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# Golden Opportunity

*A*ppearances can be deceiving. The inventor whose life was ruined thought he had lost control. Those who ruined his life thought they had control. But neither suspected that the only one who truly held the answer was an unassuming boy in a small American town.



*Ka-zapp!*

*"Zowwww!"*

*"Dad?"*

*"C-close the d-door!"*

Matt Calahan slammed the door shut. His dad, sitting on a short ladder inside the entryway, let go of the wrapped wires between his fingers. He licked his fingertips and flicked his hand in the air. "Ow."

*"Dad, your hair's sticking up. What are you doing?"*

Mr. Calahan frowned and flipped over a piece of paper on his lap. "Installing a security system."

Matt's mind suddenly jumped to his laptop sitting in his room . . . plugged into the wall. "Um . . . I gotta go!" Matt threw his backpack over by the couch and rushed down the hallway.

"What's the hurry?" Mr. Calahan asked.

"My laptop!" Matt shouted. "It's plugged in! A power surge could fry it!"

Matt's dad dropped his head. "Your dad's getting electrocuted and all you can think about is your laptop?"

Matt stopped at the foot of the stairs. "Well . . . no . . . I just . . ."

Matt knew his dad didn't understand. For Matt's laptop was no *ordinary* laptop. This was the laptop Matt received for his birthday—the one that somehow could "make things happen." Whenever Matt wrote a story in the laptop, it actually happened in real life. All Matt had to do was hit the special key with the clock face on it. Over the past few months, the laptop had become more and more invaluable to Matt . . . and he couldn't imagine losing it. Especially to a silly thing like a power surge.

"Don't worry," his dad said with a smirk. "I unplugged both computers and the TV before I started working."

Matt let out a long breath, walking back toward his dad. "Why didn't you just shut off all the power?"

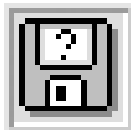
"I want it on so I can tell when it's working," Mr. Calahan said, as if that made any sense. He looked back at the sheet. "I've been a professional builder for fifteen years. I think I should know how to install one of these newfangled systems."

"You want a comb?"

His dad peered down at him again. "No, but do you see my wire cutters down there?"

Matt glanced at the tools scattered on the linoleum. He shook his head.

"I must have left it at the Zarza's. Since I started remodeling their basement, I think I've left half my tools over there."



Matt looked at the electronic box dangling from the wall. "Is that why you're putting in a security system? Because of the break-in at the Zarza's?"

Matt's dad shoved his tongue in his cheek. "It'll make your mom feel safer."

Just a couple weeks ago, Matt had been shocked when his dad found a bar of gold under some floorboards in the Zarza's basement. The Zarzas were even more shocked. They had no idea when they asked Matt's dad to remodel the dank, underground room that they might become rich because of it.

But what really jolted everyone was when, only about ten days later, someone broke into the Zarza's house. Ironically, nothing was taken . . . but the

intruder knocked a couple holes in the basement floorboards, presumably searching for more gold.

The break-in, in the middle of their quiet, small-town neighborhood, had everyone on edge. Even Matt's best friends, Lamar and Gill, said their parents were taking extra precautions. "We don't need to be scared," Gill's dad, a security guard, said. "But we need to prepare our houses for the worst. We don't want would-be thieves to suddenly think Oleander Street is an easy target."

Matt's dad grabbed the wires again and carefully twisted them together as if he were French-braiding a little girl's hair. "You know what I want to know?" Mr. Calahan asked his son. "How did word about the gold get out? I know for a fact that Jacinto put the bar in a safety-deposit box for safekeeping until he discovered more about it. Who was there to tell?"

Matt shrugged. "Sometimes," he said, "secrets have a way of getting out."

*Pop!* The door suddenly opened.

*Ka-zapp!*

"Zowwwww!" cried Matt's dad.

"Matt?"

"C-close the d-door!"

