

Caught Red-Handed

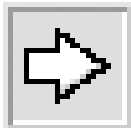
The thing about destiny is that sometimes it takes a ninety-degree turn when you least expect it. One moment a man thinks he owns the world; the next moment, he discovers it owns him. For most, this would be a tragedy. But for one man, this was inconsequential. He didn't mind being owned by the world, so long as everyone else thought he was still in control. But that's when destiny stepped in with a ninety-degree turn and changed everything.



"Peee-uu!"

The Enisburg Junior High boys' locker room smelled like a combination of sweat and athlete's foot, but it was the perfect place to hide. During sixth period, no one ever used it—except for today. Thirteen-year-old Matt Calahan sat on a wooden

bench between two rows of gray lockers, his laptop fired up in front of him. Matt's good friends, Lamar and Gill, were there, too—they had to be, or Matt was sure the plan wouldn't work.



"You sure the video camera's facing the right direction?" Matt asked Gill yet one more time.

Gill was still holding his nose. "Matt, you worry too much," he said, sounding like a duck. "I took care of everything."

"Well, I hope so, because this may be our only chance to prove that Coach Plymouth is innocent."

"The truth will come out," Lamar interjected. "I've known Coach long enough to know he didn't change anyone's grades just to keep 'em playing sports. Someone else is doing it, I'm sure. They're just letting Coach take the rap."

"I hope you're right." Matt ran his hand through his thick black hair.

Lamar tapped a locker with his fingertips. "I'll keep praying."

Matt checked his watch, then stood and peeked around the row of lockers. He spied the entrance to Coach Plymouth's office. "Alfonzo should be coming by any minute."

"You bring an extra battery?" Gill asked.

"Of course," Matt said. "You sure you got the camera hooked up to the closed-circuit TV system correctly?"

Redheaded Gill lifted up his hands and held them out dramatically.

“Sorry,” Matt apologized. “Just making sure.”

Just two class periods ago, in his media elective, Gill had wheeled the AV department’s video camera into the coach’s office. The plan? He would fulfill his media class assignment by interviewing Coach about the upcoming basketball season . . . but then he would leave the camera in the coach’s office, hooked up to the closed-circuit TV system. And so, when Alfonzo came by two periods later to work with Coach on his basketball moves in the gym, that would leave the office empty. Perhaps *then* they could catch the grade-changer red-handed . . . for the entire school to see.

So far so good. Well, *pretty* good. Gill’s interview with the coach hadn’t gone so well. While Gill loved being in front of a camera, his interview skills needed some improvement. The entire interview went something like:

Gill: Hey, Coach! How are you doing?

Coach: Good.

Gill: Good. Me, too.

Coach: Good.

Gill: So are you looking forward to the upcoming basketball season?

Coach: Yep.

Gill: Me, too.

Coach: Good.

Gill: So how do you think it'll be?

Coach: Fine.

Gill: Good.

And so forth. Matt was sure his friend wouldn't be winning the Pulitzer anytime soon.

"This better be fast," Lamar urged, his brown eyes connecting with Matt's. "We can't stay out of study hall forever."

"You guys should sign up for the AV department," Gill offered. "We get all kinds of time to wander the halls. We even hear about drama stuff before everyone else. Like I just read that they're holding auditions for a commercial downtown. I might go."

"You're going to be on TV?" Lamar asked.

"Well, I might audition. The world needs to see my talent. This time next month, I could be famous."

A low whistle echoed in the locker room.

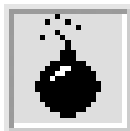
"Great!" Matt exclaimed. "That's Alfonzo. He's going to get Coach out." He rubbed his hands together. "Gill, go watch and tell me when they leave."

"Right!" Gill said and disappeared around the corner.

Lamar let out a low breath. Matt thought Lamar seemed just about as nervous as he was. Of course,

this was the first time they were using the laptop to solve a crime. Sure, they had stopped a bank robbery, but this was real Hardy Boys stuff. They had done their homework, and now they were hoping they had come to the right conclusion. If their plan worked, Matt's amazing laptop would save the day once again and Coach would be vindicated.

Matt had received the laptop a few weeks prior, on his thirteenth birthday. It was the best present his parents had ever given him. For a long time, he'd wanted to ditch his paper and pens and write like a *real* writer—with a keyboard and monitor. What his parents didn't know—and what he soon found out—was that his laptop had . . . well . . . “special abilities.” Quite simply, Matt, Lamar, Gill, and Alfonzo had discovered that Matt could change the future with the words he typed on his laptop. The boys vowed to keep this discovery a secret; they had to protect the laptop from falling into the wrong hands. But they also saw the enormous potential in this particular birthday gift. And so they made another vow—they would use Matt's laptop to make dreams come true. Or, in this case, to solve a mystery so that the truth would be known. Because as Lamar always said, “When God gives you a gift, you gotta use it.”



