

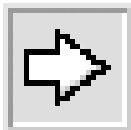
# The Secret Weapon

*Sometimes destiny is accidental. A man sets down his briefcase only to pick up another a moment later, thinking it is his own. When destiny surprises you like that, there's nothing you can do but go with the flow. But when this man lost his briefcase, he lost everything. He lost his influence. He lost his riches. He lost his power. God, he thought, was playing a game. But was he?*



**m**att Calahan's adrenaline was pumping. The sun shone hot on the football field, making him sweat. The field smelled of freshly cut grass and stale mud. The fans—well, the parents in the crowd—cheered for him and his team. They were only six points away from a sure victory. One more touchdown and they would have it. This was junior high football. Mean and green, the Culprits were an oiled machine.

But that's not why Matt Calahan's adrenaline was pumping. The truth is, Matt couldn't have cared less about the game. He'd signed up because his best friend, Lamar, had begged him to join the team. Well, that, and his dad thought it was about time Matt started playing a sport. He was playing today, for the first time in four months, because Tony Nedbit hadn't done his homework and *someone* had to take his place. So here was Matt, making his dad and his friend proud.



Matt glanced over at the stands where his dad sat by his mother, talking on his cell phone. No matter how busy either of them were, they always made his games . . . even if he never played. As usual, through most of the game his dad would be on the phone. The guy just needed to learn to relax.

*Whoosh!* The football whizzed by Matt's head. Matt whirled around. A burly guy twice Matt's width caught the ball and charged forward. He headed straight for Matt, who jumped out of the way.

"Get him!" one of Matt's teammates cried.

"Hulk" Hooligan took up the call and pushed Matt out of the way. He sacked Burly Guy.

"Oh, come on!" someone else shouted. "He gained twenty yards! C'mon!"

"Oh!" Matt said, as if getting sandwiched between Hulk and Burly Guy was an option.

Lamar jogged by and slapped Matt on the shoulder. "Don't pay any attention to them," he said.

That was Lamar. Always the encourager.

Hulk did a little dance and punched one of his teammates in the arm. The teammate recoiled. As he passed Matt, Hulk slurred, "Tanks. I guess we've found our weakness, Calhan."

"Cal-a-han," Matt huffed.

The teams moved to the line of scrimmage.

"Go Culprits!" Matt's mother screamed.

Matt looked toward the stands again just as his other best friend, Gill, entered with his mom. His real name was Conrad, but everyone called him Gill because his last name was Gillespie.

He helped his pregnant mother sit down. His parents had attended Enisburg Junior High when they were young, and so they rarely missed a game, even though Gill didn't play.

Gill gave Matt a cheesy thumbs-up and shouted, "You da man, Cal-a-han!"

Matt's dad was still talking on the phone.

The football was snapped, thrown, and stopped in a moment. Second and ten.

Matt didn't pay much attention, because chances were small that the ball would come his way. Oh,

**As he passed Matt, Hulk slurred, "Tanks. I guess we've found our weakness, Calhan."**

sure, it could. But odds were, it wouldn't. The good players usually got the ball thrown to them first.

Matt felt a bit cynical but not at all sad. His mind was set on getting home. Opening his present. He'd seen it that morning: a big, rectangular box wrapped in green-and-blue birthday paper, speckled with balloons. Matt could only dream about what was inside. His parents had said they wanted to have a small party—just the three of them. They had never said that before, so Matt was sure this present was extra special . . . maybe even expensive. Hey, you have a thirteenth birthday only once.

A few months ago, Lamar had received a complete art kit on his thirteenth birthday—one like the professionals use. Now he was drawing comics in style. For Gill's upcoming thirteenth birthday, he was anticipating getting an earring. Okay, Matt could pass on that, but Gill thought it was pretty hip. Whatever the present was, Matt knew he'd like it. And as soon as the game was over, he was going home to open it!

Hike! Pass! Whoops! On the ground again. Third and ten.

"Go Culprits!" Matt's mother shouted.