Lamar Whitmore, from a few doors down, slinked inside and slammed the door shut. His eyes were wide. Matt's dad let go of the wrapped wires between

his fingers. He licked his fingertips again and flicked his hand in the air. "Oooow."

"He's installing a security system," Matt explained to Lamar.

"I'm almost done," Mr. Calahan said, his eyebrows furled. Determined, he grabbed the wires again.

"Dad, have you thought about turning off the power?"

Mr. Calahan glared down at Matt. "I'm a professional, Matt, remember? This job doesn't require it. There's not much voltage coming through here."

Matt and Lamar both looked at the hair sticking straight up from Stan Calahan's head.

Matt turned to Lamar. "What's up?"

"Gill and I were just about to go to Alfonzo's and—" Suddenly Lamar's eyes grew big. "Gill! He's right behind—"

*Pop!* The door suddenly opened.

*Ka-zapp!*

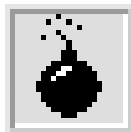
"Zowwww!" cried Matt's dad.

"Get out!" Lamar shouted.

Gill, wide-eyed, popped in, popped out, popped back in, shocked Matt's dad again, then shut the door behind himself.

"What's wrong?" red-headed Gill wondered.

Matt's dad patted down his hair. "I'm installing a security system."



*Whoop! Whoop! Whoop! Whoop!*

The boys covered their ears.

Mr. Calahan shouted, "It's working!"

Matt shouted, "Turn it off!"

*Whoop! Whoop! Whoop! Whoop!*

Mr. Calahan looked at the dangling control panel, puzzled. "I'm not sure how! The code was . . . let's see . . . 4-2-1-3? No wait. It was 6-2-4-3. No wait . . ."

*Whoop! Whoop! Whoop! Whoop!*

He pulled the wires apart and the alarm shut off.

Mr. Calahan nodded. "That'll do it."

Gill looked at Matt and Lamar. "With the new baby, my parents have been setting up all kinds of stuff, too," he said. Then, "Hey, Matt, my dad got us tickets to the races!"

"Really?" Matt asked.

Mr. Calahan smiled. "Great! He told me a few days ago that he'd try. It's a police benefit."

Matt's forehead wrinkled.

Gill explained, "There'll be a bunch of cops there watching 'cause they get in free for the next two weeks. It'll be the safest place in Enisburg."

Matt and his dad laughed.

"Cool," Matt said.

"Sorry," Gill said to Lamar, "my dad was only able to get four tickets since he's not on the force anymore. But he's getting more next week so you and Alfonzo can come too."

"Cool!" Lamar cheered. "I might bring Oscar, too, if it's all right."

"You and Oscar getting along then?" Mr. Calahan asked about the man Lamar's mother was dating.

Lamar nodded. "Better. I just don't need to get mixed up with gangster business again." He laughed at his own joke.

"None of you do," Matt's dad said, warning Matt with his eyes.

Suddenly the phone rang. Matt grabbed the cordless off the coffee table. "Hello?" He put his hand over the mouthpiece. "Dad, it's the security company. They said the alarm went off and they need our password."

Mr. Calahan smiled. "Pooka Dookas are supadupa." He glanced at Gill. "You inspired me."

Gill covered his face. Matt gave the phrase to the agent and hung up the phone.

"Let's go over to Alfonzo's," Matt said to his friends.

Gill popped open the door. *Ka-zapp!*

"Zowwwww!" cried Matt's dad.

Gill slammed the door shut. Matt's dad let go of the wires and patted down his hair. He stepped down from the ladder.

"Where you going?" Matt asked him.

"To turn off the power."





Matt, Lamar, and Gill entered the Zarza's house, knocking fists with Alfonzo on the way in. Matt's nose twitched at the spicy smell lingering in the air. He and his friends walked through the entryway and into the adjoining living room. Matt's youth pastor, Mick Ruhlen, was there, sitting on the sofa, talking to Mr. Zarza. Alfonzo's sister, Isabel, sat in a wicker chair across the room. She wore jeans and a red blouse. Her midnight black hair flowed down her back like a waterfall. When Matt entered, their eyes locked for a moment, then she offered a weak smile. Matt returned it.

