees to his chest. Then he lifted his head.

Hulk Hooligan frowned. "Ah, ya want summere, Calhan?"

"Cal-a-han," Matt growled back, pushing himself into a kneeling position.

"Arrraugh!" Hulk shouted, coming at Matt with his meaty hands leading.

Matt dodged to the side, half rolling, half sliding. Still crouched, he popped his chest up, his arms out, ready for Hulk's next move.

"How much more o' this can ya take?" Hulk taunted.

Not much more, Matt thought.

From the crowd, Matt's best friend Alfonzo shouted, "How much more can you give, Hulk?"

Matt's other two best friends, Lamar and Gill, laughed at Alfonzo's challenge to the big guy. Matt groaned. He'd have to talk to Alfonzo.

Hulk shot forward. Matt shot to the left. Hulk shot to the left. Matt shot to the right.

"Go, Matt!" Lamar shouted.

"Just don't let him land on you!" Gill warned.

Hulk ran to the side of the mat and picked up Coach Plymouth's chair, which was empty because the coach had gone to the bathroom. Which was fine, except he had left just as Matt and Hulk met on the mat. Which wasn't so great. Hulk lifted the chair in the air.

"How many times do I have to tell you?" Matt pleaded. "This is junior high wrestling—*not* the WWE!"

"What's da difference?" Hulk aimed the rungs of the chair toward Matt, then froze when the high-pitched scream of a whistle echoed off the gymnasium walls.

Coach Plymouth ran up to the boys, waving his arms. The whistle dropped from his mouth when he stepped onto the mat. "The difference," he said gruffly to Hulk, "is that in junior high wrestling, we don't use *chairs*."

Hulk put the chair down, nodding, as if the coach had spoken a revelation.

Matt let out a slow breath. He pinched himself to see if he was really still alive, then stumbled over and crashed to the floor beside Lamar, Gill, and Alfonzo. He crossed his legs underneath him, while pulling a towel out of his gym bag and wiping off his face.

Gill wrinkled his nose. "You stink," he whispered.

"I've been wrestling." Matt wiped under his arms with his towel. "What are you doing here anyway? You're not in our gym class."

"I'm scouting," Gill said.

"In other words," Lamar leaned in, "no one needs any A/V services today."

Gill smiled. He *always* had the run of the school during the hour he was supposed to be helping deliver TVs and VCRs from one classroom to another. He finished his job in about five minutes and used the rest of the time to pal around.

"No, I'm serious." Gill bobbed his head left to right. "I've decided to get out of show business and get into management. That's where the real chunk-o-change is. C'mon, let me be your manager."

"Oh brother." Matt stuffed his towel in his bag.

"Now, c'mon, you don't really hate wrestling, do you?"

"No. What I hate is getting beat up."

Gill nodded. "A manager could help you work on that." He pointed to Matt's neck. "You missed a spot."



"Well, boys, I've got a surprise for you," Coach Plymouth announced, standing in the middle of the wrestling mat. His jumpsuit was tightly stretched across his belly. He waited, but no one responded, and so he continued. "There's a reason we've been studying wrestling in gym class. And there's a reason we're going to continue studying it for the next couple weeks."

The class of boys just stared at the coach. Matt's eyes drifted over to the girls on the other side of the gym. They were bouncing a multicolored beach ball on a gigantic parachute. *How is it that they get to play the safe games?* he wondered.

"The reason we're studying wrestling," Coach said, "is because I want to start a team!"

"Shweet!" Hulk punched his fist into his palm.

Some of the guys chuckled.

"Er . . . yeah, it is pretty, uh, *shweet*. Anyway, I want to see potential here," Coach said, emphasizing the word "potential." "That's the key. *Potential*. I can train you later. Just show me you've got what it takes to be a wrestler."

The boys looked at each other.

"Now in an actual meet, you would wrestle for three periods, one to two minutes each. But this is gym class, and I want to see you guys wrestle. So we'll just wrestle for three minutes each time, got it?"

Several heads nodded.

“Finally, in a couple weeks, I’m going to pit you against one another and keep track of the scores. I’m making up the chart now. Don’t worry—we’re not going to weigh in or anything. Not yet. I just want



you guys to wrestle each other. That means, at times, big guys and little guys could be in a match together. That’s the breaks. But like I said, I’m not looking for winners. I’m looking for potential. I’ll try to keep it as fair as possible.”