A moment later, Gill came racing back.

"They left!"

"They left?"

"They left!"

"Good! Let's get started."

Gill ran off again and Matt wiggled his fingers, placing them on his laptop's keyboard. He typed:

Shortly after Coach left his office, the grade-changer chuckled. He knew he had this grade-changing thing in the palm of his hands. It was too easy—nudging those grades over the top, doing the whole school a gigantic favor . . . all the while letting Coach Plymouth take the rap. Bad grade-changer! Bad! But he didn't care. He was a crafty one.

"Maybe a little less editorializing," Lamar suggested.

Matt tipped his head toward Lamar. "I have to get the creative juices flowing."

Matt continued.

At once, the grade-changer left wherever he was. He knew the heat was on Coach and he wanted to double-check . . . to make *sure* the grades he'd altered hadn't been changed back. He needed them changed.

“What if it’s a girl?”

“A girl?”

“Yeah, what if a girl is changing the grades? You keep writing *he*.”

Matt thought for a moment. “That’s all right,” he said finally. “I think it’s grammatically correct to refer to a she as a he until you know she’s a she. Of course, once you know he’s a she, she can no longer be a he.”

Lamar blinked. “Oh . . . okay . . . good. As long as you’ve thought it out.”

Matt found the strange “clock key” just above the “enter” key and pushed it. An animated clock icon flashed on the screen; the one on the screen and the one on the key were the same clock, colored golden, its hands rapidly sweeping forward. That’s all it took. Now everything would happen just as Matt typed. He didn’t understand how it worked, but it *worked*. Every time Matt hit the clock key, amazing stuff occurred.

Gill reappeared. “The power!” he said, trying to catch his breath.

“The power?”

“The power to the camera’s off! I peeked in and the little green light is *off*! It must have a self-powered shutdown!”

Matt’s forehead scrunched up. “I thought you said you could control the recording from the AV lab.”

"Yes! But the power has to be *on!*"

"Well, go in and turn it on!"

"Right!"

Gill took off.

Gill returned.

"What now?" Matt asked.

"The killer's in there! I just saw the door close! I'm not going in!"

Matt rolled his eyes. "He's not a killer."

"I'm not going in there."

"Well, how are we going to catch him if the camera isn't *on?*"

"Maybe the killer will turn it on."

"The *killer* is not going to turn it on."

"Matt! You've got a cool laptop! Use it!"

Matt huffed, closed the laptop's cover, jumped up, and moved around Gill. "C'mon," he whispered, "I need to see what I'm doing."

The three boys crept up to Coach Plymouth's office, but whoever had gone inside had closed the window blinds. They knelt down and Matt found a pinhole. His heart began to beat wildly as he watched the figure moving around inside Coach's office. Lamar and Gill found their own pinholes and bent around each other to view the action.

"Can you tell who it is?" Gill hissed.



"Not at all," Lamar replied.

Matt hurried back to his laptop. He opened it up and wrote,

Sure that his diabolical plan to change the grades would come to pass, the menacing grade-changer sat down at the coach's desk, about to check on the grades. Suddenly, he spotted a video camera across the room.

Matt hit the clock key, then ran back to his pin-hole and looked inside. The figure had stopped moving. Matt ran back to his laptop.

The grade-changer grabbed a football and pitched it right at the camera.

Bam! The camera went down, hitting the floor fast. As it smashed, the power jolted on and it rolled to a spot where it put the thief in perfect view.

"What?" Gill cried, looking over Matt's shoulder. "Matt! If that camera busts, I'm in *so much* trouble!"
Matt added:

The camera didn't bust.

"Thanks."

Matt hit the clock key, ran back to his pinhole, and a moment later, watched as one of Coach's trophies—the one with the big golden football on top—sailed across the room.

Bam! It bounced off the camera and hit the blinds. Matt, Lamar, and Gill jolted back and scattered like birds on a seashore. They darted around the corner as they heard the camera crash to the ground.

Gill peeked around the corner and through the blinds. "Hey, good job, Matt," he whispered. "The camera is right by the window, facing the crook—and powered on."

"Go broadcast that signal!" Matt whispered back. "Right!"

Gill slinked down the hall and out of sight.

"C'mon," Matt said, tapping Lamar's arm. "Let's go watch in the gym."

He picked up his laptop and threw his blue backpack over his shoulder, then quietly rounded the corner with Lamar and exited the locker room. They crossed the hall to the gym and took seats on the bleachers. They were the only ones there except Coach Plymouth and Alfonzo, who was making baskets from all over the court.

Matt and Lamar stared at the Jumbotron video screen, hovering over the center of the gymnasium.

"C'mon, Gill," Matt mumbled. "C'mon."
Lamar was quiet, his lips moving occasionally.
Nervous, Matt opened up the laptop again.