"Go Culprits!" Gill echoed.

Hike! Pause . . . pass! No good. Fourth and ten.

Soon, thank God, it would all be over.

The Townsend Knights kicked the ball high in the air, and it thumped up and down on the other side of the field. Both teams followed it down there and changed positions. Matt looked at the clock—less than a minute left in the game.

Matt's coach blew his whistle. The Culprits took a time-out.

Matt reeled in with his team. They gathered in a circle, and Lamar smiled as he knuckle-punched Matt's knuckle.

Matt looked up to see Gill taking his place in the huddle—except he wasn't supposed to be in the huddle because he wasn't playing. He was such a comedian. If he had a day job, he was one of the few who really *could* quit. He *was* funny!

"OK," Coach Plymouth said. "This is it, guys. Make this play, and you can win for the Culprits."

"Yes!" Gill shouted.

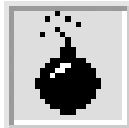
"You know what that means, don't you?" the coach asked.

"Yes!" Gill shouted. "It means we're one step closer to the playoffs!"

The coach winked at Gill. "That's right." Then he suddenly squeezed his eyes tight, "Gill, what are you doing here? You're not on the team."

"I'm on the team in spirit, Coach."

Coach Plymouth rolled his eyes, then nodded at the quarterback, Phillip Grove. He always let the



quarterbacks choose the plays. Phillip licked his lips and looked around the circle.

"Lamar," he said decisively. "I'm going to throw the ball to you."

"Cool," Lamar said.

"And then," Phillip continued, "I want you to pitch it to Matt."

"Pitch it to *Matt*?" Gill and Lamar said, shocked.

"Pitch it to *Matt*?" Hulk echoed.

"Pitch it to *Matt*?" Matt said, equally shocked.

The players glanced at one another.

"Pitch it to Matt," Phillip confirmed.

Matt's stomach turned over. "I'm not so sure . . ."

Phillip reached across and put his hand on Matt's shoulder. "You're our secret weapon."

"Secret weapon?"

"Secret weapon. No one on the Knights team would expect us to lateral to you. You'll be wide open. Just catch the ball and run as fast as you can to the end zone. You can make it. And we'll win."

"Yes!" Gill Gillespie shouted. "Secret weapon!"

The coach narrowed his eyes at Gill. "Gill, get off the field, will ya, before we get a penalty?"

Gill laughed and walked away, bobbing his head like a chicken. Gill was a little off his rocker, but you had to love him. Everyone laughed.

“Wait a second!” Matt shouted, his voice crackling. “What about Burly Guy—number 68? He’s right in my path!”

“Hulk, you and I will take out 68 after Lamar pitches it to Matt,” Phillip ordered.

Hulk nodded and muttered under his breath.

The referee blew his whistle as Phillip said, “On three, guys.”

The Culprits put their hands in the center of the circle, stacked one atop another, and dropped them all at once as they shouted, “Go-o-o-o Culprits!” They broke apart and took their places on the field.

Matt felt lightheaded. For a second he closed his eyes. *God, please help me. I promise I’ll go on a missions trip to Africa if you help me.*

“Hut one! Hut two!”

Matt opened his eyes.

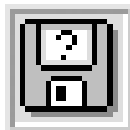
“Hut-hut!”

Phillip threw the ball to Lamar. As the football shot past the stands, Matt could see his dad was finally off the phone. Lamar caught the ball. The Knights followed the ball, heading away from Matt.

Lamar hesitated.

Matt threw his arms in the air.

Lamar pitched the football straight to him. Matt saw it coming like a bullet. The Knights seemed noticeably surprised.



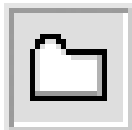
*Thump!* The football slapped Matt in the chest. He closed his arms around it—and he caught it! He actually caught it!

Matt quickly surveyed the field. *Pow! Slam! Womp!* The Culprits blocked the Knights.

“Go!” someone shouted.