Matt’s eyes darted to Hulk. *Interesting choice of words*, he thought, massaging his sore arm. “*That’s the breaks.*” *If I have another bout with “da Hooligan,” and he’s not fooling around, breaks are sure to happen.*

“Look at this bruise on my arm,” Matt pointed out to his friends. Just below his shoulder, his arm was tinted black and blue.

In the Enisburg Junior High School locker room, Matt, Lamar, and Alfonzo had showered and were now getting dressed again for the remainder of the school day. Gill leaned against the lockers, punching numbers into a calculator.

Lamar surveyed Matt’s bruise and shook his head. “Man, that’s gonna get dark.”

“At least Hulk didn’t snap it,” Alfonzo said.

Matt gulped. “Snap it?”

“I’m just kidding,” Alfonzo said, rolling on his deodorant.

"I think I'm lucky to be alive."

"It wasn't that bad," Lamar chided.

"Actually," Gill said, looking up, "from where I was sitting, it *was* pretty bad."

Matt looked at Gill, the red-haired comedian. "Thanks for the support."

"Anytime, my friend. A manager is always honest with the little people under him."

"Little people?! Hey, at least *I* didn't throw up on him."

"Hey, ya gotta do what works for you."

Suddenly the bench shook.

"Speaking of . . ."

Hulk rounded the corner. He looked at Matt's bruised arm and chuckled. "Nice battle wound, Calhan."

"What's your problem?" Matt challenged the big guy. "Did you have to be so dramatic out there?"

"If I member right, ya didn't keep yer promise to me. Ya promised to help me become fit."

"It's impossible."

"Shuddup."

"Look, I've tried. I've told you that you have to exercise every day. And diet."

"Forget all dat. I just wanna be in shape for da tournament."

"Exercise. Diet."



Hulk huffed. His eyes cut to Alfonzo, then back to Matt. "Okay, gimme a list or somethin' of what I gotta eat."

Gill piped up, "Hey, Hulk, you looking for a manager?"

"Gill!" Matt shouted.

"What? Did you see him out there? He clobbered you."

"So now you're not going to be *my* manager?"

"You want me to be your manager?" Gill asked, looking hopeful.

"Well, ya ain't gonna be *my* manager," Hulk said to Gill. "I need someone with brains."



"Oh sure," Gill countered. "You think Matt has brains just because he wears glasses."

Matt blinked. "I don't wear glasses."

Gill looked at Matt for a long moment, then turned back to Hulk. "What do you say?"

Hulk shook his head. "I say," he leaned into Matt's face, "if Matt don't help me get fit, next time we're in da ring together, I'm gonna beat da snot outta him." On that note, he stepped back and went to pick on someone else smaller than him.

Matt gulped and pushed Gill. "You'll be his manager?"

"What?"

"I'm gonna get the snot beat outta me, that's what."

"That's really a gross visual," Gill said. "But how is this any different than the other hundred times?"

"Because," Matt said, looking around. "You know."

"Oh!" Gill's eyes grew big. "Because you don't have the laptop this time!"

"Shhh!" Matt, Lamar, and Alfonzo all shushed him.

"Yes, that's right," Matt admitted. "I'm still grounded from it."

"Well, do you know where it is?" Alfonzo asked in his only-slightly-Spanish accent.

Matt looked at Lamar, who just raised his dark eyebrows.

"Yeah, I know where it is," Matt told them.

It was shoved under a shoebox on the top shelf of his dad's closet. It had been nearly two weeks now since his dad took it away. His reasons were understandable—because they were true. He thought Matt was spending *way* too much time on his laptop and not enough time doing anything else . . . like sports . . . like wrestling. But his dad didn't understand. He didn't know when he bought it for Matt's thirteenth birthday that this laptop was special. Matt had quickly discovered this was no ordinary computer. This laptop—somehow, someway—could make whatever Matt typed into it actually *happen*. Of

course, this made the laptop not only very powerful, but also very dangerous. In a way, Matt was relieved to be away from it for a short while. Still . . . it would be awfully nice to have it so that he could avoid any trouble with Hulk—and *certainly* to keep him off the same wrestling mat.

There was also the matter of Sam—the laptop's previous owner who had recently told Matt she needed his help. She still freaked him out sometimes. But with the laptop stored away, for the last couple weeks she was nowhere to be seen.