"Well, I'm just glad everything's all right," Pastor Ruhlen was saying. "I believe God protected you from what could've been much worse."

Jacinto Zarza just nodded.

"He is our hope," Pastor Ruhlen said, pointing up.

Matt and his friends claimed spots around the room. Alfonzo and Gill hit the floor. Lamar sat on the edge of some kind of stool. Matt just leaned against the wall and watched the Zarza's faces.

Matt and his friends had all seen trouble lately—mainly because of his laptop. The boys had quickly discovered that whatever Matt typed into the laptop actually happened . . . and that unknown people "out

there” didn’t want Matt to have the laptop. But the danger had never quite entered any of their homes.

Now, in the ripple effect of the break-in, Matt could tell the Zarzas felt violated. Alfonzo had turned quiet again, like he was when they first met him. Isabel just looked sad. And their father . . . well, Matt didn’t know him well, and he was hard to read. Still, he looked like he had a few months prior when he had first brought his children to the States after a job transfer from Mexico City. Somewhat hopeful, somewhat hopeless. Truth is, Matt always thought the job transfer was just an excuse. The real reason for the move, Matt had discovered, was that Jacinto’s wife had left him and left the family in shambles. Matt knew Mr. Zarza and his kids were just looking for a good place to start over.

“We’re running in a rat race,” Pastor Ruhlen said, throwing a grin at Isabel. “But if we run the race with God on our side, we know that we *will* make it through.”

Matt leaned forward and looked back over his shoulder at some photos of Alfonzo and Isabel as children. There were cheesy school photos on blue backgrounds, as well as wonderfully candid shots. From one picture to another, Alfonzo looked like a handful—active and curious. Big, toothy smiles caught the camera. Isabel’s deep brown eyes swallowed the lens even



as a baby, her black hair shorter, but shiny and straight. Matt turned his head to catch her eyes again. She looked away.

"I guess what I'm saying," Pastor Ruhlen said, his Chia-Pet hairdo blue today, "is: Have you ever made Jesus the Lord of your life?"

Matt blinked.

Mr. Zarza tilted his head. "We go to church," he said. "We have many times."

Pastor Ruhlen nodded. "Yeah, I know you do. I know you really have an interest in getting to know God. That's why I wanted you to know that—dude!—you can make a decision today to put Jesus first in your life. To follow Him above all else. Then when hard times come—like these—you and your family will have Someone you know you can count on."

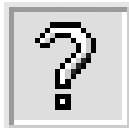
Matt suddenly felt sick to his stomach. He glanced at Lamar and Gill . . . and then at Alfonzo. Matt, Lamar, and Gill had all been Christians for years. And when Alfonzo—a great guy—moved into their neighborhood, Matt had just assumed he was a Christian, too. He never objected when they prayed. In fact, he joined in. But . . . Matt couldn't say they'd ever talked about whether he served Jesus as his Lord.

Then Matt's eyes clipped to Isabel. *How could I have never asked*, he wondered, *never even thought to ask?*

A sudden rap came at the door and jolted everyone in the room. Alfonzo made his way through the entryway. A brooding man stood in the doorway, with dark, shadowy features and a nose like a hawk. He wore a tattered black coat and equally tattered black slacks. He insisted on talking to the owner of the house. Mr. Zarza excused himself, and Matt and his friends followed him into the entryway.

"Yes?" Mr. Zarza asked the brooding man.

The man's voice was raspy and forceful, not unlike the mobster their friend Oscar had played in the theater. "You have something that belongs to me," he said.



"I don't understand," Mr. Zarza said plainly.

Pastor Ruhlen rounded the corner, behind Matt. Isabel was beside him.

"The *gold bar*," the brooding man bellowed. "I want my gold!"

