

*To Kim Culp, whose constant prayers for this series
haven't gone unnoticed.*

Zonderkidz®

The children's group of Zondervan

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Dangerous Encounters

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Another False Alarm

The inventor knew he had misjudged them, but by the time he realized it, it was too late. He was forced to disappear—lose his life—in hopes that one day he might find it again. When he vanished, they thought they had won. They thought he was dead. Little did they know, they had misjudged him.



“Go! Go! Go!” Gill thumped the back of his dad’s leather seat as if it were a bongo drum.

“Yes! Go!” Mrs. Gillespie shouted at her husband. Her head was pressed back against the headrest, her hands were wrapped around her stomach.

“I’m going! I’m going!” Gill’s dad, Jason Gillespie, yelled back.

The Security Bank security truck screeched its wheels as it tore out of the driveway. Matt Calahan, sitting beside Gill in the backseat, buckled his seat belt as fast as he could. He looked out the window, feeling oddly like a criminal locked in the back of a

police car. He popped open his laptop and waited for it to boot.

“Where were you, Gill?” Jason Gillespie asked as he propelled the truck down Oleander Street, picking up speed with each roar of the engine. “Didn’t your beeper go off?”

“Yes!” his red-headed son shouted. “And it *kept* going off! I told you it tickles me when it vibrates. I couldn’t stop laughing long enough to get over here! Besides, I wanted to get Matt!”

Matt dropped his head. “Thanks, Gill,” he whispered. *As if* it were *his* fault they were late. He didn’t really want to go, anyway, but Gill had insisted, as he had all *three* times they’d rushed to the hospital so far. They had all been false alarms. Gill’s parents were way too excited about having a baby, and every time Mrs. Gillespie felt uncomfortable—whoosh!—off to the hospital.

Gill, on the other hand, wasn’t so thrilled about his soon-to-be sibling. Matt didn’t know *why* Gill didn’t want a little brother or sister, but he knew he needed to stick by his friend. In some way, Matt felt responsible for Gill. He just might be the only person who could help Gill . . . with a keystroke or two.

Matt’s laptop was fully booted. He placed his fingers on his keyboard, ready to assist as needed. Ironically, Gill’s parents never did ask why Matt always

had to come along. Nor did they seem to wonder why Matt was always typing. They must have figured he was just one of Gill's best friends, documenting the event. Or then again, maybe they were just preoccupied. Little did they know, Matt's laptop was no ordinary laptop. Little did they know that whatever Matt typed into the laptop actually *happened*—all he had to do was press the key with the clock face. Then the laptop went into action. Matt didn't understand *how* it worked, but it did. And at times like this, Matt was thankful that he had it. Other times, though . . .

"Type, Matt!" Gill ordered in a harsh whisper.

Matt ran his hand through his black hair. He leaned toward the center of the car and peered out the front window. He saw the stoplight turn red. Quickly he typed,

Immediately the stoplight at the crossing of Stewart and Reed turned green.

He hit the clock key. The on-screen arrow cursor turned into a golden analog clock, swiftly ticking forward. A second later it stopped and Matt looked up.

The stoplight instantly turned green. A white pickup and a green VW Bug came to a screeching halt, the rears of the vehicles popping into the air.

"Aaaaggghhhh!" Mrs. Gillespie screamed.

"Whoo-hoo!" Gill cheered as they sailed through the intersection.

"Sweet," Mr. Gillespie said.

Matt cracked a smile.

"We'll be there in no time," Gill's dad said, trying to comfort his wife.

"We'd better!" she shouted, her fingernails digging into the soft roof. "Or next time *you're* having the baby!"

Matt watched Mr. Gillespie stomp on the gas pedal.

"Oh no!" Gill pointed forward. "There's a dump truck blocking the street!"

Mr. Gillespie now stomped on the brake pedal.

"You're slowing down!" Gill's mom complained, her auburn hair spreading out on her headrest like a squashed starfish.

"What am I supposed to do? Plow through it?"

Matt furiously typed. "Take Henson Boulevard," he stated matter-of-factly. "It'll be clear."

Mr. Gillespie turned onto Henson Boulevard, obeying without question, like a dazed clone.

"How do you know it'll be clear?" Gill asked Matt.

Matt turned the laptop so Gill could read the screen.

Henson Blvd was blocked to thru traffic
and free for Mr. Gillespie to drive down.

"Nice," Gill said.

As they shot down Henson Boulevard, they passed an intersection blocked by a tipped ice cream truck. Ice cream was spilled everywhere, holding up crossing traffic on the now-rocky road.

"Is that what you meant to do?" Gill asked, reading once again what Matt had typed.

Matt twisted his lip. "Hmm. No. But then again, sometimes the best stories thrive on misunderstandings."

"Cool—like sitcoms!"

Matt grimaced. *Leave it to Gill to relate literary prowess back to television.* "Yes, like sitcoms," he conceded.

"How much longer?" Mrs. Gillespie shouted, pounding the floorboard with her foot.

"Not long!" Gill's dad promised, cranking into another turn.

With the road clear, Matt relaxed and turned to Gill. "So you're about to be a big brother, eh?"