"So . . ." Alfonzo pressed.

"So . . ." Matt repeated.

"So why don't you just sneak in and use it?"

Matt, Lamar, and Gill looked at each other.

"Hey, man," Lamar spoke up, "that's not cool. Matt's grounded from it. As a Christian, he can't do that. It's not right."

"Not to mention that I'd get in *huge* trouble," Matt added.

Alfonzo shrugged. "Hey, this Christian stuff is all new to me. Sorry. Seems like life would be easier without all these rules, though."

"No one said being a Christian was easy," Lamar said, always the one to make a spiritual point. "If anything, it's hard to be a Christian. It's much easier to live without any standards."

"Yeah," Matt agreed, tying his tennis shoe. "We live by a higher standard."

Alfonzo shrugged again.

"Besides," Matt added, "I would get in *huge* trouble."

"So I've heard."

"Hey Matt!" Coach Plymouth blurted out as he rounded the corner.

The four boys jumped and Matt nearly fell over. "Yes, Coach?"

"I need to see you in my office."

"In trouble again, Matt?" Gill whispered as the coach walked away. "See, if you had a manager, you could avoid snags like this."

Matt entered Coach Plymouth's office, softly closing the door behind him. He wanted to beat the coach to the punch, asking, "What'd I do?" but he kept his mouth shut. Gill had gone off to deliver another TV to a class and Alfonzo had headed for his math class. Lamar, with just a study hall ahead, had promised to stick around outside for support. Matt hoped he was out there praying.

Coach Plymouth was perched on the edge of his desk, leaning up against the pile of paperwork in his inbox. His office seemed rather dark with the blinds drawn. Coach's computer displayed an Arizona Cardinals screensaver. A gold trophy shaped like a



football sat at one corner of his desk, next to a glass of water that had to be at least 44 ounces. He took a chug of the water and then set the glass back down.

"So I guess you're wondering why I called you in here," the coach barked.

"I didn't do it," Matt said, only half-kidding.

The coach laughed. "You're not in trouble."

Matt felt the tension release.

"No, in fact, just the opposite."

Matt felt the tension return.



"I've been watching you, Matt, and I really want you to try your hardest for our wrestling team. When I was talking about potential out there, I was talking about *you*."

Matt looked behind him. Nope, he was the only one in the room. "Me?"

Coach Plymouth nodded. "You're fast and you're smart. That's the kind of wrestler I need."

"But . . . I'm not . . . big."

"Bulk is only one piece of the puzzle," Coach said like a teacher.

Matt felt his mouth dry up as he considered this. Then he took a shot in the dark. "Did my dad call you?"

Coach Plymouth smiled. "No, this is all me. Though I've talked to your dad before and I know he'd love for you to find a sport you liked."

"He said that?"

"All dads say that."

Matt's mind rushed as he contemplated being thrown onto the wrestling mat again and again, against bigger, stronger guys than himself. He saw blue and black becoming his best colors. But then again, if *Coach* thought Matt could do it, maybe he could. He did *enjoy* wrestling—except for when he had wrestled Hulk—but he never thought he'd be on a team. He wasn't too good at too many sports, but maybe this time he could be. That would really be *something*.

"Me?" Matt said again.

"Think about it, Matt." Coach Plymouth walked back around his desk and sat down in his high-back chair. "I think you've got what it takes. Will you give it your best shot?"

Matt envisioned himself slamming his opponent down on the mat for the count. He saw his teammates carrying him on their shoulders, fireworks in the distance, confetti littering his hair. He saw the other team crying like babies because they got crushed on the mat *by* the Matt. He saw his friends cheering. He saw Alfonzo's sister, Isabel, clapping joyfully at his triumph. Then he saw his parents smiling, his dad giving him a thumbs up.

Matt smiled and suddenly found himself saying, "Yeah, sure. It would be cool to be on the team."

Coach Plymouth nodded happily, swiveled in his chair, and started typing. Matt waited for him to dismiss him, but after a minute, realized he must have already done so. Matt slowly turned around and exited as quietly as he had entered.

On the other side of the door, Lamar stopped pacing. His brown eyes were as big as Frisbees. "What happened?"

Still dumbfounded, Matt pulled the door shut and gulped. "Let's just say, now I *really* need the laptop."

"But your parents grounded you."