Matt was about to run when suddenly Burly Guy was charging straight toward him.

Where were Hulk and Phillip? Weren’t they going to “take out 68 after Lamar pitches it to Matt”?



“Yaaaaaaaaaaaaa!!!!” From the center of the field, Phillip the quarterback came running like a wild turkey. He leaped in the air and landed on Burly Guy’s back, screaming. But Burly Guy kept coming. Matt’s heart was racing. He just knew he was going down. Then: Hulk. The huge Culprit came bounding in from center field, a goofy-looking grin on his face. He crashed into Burly Guy at full speed, throwing him backward and pinning Phillip underneath him.

“Agh!” Phillip shouted in pain. “Matt . . . run!”

Matt looked. With Burly Guy out of the way, the field was clear! He twisted around and ran! Fast! Faster! Faster! Suddenly before him, the Knights who had been heading his direction gave up hope! Matt was a rocket! The field opened before him! He ran! Ran! Ran!

The end zone was getting closer . . . closer.

Like a marathon winner, Matt crossed the line with both arms in the air. He threw the football, spiking it on the ground.

Touchdown!

He made a touchdown! Matt danced like a chicken. He spun like a monkey. He was a secret weapon!

So why were his teammates, glaring at him, instead of raising him on their shoulders?

Then Matt noticed something a bit odd. His mouth dropped. He was on the wrong side of the field.

He had made a touchdown all right . . . for the *other* team.

Well, at least he didn't have to go to Africa.



"It's all right, Matt." Mr. Calahan patted Matt's knee and sat back on the couch. "You put your whole self into the game."

Matt shrugged. The game was over—thankfully over—and Matt had decided to put it out of his mind. He had managed to avoid his teammates (especially Phillip Grove, the quarterback, who limped off the field after tackling Burly Guy in vain), to come home with his mom and dad and to take a quick shower. He was now in the living room wearing cut-off sweatpants and a DCTalk T-shirt. He ran his hand through his wet, black hair.

It was dark outside now, and the house was quiet. Matt's mom finally entered the room with a small cupcake. A single candle sat atop, burning hot. She shielded it with her hand. "Happy birthday to you, happy birthday to you . . . "

Mrs. Calahan was a sweet woman with soft facial features surrounded by short and straight black hair. She wore a denim shirt and blue jeans. She shot Matt's dad a quick glance, and he joined in. "Happy birthday, dear Matthew! Happy birthday to you!"

Mrs. Calahan carefully handed the cupcake to Matt. "Make a wish!"

Matt felt a little silly but closed his eyes anyway.

*I hope I get a good present*, he wished. He opened his eyes and blew out the candle.

A moment later, it flared up again.

Matt blinked. He blew it out again.

It flared up again, Matt looked at his mom.

She giggled. "Trick candle."

Matt's dad laughed.

Mrs. Calahan licked her fingertips and snuffed the flame out for the last time.

"Do I still get my wish?" Matt asked.

"Of course," Matt's mom said, not losing a beat. "You get it three times over."

Mr. Calahan reached down, picked up the present, and handed it to Matt. It was somewhat heavy. Matt smiled and didn't waste any time. Soon the

balloon-speckled paper was in shreds at his feet. It had been masterfully taped around a plain, white box that looked like it had been recycled from Christmas.

“Even I don’t know what it is,” Matt’s mom said, “Your dad just said he knew you’d like it.”

Matt looked at his dad. His square-jawed father wore his signature plaid shirt and jeans, and he chewed his gum like he was trying to squeeze out the last ounce of flavor. They didn’t spend a lot of time together, so Matt wondered how his dad knew what he liked. Would he have to feign surprise and excitement, pretending he liked it, when he hated it?

“Here you go,” Mr. Calahan said, handing him an open pocketknife.

Matt’s mother winked and giggled.

Matt took the pocketknife and sliced the top of the white box down the middle, tearing through the packing tape. He handed the knife back, slipped his fingers in the open crack and pulled, tearing the remaining tape at the sides. The box opened with a *pop*, and a few Styrofoam squiggles shot out, peppering the floor.