Gill rolled his eyes.

"What?"

"You know what," Gill retorted.

"I just want life to get back to normal."

Matt chuckled. "Normal life? You mean the normal life where Hulk Hooligan is still upset at you for upchucking all over him?"

Gill waved a hand. "Actually he hasn't bothered me at all." Then he added, "Speaking of normal life, is Isabel still mad at you for sabotaging your date?"

"It wasn't a date, it was a youth function," Matt insisted. "But yes. Alfonzo told me she couldn't get the chocolate cake out of her dress."

Gill's eyebrows perked up. "I didn't know chocolate-cake-slinging was involved."

"Trust me, you don't want to know. Besides, chocolate cake is the least of my worries. For all I know, Sam's going to show up again and try to rope me into something. Fat chance."

Gill shuddered. "I hope he doesn't show up again."

Matt knew. Gill didn't like Sam because Gill wasn't fond of danger. And Sam, the previous owner of Matt's amazing laptop, *reeked* of danger. It was only recently that Matt had discovered that the mysterious man was even alive . . . and ready to meddle in Matt's laptop business.

"We can't be afraid of him," Matt said. "That's what he wants."

"Easier said than done."

"Tell me about it."

Whooooooooooooooooooooo!

Matt, Gill, and Gill's mom all shifted around and looked out the back window. Mr. Gillespie peered into the rearview mirror. His shoulders dropped.

"We're being pulled over," he stated.

"I can see that, but you can't stop!" Gill's mom protested.

"I can't *not* stop!" he replied.

A moment later the security vehicle was idling by the curb as a female police officer stepped off her motorcycle. She slowly strolled to the driver's side window as Mr. Gillespie rolled it down.

Matt typed,

Mrs. Gillespie makes it to the hospital with flying colors.

"License and reg—," the officer began, then she said, "Hey, is that you, Jason?"

Mr. Gillespie smiled. "Betty! Hi!" He turned to his wife. "Hey, Jill, this is Betty. We worked together sometimes when I was on the force."

Mrs. Gillespie had a pinched look on her face and seemed to be forcing her smile. "Jason . . ."

"Oh, right! Say, Betty, I'm sorry we were speeding, but my wife's having a baby, and—"

"A baby! Oh! Say no more. Been there, done that! Turn on your lights—I'll escort you."

"Right!"

Officer Betty ran back to her motorcycle and pulled out, her lights twirling, her siren blaring. Mr.

Gillespie flipped on the top lights of his security vehicle and pulled in behind her.

“Cool!” Gill shouted.

The motorcycle-truck caravan raced down the road, parting traffic like Moses parted the Red Sea, but without all the water mess.

“I’m so embarrassed!” Gill’s mom lamented.

As they flew down the road, Gill peeled his eyes away from the flashing red and white of the police cycle just long enough to glance at Matt’s laptop. “Flying colors,” he said.

Matt smiled. “Not what I meant, but see, sometimes misunderstandings aren’t so bad!”

Gill playfully socked Matt in the shoulder. “Man, you couldn’t top this!”

Matt nodded. “Let’s hope I don’t have to.”



Matt, Gill, Lamar, and Alfonzo—the QoolQuad, as they called themselves—were biking up and down Oleander Street, in front of their homes. Matt’s house was in the center of the block, a two-story, wooden, musty-white house with black trim.

Across the street was Alfonzo’s house, a huge three-story mansion that even had a basement. Outside, ivy eerily snaked up the brick. The creaky old gate was one of the first things Mr. Zarza had

removed when they moved up from Mexico. Matt was thankful they were remodeling the house so fast—it had been a real eyesore for years.

Gill's house was next to Matt's. It was an odd turquoise color that somehow worked in the neighborhood. It was just one story, with a small yard and an always open garage.

Lamar's house, where Matt had spent many hours, was a few doors down, on the other side. It was brick red and white with plenty of lush, dark green bushes out front. A long, stark-black Cadillac sat in the driveway now. Oscar, the man Lamar's mom had started dating, was visiting again . . . which was probably the reason Lamar was the first one outside on his bike.

"I can't believe it was *another* false alarm," Lamar said.

"I'll believe it's over when I see the baby," Matt said flatly.

Gill shivered as if Matt had just made his skin crawl. "My parents are way too nervous. The doctor says it's like . . . hiccups or something."

"Hiccups don't do that to me."

"Well, they sure do it to my mom. I'm telling you, that thing is *trouble*."

Matt winced. "It's not a *thing*, Gill. It's not even an *it*. It's your baby brother or sister. Are you sure you're not just scared about being a big brother?"

"I'm not scared," Gill scoffed. "I don't scare easily."

"Look! There's Sam!" Matt yelled.

Gill ducked. "Where?"

The boys laughed.

Alfonzo had constructed a small ramp out of wooden planks. Gill shot over it, his bicycle launching into the air and landing with a thump.

"Personally," Gill added as he spun around, "I'm glad I'm not a girl. Because who wants to have babies?" He shuddered. "Not me. I'll adopt. Just like my parents adopted me. But no, they had to go the extra mile and have one themselves."