Matt twisted his lip and looked straight at Lamar. "I know. . .but maybe I can talk them out of it."



The Con Game

That's great, Ace!" Stan Calahan, Matt's father snapped his gum and slapped Matt on the back. A broad-shouldered man with a square jaw, he was always chewing gum like it was going out of style. Today he wore his signature plaid shirt and blue jeans.

Matt grimaced. "Yeah, it'd be cool, though I don't know—"

"We're really proud of you," Matt's mother, Penny Calahan, agreed. She wore jeans also, with a pink blouse that brought out her soft facial features and contrasted with her short, straight black hair.

Matt's parents were suddenly into spring cleaning, shifting boxes and gadgets around inside the garage. Matt's dad popped open a box and shuffled through it.

"Well," Matt continued, "Coach says he wants me on the team, but I don't know if I'll actually make—"

"Oh, don't worry about it," Mr. Calahan said, looking up with a wink. "You'll do great. This could be right up your alley."

"But I'm not really stro—"

"Oh!" Mrs. Calahan interjected. "And girls like boys with vision. Boys who are able to take on a challenge with gusto!"

"Mom! Believe me. I'm not trying to impress girls."

Penny Calahan's dark eyebrows popped up. "None?"

Matt sat down on a nearby step and looked at the concrete floor. He thought of Alfonzo's sister, Isabel, living across the street, with the midnight black hair that cascaded down her back like a waterfall, and the voice that sounded like newly-spun honey. He swallowed. "Mom, I'm not—"

"Oh, she's just a hopeless romantic." Matt's dad leaned over and pecked his wife on the cheek.

Her right hand flew up. "Guilty!" she sang.

"But seriously," Mr. Calahan said, his attention back in his box. "Wrestling will be good for you. Might distract you from that laptop."

Matt looked up from the step he was sitting on and brushed a strand of hair out of his eyes. "Heh. Uh . . . yeah." He sat still for a few moments, mustering his courage. Finally, he blurted out, "So can I have it

back? I've been grounded for nearly two weeks and been *really* good."

Mr. Calahan set down his box. He looked at Matt and pointedly said, "No."

"But—"

"No, Matt. Our agreement was four weeks away from the laptop. It was consuming you—like you couldn't live without it. That's not healthy."

"Pleeeeeeeeeeeeease?"

Matt's mom laughed. "Like that's gonna work."

"It works."

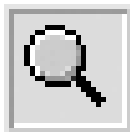
"When you were *two* it worked. Matt, you're a teenager now. We expect you to be responsible."

Matt rolled his eyes. Yes, he was a teenager now. That's what had started all this trouble—turning thirteen and receiving an amazing laptop for his birthday. "I *am* responsible!" he cried.

"And you're going to be responsible for two more weeks," Matt's dad added.

"But—"

"Look, you've got nothing to fear as long as you keep up a good attitude about it. You'll have your laptop back in two weeks."



"But what if I need it before then?"

"Use a pad and paper," Penny Calahan suggested.

"It's not the same, believe me," Matt said dryly. His knee started moving up and down. *Nothing to*

fear. That's what his dad had said. He had nothing to fear. But his dad didn't know that there was *no way* to ensure his safety—or even his place on the wrestling team—without a little nudge from the laptop. He needed an edge. He needed to be *sure* Hulk couldn't pound him to a pulp.

"Are you absolutely, positively sure?" Matt tried again.

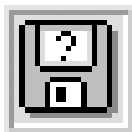
"Matt," Stan Calahan said, his tone of voice becoming a warning.

"No way I can convince you?"

"It would take some pretty hard convincing, Ace."

Con #1

In his bedroom, Matt reclined on his bed, cordless phone in hand. He stared up at his ceiling light, opening and closing his eyes, watching red spots appear out of nowhere. Gill was on the other end of the line, trying his best to help.



"It'll be *easy!*" he said to Matt.

Matt rolled his eyes. "I doubt that. I practically begged my dad to give me my laptop back and he said it's not gonna happen."

"Well, that's because you're trying to do this without your manager."

"Oh, you want to try?"

"Can I be your manager?"

"I'm not paying you anything, Gill."

"I'll do this pro bono."

"So now you're my lawyer, too?"

"What's the difference? Look, all you have to do is be a salesman."

Matt lifted the phone away from his ear and looked at it. He pulled it back. "How's that?"