The snowfall continued as Matt dug into the box like a dog digging for a bone. Then he hit it. He pressed his fingertips around the edges and lifted it up. His father looked at him with a goofy grin. His mother’s lips tightened.



Matt put the box on the floor and pulled the birthday gift the rest of the way out. All at once, it was free. Matt felt his mouth drop. He set the present down on his lap. He could barely believe it.

"It's a laptop!" his dad announced.

Matt's wish *had* come true. Three times over. He had often dreamed of having his own laptop but never really thought he'd get one. Not anytime soon, anyway. They were so . . . expensive.

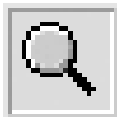
"Oh, my, Stan . . . how did you afford that?" his mother asked in a hush. "We can't afford that . . ."

"Business has been good, Penny," Matt's father responded, "and I have friends who have friends."

Before they could exchange another word, his dad's cellular phone rang, leaving Matt's mother to draw her own conclusions. Matt's dad pulled the phone off his leather belt and looked at the display.

"Gotta get this," he said, standing up and flipping the phone open. It was probably one of the guys at one of his construction sites. They were always calling with questions. And his dad was always answering them.

Matt couldn't take his eyes off the laptop. His gaze was drawn to the small, gold lettering embossed in the bottom, right corner: WORDTRONIX.



Matt pulled his right forefinger along the right-hand side and felt the slick, black plastic. His finger came to a switch, and when he

located another one on the opposite side, he carefully pulled both switches forward. The lid locks released, and Matt lifted the top. It opened like a big, flat clam.

The screen was a good-sized 12.1 inches. The keyboard was compact but full. Below it was a touchpad like Matt had seen on the laptops at the store—the kind you pull your finger across to move the cursor around the screen. Above the keyboard was a small LCD strip. Beside it, the power button.

“Turn it on,” his dad encouraged, holding his hand over the cell phone’s mouthpiece.

Matt’s fingers tingled as he pushed the small, round button. A beep sounded, and the laptop came to life. The LCD strip flashed with several symbols. Matt easily figured them out. A lightning bolt signaled that the power was on. A picture of a battery showed the battery was full.

For the next thirty seconds, the Wordtronix logo swirled on the screen as the operating system loaded. When the Wordtronix logo disappeared, the screen lit up with a standard set of computer icons.

Matt’s dad hung up from his call. He walked over, sat beside Matt, and pointed to each icon. “It’s got a word processor, a database, a spreadsheet, access to the Internet, and I dunno what else.”

**Matt’s fingers tingled as he pushed the small, round button.**

Matt stared in wide-eyed wonder. "This is incredible, Dad." No need to pretend excitement *this* year.

His dad nodded. "I knew you'd like it. You're always on your mom's computer messing around with your friends, but now you have your own."

"Wow. You mean my computer will actually be free?" his mom teased.

Matt's dad reached into the box. "There's some other cables and stuff in here." He pulled them out. "Since you like to write so much, now you can do your writing in style, eh?"

Matt did love to write. Stories about knights and battles, robots coming to life, aliens invading earth—whatever came to mind. For years he had written in a spiral notepad . . . but now he had a writer's dream: a laptop. He could take it with him any time, anywhere. Whenever he felt inspired, he could write!

The tall, oak grandfather clock in the living room bonged seven times, like a sentry alerting his kingdom that all was well.

His father's cellular phone rang again.

"Why don't you turn that thing off?" his mom offered.

"I can't," his dad simply stated. He leaned over and put his arm around Matt, giving him a hug.

Matt hugged back. "Thank you—so much."

"Nothing's too good for my boy," his dad mumbled as he turned away and flipped open his cell

phone. Then he stopped and turned back to Matt. "You enjoy writing, Ace," he said with a wink. "Who knows? Maybe one day something you write will change someone's life."