Matt looked at Alfonzo. Alfonzo looked at Gill. Gill looked at Lamar and whispered, "He's a gangster, isn't he? He's going to put cement on our feet and drop us into the ocean, isn't he?"

Lamar slapped Gill on the chest. "Stop it! We don't need to get into judging people as gangsters again!"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Mr. Zarza told the man.

"Don't play dumb, old man," replied the brooding man. "I know all about it. This used to be my

house. I hid my gold in the basement. And I've come to reclaim it!"

Something about this circumstance was oddly familiar. Matt found himself instinctively reaching for his shoulder where his backpack usually sat, so he could pull out his laptop. But it wasn't there. Matt sighed. How he wished he had it with him. He could take care of this situation with a sentence or two.

A deep voice came from the other side of the doorway. "I heard shouting. Is there a problem here?"

The brooding man shifted aside as Mr. Calahan stepped into his personal space. The brooding man opened his mouth to protest, but stopped himself, most likely because Matt's dad looked like a crazy man, his hair sticking straight up on all sides.

"No problem," the brooding man said. "We're just . . . ironing things out."

"Well, if everything's ironed out, then maybe you should be on your way." Mr. Calahan tapped the large pair of wire cutters on his jeans.

The brooding man stiffened his lip and with a haunting growl, he stated, "I'll be back."

He spun around and headed away, swiftly making his way through where the swinging gate used to stand in front of the house.

"*Gracias*," Mr. Zarza said to Matt's dad, letting out an anxious breath.

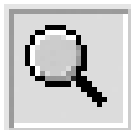
“That was awesome!” Matt told his dad.

Mr. Calahan just looked back at the brooding man, a frown on his face.

“I sure wouldn’t want to meet that bad dude in a dark alley,” Pastor Ruhlen admitted.

“Me neither,” Gill said. “I’m glad he left.”

Pastor Ruhlen nodded thoughtfully. “Actually, I was referring to Mr. Calahan,” he said.



# Dodging Danger

**D**odge ball!"

Matt screamed as the big red rubber sphere spun toward him like a heat-seeking missile. *Pow!* It hit him in the forearm with a blow befitting its launcher, school bully Hulk Hooligan.

Like a tennis-ball machine, Hulk grabbed one ball after another and targeted them at Matt, cracking them against his body as if he were a punching bag . . . which, at this point, he pretty much was.

Matt lurched for any wayward ball he could find, but grabbing one meant exposing an extremity. *Pow! Ooof! Pow!*

"Matt's getting the snot beat out of him!" Lamar cried as he, Gill, and Alfonzo came to Matt's aid, grabbing bouncing red rubber balls and launching them back at Hulk. Even with all three of them joining Matt's side, the two-hundred-and-some-pound beast with bleached blonde hair easily overpowered them.

The only thing that saved the boys from excessive torture was the whistle of Coach Plymouth. "Hit the showers!" he cried.

The four boys let out sighs of relief as the bouncing balls rolled to a stop around their feet. They each grabbed several balls and set them on the nearest rack. Hulk passed Gill on the way into the showers and knocked four balls out of his hands.

Matt stood in the showers and washed up as fast as he could, thinking only about how much he hated showering after P.E. He knew he had to get clean, but he despised feeling awkward and always on the edge of running if Hulk ran through with a wet towel. Fortunately, today he could hear Hulk somewhere in the adjacent room giving someone else a snap-ful of trouble.

Back at the lockers, Matt dried off and put his clothes on as fast as he could. His shirt was sticking to his back so much he had to take it off again and re-wipe his towel across his back. Lamar sat down on the bench next to Matt, then glanced over at Alfonzo, who stood talking to Gill by one of the sinks.

"Hey, Matt," Lamar said, "you think Pastor Ruhlen is right? You think Alfonzo hasn't made Jesus his Lord?"



Matt shrugged. "I don't know—I was wondering the same thing. Kinda weird. He doesn't cuss or anything though."