"Well," Gill said, "the first thing you learn in sales is that you have to get the customer saying 'yes.' You get them saying 'yes, yes, yes' and you can get them to do anything you want."

"Are you sure about that?"

"I have an uncle in sales. He's a telemarketer. You know, sales by phone."

"You're gonna have him call my dad during dinner?"

"No," Gill corrected, as if the notion was ridiculous. "I'll do it. You have three-way calling, right?"

"Yeah."

"So put me on with your dad's cell phone."

"Now?"

"Yeah."

Matt shrugged. *It can't hurt.*

"Hold on." Matt sat up and dialed his dad's cellular phone number from memory. Two rings later, his dad—just downstairs—answered his cell phone.

"Stan Calahan," he said boldly.

Matt quickly clicked Gill on the line.

"Stan Calahan," Matt's dad said again. "Hello?"

"Mr. Calahan!" Gill shouted, his voice deep and robust, sounding quite a bit like Mr. Moviefone. "May I have a moment of your time?"

"No, I—"

"Good!"

Way to go, Matt thought. Get him saying 'no' right away.

Gill continued, "You've been selected as a winner here at K-L-M-N-O-P Radio!"

"I . . . I have?"



"Yes! Yes! Yes! Er . . . could you please turn your radio down? We're getting feedback."

After a short pause, Matt's dad said, "I don't have a radio on."

Matt winced.

"Right!" Gill said quickly. "Must be short waves from the Aurora Bor . . . er . . . Northern Lights!"

"Aren't they . . . up North?"

"So all you have to do," Gill pressed Matt's dad, "is answer three simple questions and you could win your choice of a thousand dollars or an off-season trip to Cancun. Sound good?"

"Er . . . yes?"

"Yes!"

Matt closed his eyes and crashed back onto his pillow.

"Question one," Gill started. "Does the earth revolve around the sun?"

"Yes."

"Yes! Two: Do yellow and blue make green?"

"Yes."

"Yes! Is *Attack of the Clones* better than *The Phantom Menace*?"

"Yes."

"Yes! And now for our final question: Can Matt have his laptop back?"

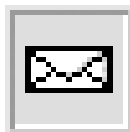
Matt sat up in bed, the phone pressed to his ear.

"That's *four* questions, Gill," Matt's dad said, "and the answer's no."

Click!

Con #2

"What . . . what's *this!*" Matt's mother asked, entering the kitchen after a long day at work.



"Dinner for you and dad," Matt said warmly.

The table was set with clean plates, polished silverware, long-stem glasses and a bouquet of paper flowers Matt created out of old Nickelodeon magazine pages. He didn't dare pick any of his mom's flowers out back.

A peppery, saucy smell lingered in the air; two Salisbury steaks were baking in the oven, along with peas, candied apples, and whatever else was in the Swanson dinner trays.

"This is so sweet, honey!" Penny Calahan cheered, hugging Matt. "Does your dad know?"

"I called him and told him to come home early for a special dinner."

"How about that."

Matt smiled. He took his mother's coat and briefcase and told her to have a seat at the table. A moment



later, Matt returned to the kitchen with a boom box. He plugged it in and spun up a classical music CD. Beethoven was about halfway through his "Moonlight Sonata" when Matt's dad popped open the door from the garage and entered the kitchen.

"Look what Matt prepared us!" Mrs. Calahan exclaimed.

Stan Calahan smiled and nodded and handed his coat to Matt, who promptly left to hang it in the hall closet. He returned, lit two candles, and placed them in the center of the table.

"Very romantic," Matt's mother said.

"Very," his dad replied, smiling at her, a twinkle in his eye.

With flower-print oven mitts, Matt pulled out the dinners, arranged them on plates, and set them in front of his parents.

"Aren't you going to eat?" Matt's mother asked.

"Naw," Matt declined. "I'll grab something later when I clean up."

"You're going to clean up, too? This is so sweet, honey. Isn't this sweet, Stan?"

"It is." His dad looked at him closely. Then he ruffed up Matt's hair. "And you know what? You're still not getting the laptop."

Con #3

After dinner, as Matt predicted to himself, his father retired to the living room and sat back in his La-Z-Boy. Matt watched him search for the remote and finally turn on the TV by hand. Matt stood around the corner with the remote in hand. On the Enisburg news station, the weatherman finished up the forecast. Two commercials followed. Then, right after station identification, Matt aimed the remote precisely and pushed "play" on the VCR, launching the tape he had created earlier with the help of his dad's camcorder. It started up seamlessly.