One by one, the grade-changer checked the grades. He let out a monster mad scientist laugh, knowing that he was outsmarting the world!

"Muah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

Pzzzt! Phhatt!

The Jumbotron popped on and Matt knew that all around the school, video feeds were being interrupted as a new video took over. At once, they saw a huge figure, lurking over a computer.

Alfonzo stopped dribbling the basketball and Coach Plymouth's eyebrows furled.

"That . . . that's my office," the coach said slowly. "Who's . . . in there?"

Matt squinted and felt his stomach tighten. He knew the figure . . . he just couldn't make out the face. "Who . . . ?"

Lamar shrugged, squinting.

The gym doors on the far side burst open and Vice-Principal Carter ran in, his tie over his shoulder. "Hey!" he barked at Coach Plymouth. "Isn't that your office?"



Both men squinted at the video feed as the figure tapped on the coach's keyboard.

"Hey! He's using my computer to change grades." Coach realized.

"Who?"

At once, the grade-changer spun around in his chair and laughed like a mad scientist. "Muah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

Matt felt his body go weak. Yes, he knew that figure. He knew that voice. He knew that face.

It was "Hulk" Hooligan—the biggest, meanest guy in the school.

Matt gulped. "I think it's time to get back to study hall," he said.



Moments later, Matt sat at a table in the library, shaking. Lamar sat beside him. The study hall monitor had just stepped out; he'd heard about a video broadcasting throughout the school, and he wanted to see it for himself.

"What are you afraid of?" Lamar whispered.

"Gill was right," Matt said. "It *was* a killer. And he's going to kill *me!*"

"Matt, he doesn't know you did anything. Look, what he did was wrong. And now he's caught. Remember, you just saved Coach Plymouth's hide."

Matt expelled a long breath. "Yeah, I guess you're right. And that feels pretty good."

"You bet it does!" Lamar agreed.

Bam! Suddenly the library door burst open and Matt jerked back. Standing in the door's frame was Hulk Hooligan—all 250 pounds of him. He glared directly at Matt.

Matt gulped. "He knows."

"He doesn't know," Lamar whispered, not moving his lips. "He *can't* know. Keep your cool."

Hulk stomped into the room like a T-Rex, causing nearby bookshelves to shake. A bead of perspiration trickled down the back of Matt's neck.

As Hulk crossed the room, Matt heard some girls whispering about the video, which didn't help at all. Hulk stopped on the other side of Matt and Lamar's table and glared at Matt.

"Hey, Hulk," Lamar greeted him.

"Do ya' know what jus' happened to me?" he asked Matt through gritted teeth.

Matt quickly shook his head. "I . . . uh . . ."

"I was jus' told I could be *expelled*, Calhan," Hulk announced.

His words hung in the air.

"C-c-cal-a-han," Matt said, choking on his last name.

"Don't know how," he blustered, "but dey found out I hacked Coach's computer and changed my

English grade to an A. Pretty smart, eh? I had even covered my tracks by changing some of da other kids' grades. But somehow dey found out."

Suddenly the library door burst open and Gill ran in, his head bouncing. "I did it!" he shouted, "I—"



Then he spotted Hulk. "I—" Gill threw a finger up in the air. "I . . . have to go to the bathroom. Excuse me!" And he ran back out the door.

Hulk shook his head. "Dat kid's strange," he said.

"Heh-heh," Matt chuckled. Then, "Hulk, I'm sorry, but—"

"Good!" Hulk shouted, slamming his fists on the table.

Matt and Lamar jumped.

"I'm glad you're sorry, 'cuz you're gonna help me!"

"I . . . I am?"

"Yeah, ya are. See, I've been given one week to pass last week's English exam."

"Last week's English exam?"

"Yeah—dey want me to retake it. I have t' pass or I'm out of here. Ya wouldn't want dat now, would ya?"

Matt thought about that for a moment.

Hulk slammed his fist on the table.

"No, no, I wouldn't want that."

"I didn't think so."

"So . . . what do you want me to do?"

“Well, I always see ya typin’ on yer laptop, and I know yer good at English. Ya jus’ became my tutor.”

“Your *tutor*?”

Hulk reached across the table and grabbed Matt by the collar. Matt popped up out of his chair and leaned over the table as Hulk pulled Matt’s face close to his own.

“Ya have a *problem* with dat?”

Matt winced at Hulk’s breath.

“We start tomorrow, after school, at my locker.”

“Right,” Matt squeaked.

Hulk pushed Matt back and let go. Matt crumbled into his seat. Hulk spun around and started walking away.

“Uh, Hulk?”

The mammoth bully stopped. He didn’t turn around. “What?”

“What . . . um . . . what happens if we do all this studying and . . . and you don’t pass?”

Hulk cracked his knuckles and snickered. “Use your imagination.”