"No, but that doesn't mean anything. We need to ask him."

"Go for it."

"You're not gonna ask him?"

"I want to . . . but it's more your thing, Lamar."

"My thing?"

"Your thing. You know, asking stuff like that."

"It's *all* our thing," Lamar corrected Matt.

Just then, as if on cue, Alfonzo and Gill walked over and grabbed their clothes from their lockers. As they got dressed, Matt and Lamar exchanged glances. Finally, Lamar just blurted it out.

"Hey, Alfonzo, what did you think about what Pastor Ruhlen said? Have you ever made Jesus your Lord?"

Alfonzo froze for a moment, then looked at Matt and Gill. "I dunno. Never really thought about it."

Matt looked at Lamar. Lamar looked at Matt. Gill seemed oblivious.

"Well," Lamar said, "if you want, we can, you know, pray with you and ask Jesus."

"Ask Him what?"

"To be Lord of your life."

"Oh."

Matt looked at Lamar. Lamar looked at Matt. Lamar obviously wasn't sure how to respond to "Oh."

Just then, Hulk rounded the corner.

"Duck!" Gill shouted.

Hulk guffawed and snapped Gill, Lamar, and Matt with his wet towel. "Gotcha, Calhan!" he prodded.

"Cal-a-han," Matt corrected, gritting his teeth.

Hulk continued on his way.

Matt frowned at Alfonzo. "How come he didn't snap you?"

Alfonzo shrugged.

Matt stared at Alfonzo's arms. "Hey—you don't have any bruises either. Didn't he hit you in dodge ball?"

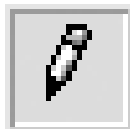
Alfonzo smiled. "Guess it's just my lucky day."

Matt was puzzled. "If I know Hulk, luck had nothing to do with it."

Matt buckled his belt and waited for his friends to finish getting ready.

When Alfonzo pulled his shirt out of his locker, a small square paper hit the ground. Alfonzo bent to pick it up, but Matt beat him to it. Matt flipped the paper over and realized it wasn't paper—it was a Polaroid picture.

"What's this?" Matt asked, looking at the picture. Centered in the picture was the gold bar Matt's dad had found in Alfonzo's basement. It had even been



shined up for the picture. Light glared off the bar like the sun's reflection. The only thing *not* shining were some dirty indentations in the top. Matt couldn't believe his eyes.

"Alfonzo, what is this?" he repeated again.

Alfonzo snatched the picture out of Matt's hand and stuffed it back in his shirt pocket. "It's the gold bar," he whispered.



"Why are you carrying around a picture of it?"

"It's cool. Everyone wants to see it."

"But how'd they find out about it in the first place?"

"You know . . . I showed a couple people."

Matt's face dropped. "Did you show Hulk?"

Alfonzo hesitated, then nodded.

"That explains why you don't have any bruises," Gill said gruffly.

"Alfonzo!" Matt nearly shouted. "It's no wonder your house got broken into! You can't parade stuff like this around!"

"No one from school broke into my house," Alfonzo defended.

"But you tell your friends," Lamar put in, "they tell their parents, they tell their friends . . . Word of mouth is a powerful thing."

"Especially in a town this size," Gill affirmed.

Alfonzo pulled the picture out of his pocket. "You think . . . I'm the reason my house got broke into?"

"No biggie," Matt said to his friend. "We all make mistakes. Just . . . get rid of it."

Alfonzo took a step forward. "I'll go throw it away now."

Matt grabbed the picture from Alfonzo's hand. "You don't want it in a trash can here at school." Matt stuffed it into his pocket. "I'll take care of it."



"So you guys feel safe enough?" Pastor Ruhlen said, tightening something under the hood of his yellow Volkswagen Beetle.

After school, Matt and Lamar had broken away from the group to go to Pastor Ruhlen's apartment. Lamar had insisted they find out how to lead Alfonzo to Jesus.