On the television screen, Matt popped up behind a makeshift desk, brow furled, in a blue suit with a



red tie. Gill had promised it was the best combination for TV.

"Today's story," said Matt's on-screen persona, "is about a young man who was denied an outlet for his creativity. This is the story of Matt Calahan." Matt-at-the-news-desk held up a family photo of himself. Matt-in-the-hallway smiled. "Yes, this is the young man who had a bright future as the greatest writer of all time. He was so great, he didn't even need an editor."

The screen flashed to Matt standing in a trench coat with a mustache stuck on his upper lip. "I'm an editor," Matt-the-trenchcoat-wearing-editor said. "I'm outta work."

The screen flashed back to Matt-at-the-news-desk. "But that bright future has changed . . . because his laptop was taken away."

"Matt!!" Matt's dad shouted.

The real Matt put on a wide, cheesy smile and rounded the corner. *Please*, he thought, *please give me the laptop back!*

"Remote." Stan Calahan held out his hand.

Matt handed it over.

His dad pushed stop and looked at Matt for a long moment. "I thought you once told me that *everyone* needs an editor—no matter how good they write."

"Oh sure," Matt admitted, "*now*. But I was planning to change all that."

Mr. Calahan kept a straight face. "This," he said, "is why you're grounded from your laptop. You seem to think that without it, your life won't be the same. It's just a laptop."

"It's not . . . well . . . it's just really important. My future, Dad."

"Hogwash, Matt," his dad said, pointedly. "You can wait. Just two more weeks."

"But . . . what if it's really important?"

"It won't be."

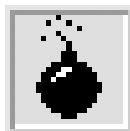
"But what if it is . . . a matter of life and death?"

Matt's dad looked at Matt for a long time, as if trying to read his thoughts. Then, "Right, sure," he said flatly, "if it's a matter of life and death. But, Matt—"

Matt raised his eyebrows.

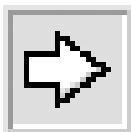
"I can't imagine one instance where typing a story means the difference between life or death. So no more begging or it'll be longer."

Matt kept his mouth shut and exited the room. It was times like this he wished he could just tell his dad all about the laptop's special power to literally change the future. But he knew he couldn't. It was too dangerous. Matt and his friends had decided to keep it a secret to protect the ones they loved. And



now that secret meant Matt was about to “have the snot beat out of him.” Gill was right. It was a less than pleasant visual.

Matt sighed. It *was* a matter of life and death and his dad just didn’t realize the laptop could make all the difference. He just didn’t understand.



“My dad just doesn’t understand,” Matt told Lamar, Gill, and Alfonzo at school the next day.

“I can’t believe you actually thought you could talk him out of it,” Lamar said.

“I didn’t have much of a choice.” Matt held a small stack of notebook paper out. “Look at all this stuff I’ve had to research for Hulk. It’s my only hope now for saving my life.” He stuffed the wad of papers into his backpack.

“Well, you shouldn’t have agreed to help Hulk then,” Alfonzo said.

“Believe me, I didn’t have a choice about that either.”

The friends had made their way from the schoolyard into the school foyer when Matt heard a faint whisper that made him freeze in place.

Noticing Matt stop, Lamar stopped too, and turned around. “What?”

“You didn’t hear that?”

“Hear what?” Lamar said.

"I don't . . ."

There! Matt heard it again. A faint whisper . . . like a child straining to say . . .

"Wordtronix!"

Matt turned around. The whisper was coming from out in the schoolyard. But who would know the name "Wordtronix"—the unique, untraceable brand of his laptop?

"I'm . . . I'll be right in," Matt told his friends.

Lamar looked at Matt quizzically, then shrugged and said he'd see him in class. Matt stepped out of the foyer and back into the schoolyard. He cut down the side of the brick school building and made his way past a few long windows. He stopped and listened.

Nothing.

He moved farther.

Still nothing.

At the corner of the building, he stopped one more time to listen. But with all Matt's schoolmates now inside the schoolyard had grown quiet.

Matt scratched his head. There was no one in sight. *Must be imagining things.*

Matt swiveled to return to the foyer when a gloved hand grabbed the back of his coat and yanked him around the side of the building.