"Yeah," Alfonzo offered as he kicked up his speed. "But you're just playin', right? I mean, you want another Gillespie, don't you?" Pow! He shot over the ramp and then screeched to a halt.

Gill waited for Alfonzo to turn around.



"Well, it's not even born yet and look how much trouble it's been! Demanding all that attention. Giving my mother bad hiccups."

"So is it a boy or a girl?" Alfonzo asked.

"We don't know. My parents want it to be a big surprise. I don't really care. They'll see soon enough that it's a monster."

"It's not so bad," Alfonzo said, assuring Gill. "I mean, Iz was a handful when she was born—still is. But don't knock being a big brother until you've tried it."

Matt squinted and stopped pedaling. "You weren't even *two* when Isabel was born. You can't remember that far back."

"Trust me. If you've ever heard my sister scream, you'd remember."

Matt conceded the point. He looked at Alfonzo's house, his eyes drawing across the structure until they settled on the window to Isabel's room on the second floor. He cleared his throat. "So, er, how is she?"

Alfonzo shot down the street and jumped off the ramp again before he answered. "Man, I don't know if she's upset or just working things out. But I warned you. I told you after our mom left that she didn't need her heart broken again."

Gill shook his head. "I heard about the chocolate-cake-slinging incident."

Suddenly the crew froze. They could nearly feel the ground shake as they watched the figure round the corner. It was the six-foot, two-hundred-and-some-pound bully of Enisburg Junior High in the flesh. With a frown on his face. *Hulk Hooligan*.

Gill gulped. "He's come to kill me," he whispered.

"Can you blame him? You puked on him—on TV," Alfonzo noted.

"Thanks for reminding me," Gill whimpered. "Just for that, upon my passing, Lamar gets my stereo instead of you."

"Hey!" Hulk roared as he drew close to their ramp.

Gill hopped off his bike, punched down the kickstand, turned around, and opened his arms. "Okay, beat me up," he said to Hulk. "Do your worst. I deserve it. I'm tired of acting like the Road Runner trying to escape Wile E. I'm going to be a man and stand my ground."

"He gets kinda melodramatic when his life's on the line," Matt explained to Hulk.

"Kill ya?" Hulk shouted. "I'm not gonna kill ya! Whatdaya dink I am? A Neanderdal?"

Gill said, "Well, now that you mention it . . ."

Hulk sneered.

Gill put his arms down. "So you're not gonna kill me?"

"You kiddin'? Everywhere I go, kids want my autograph. Dey saw me skatin' and saw ya barf on me. On TV! Man, dey dought it was high-larious! I got carpo tunnel fer signin' so much!"

"This can't be happening," Gill whimpered.

"Ya rule, Gillespie! Jus' wanted ta say danks."

"Way to go, Gill," Matt said.

"Shuddup, Calhan," Hulk ordered.

"Cal-a-han," Matt corrected, pronouncing each syllable.

"Oh, by the way," Hulk added, leaning into Gill and holding a clenched fist between their faces, "don't let it happen again."

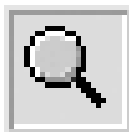
Gill gulped. Hulk walked away, the ground rumbling with each step. Gill waited until he was out of earshot, then said, "How come I was the star of the commercial and he's the one who became famous? Makes no sense."

"You know what doesn't make sense?" Lamar asked. His three friends turned to look at him.

"What?" Matt wondered aloud.

"My mom dating that loser." He straddled his bike, his head nodding toward the black Cadillac.

"Why don't you want your mom to date?" Matt asked. "I thought you were okay with this. It's been like fourteen years since your dad died, Lamar. I know she hasn't dated before, but c'mon. She's a grown woman."



"It's not that," Lamar said. "It's . . . I think this guy's bad news."

Matt let out a long breath. He flashed back to Lamar's uneasy feelings weeks ago at the winter banquet. He wasn't keen on his mother going out with Oscar then, and though Matt thought he'd come to accept it that night, obviously his concern had only grown. "What do you mean, 'bad news'?"

"I don't know. Like he's into something."

"Well, what do you mean, 'into something'? You mean something serious, like drugs—or just something weird, like pulling heads off Barbie dolls?"

"*That* would make Iz scream," Alfonzo said.

"I mean something serious," Lamar answered. "There's more to him than what he's letting on. I think he's holding a secret."

"Welcome to the club," Matt said.

"No, I mean a dangerous secret."

"Welcome to the club," Matt said again.

Gill prodded for more, "For instance . . ."

"Well, I've noticed he's always making phone calls and leaving abruptly."

Matt shrugged. "What's his job?"

Lamar's eyes darted back to the black Cadillac. "He says he's a loan officer."

"And you don't believe him?"

Now Lamar shrugged. "There's something else. I don't know what it is, but I'm telling you, he has a secret. I can feel it."

Matt pursed his lips. He knew Lamar well . . . and he knew his friend was probably just uncomfortable with someone dating his mother. Still, Matt hesitated to press the point.

"Well," Matt said, "I can't say. I've only met him that one time at the winter banquet, and I don't want to judge him without knowing."

Lamar looked at Matt. "Wanna come over?"