In Southern California, even autumn evenings were warm, so Matt pushed up his second-story window and let the breeze blow in. This was his favorite time to write. Once situated, he shoved his pen and notebook aside and thumped his laptop onto his pinewood desk. He popped open the top and waited while the Wordtronix logo whirled on the screen and the machine came to life.



The icons appeared, and Matt moved the on-screen arrow over to an analog clock face on a piece of paper. He tapped the touchpad once, and the icon burst into a full-screen word processor. Matt's eyebrows leapt up. He studied the screen.

The word processor looked pretty much like others he had used: drop-down menu items for manipulating his document and a whole slew of clickable buttons for changing the size of letters, the layout, and more. It appeared simple enough.

Matt leaned back, smiled, and cracked his knuckles. He wiggled his fingers in the air and then set them on the keyboard. He had learned to type in school—and he was good at it.

Matt looked out the window as his mind began to think . . . to wonder . . . to create.

One of Matt's favorite writing exercises was to imagine "what if . . ." He found this exercise, more than any other, got his brain to churn up a story.

*What if* a world-famous rock star bought Antarctica and then sold it to aliens?

*What if* cockroaches grew every time it rained, and it rained nonstop for a month?

*What if* a tall cactus came alive and decided to clean up the streets by shooting its needles at thieves, robbers, crooks, and politicians?

Matt looked across the street at the old, empty, three-story house. It was more like a mansion with its recessed placement and creaky front gate. As long as Matt had lived on Oleander Street, it had been abandoned. Ivy snaked up the brick walls like wrinkles. Most of the lower windows were boarded up. It was a constant eyesore to the neighborhood.

Matt smirked as he watched a flimsy outdoor shutter wave in the breeze. It was like something out of a cheesy scary movie . . . still, he knew it must have a great story to tell.

*What if* someone decided to move into that old place only to find out it had once been a haven for gangsters . . . with hidden passageways, long-lost secrets, and gold buried in the basement? Matt placed

his fingers on the home row of his keyboard and began to type.

The old mansion on Oleander Street was once a hideout for gangsters.

Not a bad start. It was short and sweet, and it grabbed the reader's attention. Matt rubbed his chin, as he imagined a seasoned, bearded writer would. He thought about the setting. The story needed to start in the daytime so things couldn't go anywhere but downhill.

The old mansion on Oleander Street was once a hideout for gangsters. However, on the warm, sunny, autumn afternoon in California, that was the last thing the new homeowners expected.

Matt noticed an odd key on his keyboard, located just above the enter key. It was similar to the other keys, but instead of a letter, it had a clear clock face on it . . . just like the one on the word processor icon. Matt pushed it. On screen, his cursor changed from an arrow to a clock face. It flashed from white to gold and back as its hands swept forward lightning fast. Then it disappeared, and the arrow returned. Matt shrugged. *Cool. Must be spell-check or something.*

Isabel's father led her up the rickety, old, front steps. Isabel's long, straight, midnight black hair tumbled down her back like a waterfall. Her innocent, twelve-year-old, deep brown eyes took in her new home.

There had to be a girl in the gangster story because girls scream better than guys do. And she had to be pretty, because that would make the reader sympathetic to her when she was tied to a chair with a pack of dynamite at her feet. But that would come later. Now for a little foreshadowing . . .

"This place looks scary, Daddy," Isabel said sweetly, her words dripping like newly spun honey.

"Nonsense," her father replied. "It's our new home. I saw it last night when driving by and called on it first thing this morning. Since I was transferred here on such short notice, I didn't think we'd be able to find a big, beautiful fixer-upper in our price range . . . but here we are!"

Little did Isabel or her father know what awful surprises were in store for them. Welcome home, innocent victims. Welcome home!

Matt punched the little clock key again, just for effect. The hands in the golden clock icon spun around on the screen. He was writing his story in style now. No more paper. No more ink-splattering pens. Matt folded his arms across his chest. This laptop was the best gift ever!



In the street below, a car slowly rolled by.