"I feel safe," Matt admitted. "I figure, what are the chances of the same bad guy breaking into anyone's house again in the same neighborhood?" Besides, Matt thought, *I've always got the laptop.*

"Well, that's swell-er-ino, dude." Pastor Ruhlen's hair, now colored yellow, matched his car. Maybe he got a bulk discount on his hair-care products.

"This is a really cool car," Matt noted. "Is this the V6 model with fuel-injected rotor cuffs and a turbo-pitched drive train?"

Pastor Ruhlen raised an eyebrow. "You don't know a lot about cars, do you, Matt?"

Matt smirked. "Actually I don't know *anything* about them. But I like cars. I think they should have put a backseat in yours."

"Peer inside, dude," Ruhlen encouraged. "There's more room in there than you think. I can be a hip chauffeur if the need ever arises."

Matt peered into the back window. "Wow." There *were* seats back there.

"Anyway," Lamar said, bringing the topic back on track. "So what do we do to lead someone to Jesus?"

Pastor Ruhlen stood up straight and twirled a wrench around in his hand. "My preference is to use the ol' Roman Road."

"What's that?" Matt wondered.

Pastor Ruhlen produced a small Bible out of nowhere. He held it out so Matt and Lamar could see it, then flipped to the book of Romans, chapter 3, verse 23.

"Start here," he said, pointing a finger at the verse. "This Scripture shows that everyone has done stuff wrong—and everyone needs forgiveness." He flipped a few pages over. "Next stop on the road: Romans 5:8. 'But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.' See, the first verse shows we're all sinners.

This one shows Jesus died for us—so we wouldn't have to."

"That's cool," Lamar stated.

"It gets better," Pastor Ruhlen continued, getting fired up. "Next stop, Romans 6:23. It says here that sin leads to death. But if we accept Jesus as our Lord, we will have eternal life. Kinda makes your blood pump, don't it?"

Matt nodded. "But exactly how do we help them make Jesus their Lord? Don't they have to pray?"

Pastor Ruhlen confirmed, "Well, it's really a heart decision for them. But, yes, they need to say something. We're not off the road yet. Next is Romans 10:9 and 10. Go ahead. Read it." He flipped the Bible around and let Matt read.

"If you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved.'" Matt bit his lip. "So all they have to do is say it, and believe it in their heart?"

"Exactly," Pastor Ruhlen confirmed. "Because—verse 13—'Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.'"

"That's cool," Lamar said, jotting down the verses.



"That's the Roman Road. Good stuff-er-ino." Then, "So who do you want to lead to Jesus? Alfonzo?"

Lamar nodded. "I'm working on it."

"Sa-weet! You know, sharing your faith is all part of being a 2:52 guy! You know what Luke 2:52 says, don't you?"

At the same time, Matt and Lamar recited, "'And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men.'"

"Right-e-o! Jesus grew smarter, stronger, deeper, and cooler! And when you lead someone to Jesus, not only is it the smart thing to do, but it's deep, dude, because it's what being a Christian is all about!" Pastor Ruhlen stuck his head back under the hood of his car. "Keep me updated, dudes! I'll be prayin' for ya for the perfect opportunity!"



Lying in bed that night, Matt said a prayer for the Zarzas. He prayed that God would give Lamar just the right words when he talked to Alfonzo about Jesus. He prayed that the Zarza's fear would go away and things could get back to normal.

*Click!*

Matt's eyes popped open. *What was that?*

*Pop!* Matt sat up in bed. He had definitely heard something. Downstairs. A cold chill crept down his

spine. Someone? In his house? *The alarm*, Matt thought. *It's not set*. Matt and his mother were leaving it off until Matt's dad got home from a late evening lumber-shopping trip. Matt pushed his covers aside and cracked open his door.

*Pop!* There was the sound again. Matt wished he had a dog. He softly closed his door and looked at his desk. Sitting on top was Alfonzo's picture of his gold bar. *Is the burglar back? Looking for more?*

Matt felt frozen for a long moment, not knowing what to do. Gill's dad had warned them about break-ins in the neighborhood. But Matt never truly thought it would happen in *his* house. He held his hand out in front of him. It was shaking.



Matt's eyes darted to the other object on his desk: his laptop. He smirked. His dad wondered why he was always thinking about his laptop. *This* was why. He *needed* the laptop . . . for in situations like this, it could change everything. Matt walked to his desk, tossed the picture of the gold in the trash, and fired up his computer.

*This thief isn't getting far*, Matt thought. But . . . what if the sounds downstairs were from someone connected *to* the laptop? Matt and his friends worked hard to keep the laptop a secret. They didn't let anyone know about it, not even their parents—it was too

dangerous. Matt's dad had picked the computer up at a local pawn shop, and ever since then, Matt had received clues to its mysterious origins. There were people out there who wanted the laptop back. The previous owner—"Sam"—had contacted Matt, warning him to be careful of *them*, whoever *they* were. And now Matt couldn't help but wonder if *they* had found his house.

With the laptop fully booted, Matt opened the word processor. He held out his hand again. It had stopped shaking. He unplugged the computer from the wall and carried it to his door. Quietly, he opened the door and made his way to the stairs. He wanted to see exactly what the intruder was doing, so he could best stop him in his tracks. If there was one thing he'd learned using the laptop, it was to be *specific*. And being specific meant knowing exactly what was happening at all times.

There! A shadow! Matt watched as it made its way across the living room. His heart skipped a beat and his hands felt sticky. Quickly, without thinking, he typed,

The guy in my house runs into the wall.

Matt hit the clock key. Immediately, the on-screen arrow switched to a golden clock face, tick-

ing forward, fast and furious. Then it stopped. Matt listened.

*Boom!* Downstairs, the intruder ran into the wall. Matt smirked. He typed,

The guy in my house trips and falls over the sofa.

Seconds later, *Ka-boom!* "Oof!"

Matt leaned forward. He could see the security panel's glow from the other room. He thought for a moment and then typed,

As an after-effect of my dad's faulty wiring, the alarm suddenly goes off, dispatching the police. The guy in my house takes off out the door and runs right into the police.

At once, Matt saw a flash in his living room. *Whoop! Whoop! Whoop!* The alarm went off and the shadow ran past the stairs, to the alarm. Matt heard him hitting the keypad. He smirked. Matt's mother ran out of her bedroom, looking disheveled and surprised. Matt slammed his laptop shut.

"What's happening?" she demanded.

"Someone's downstairs."

The phone started ringing. The security company. Suddenly the alarm shut off and the lights downstairs flashed on. The phone stopped ringing.

"Penny! Matt! You all right?"

Matt looked at his mother. His mother looked back at Matt.

"Dad?" Matt called.

Mr. Calahan rushed to the stairs. "Sorry about that," he said, rubbing his knee. "I wasn't trying to wake you. Not sure why the alarm went off."

"Dad, I thought you were a burglar!"

Mr. Calahan grinned. "Nope—just me. But I think I missed the security call. The police are probably on their way."

Matt rubbed his temples. "I can't believe this."

"Sorry," apologized Mr. Calahan.

Matt's mother yawned, waved good night, and went back to bed.

"I'm going to go out and wait for the police," Mr. Calahan said. "They should be here any moment."

"I'm sure you'll run right into them," Matt said, walking down the stairs.

Stan Calahan looked at Matt. "What are you doing with your laptop?"

Matt felt his mouth go dry. His father just stared at him. A long, awkward moment passed between them.

Suddenly, Matt's dad turned toward the door. "You hear that?" He opened it. Matt walked up behind him. A hollow knocking sound echoed in the street.

"It's a good thing the police are coming," his dad said, staring across the street. "It looks like that creep is back. He's pounding on the Zarza's door."

