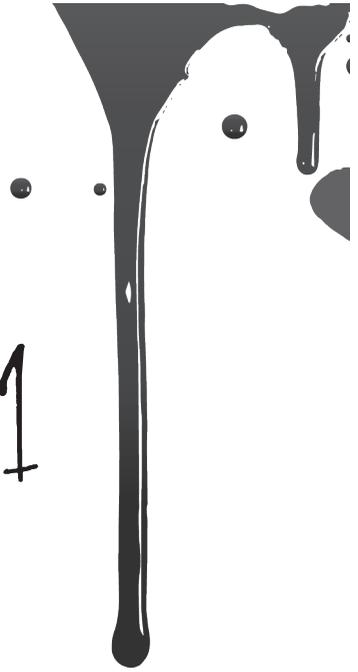


CHAPTER 1



“I want to tell you a story. A story about death, about danger, and about an item so cursed that most people think it’s not even real. Time and again it appears unexpectedly, and when it pops up, mayhem is sure to follow. You might be asking yourself, what could be so dangerous, so deadly? Maybe it’s a creepy doll containing the souls of the dead . . . or a forgotten relic from ancient times. But no, this cursed object is something that no one would ever suspect . . . *an arcade game.*”

Danny had to laugh. He was sitting in the front passenger seat of his mom’s SUV with one earbud in. The other one was currently missing in action, probably somewhere in his room lost in a sea of video games and action figures.

His mom glanced over at him from the driver’s seat. “What’s so funny?”

“Just this YouTube guy,” Danny said. “He’s so dramatic.”

The YouTuber was in his twenties and went by the name Mr. Griller, and Danny was his biggest fan. His focus was on horror video games, the more obscure the better, with occasional Twitch live streams and longer, story-driven videos about game legends and lore.

It was the kind of thing Danny lived for.

The image onscreen transitioned from a series of black-and-white crime scene photos to a shot of Mr. Griller in his usual spot, the small corner of a well-lit room. Over his right shoulder a massive HD monitor played a loop of a bloody first-person shooter. Mr. Griller had a thin black beard and a head full of shaggy curls that fell out from underneath a baseball cap with a logo for the Raccoon City Rangers. According to a video from the previous year titled “Get to Know Me,” his parents were from India, and in his words, “They *really* want me to go back to college.”

“Imagine a game,” he said, talking directly into the camera in a hilariously serious tone, “so disturbing that everyone who has ever played it has died at some point.”

Wait, Danny thought, *doesn’t everyone die at some point?*

“Most people wrote it off as an urban legend. For years, people in the arcade trading and restoration scene would whisper about it, trying to convince themselves that they were safe, that the danger wasn’t real. But in my research, I’ve been able to uncover the truth, which has never been seen before now.”

Danny would often laugh whenever the videos got too dramatic, but he could easily get sucked into the storytelling. He leaned forward, squinting at his phone.

“This,” Mr. Griller said, “is the only known photo of the game to exist online.”

A blurry picture appeared. The arcade machine looked like a six-foot-tall box made out of particleboard, big and unwieldy. The photo didn’t include the machine’s screen, but Danny could make out the side panels of the wooden cabinet, which showed off the game’s art.

“Whoa . . .”

A single word was splashed across the machine’s side in scrawled green letters.

“*Grin*,” Danny whispered.

“What’s that?” his mom asked.

“Shhh,” Danny said. He didn’t want to miss this.

“This,” Mr. Griller continued, “is *Grin*.”

Beneath the name, painted in a rough, sketchy style, was a huge, gruesome smile. No eyes, no nose, nothing but that ominous, mocking grin with huge, hungry teeth that seemed to leap from the black background.

“No one knows where it came from, and there are no records of any major video game company making an arcade game with that title. It’s a true mystery, passed down from seller to seller like a rumor. I haven’t yet tracked down the names of any of the owners, but the whispers persist on message boards. For every person who says it’s a hoax, there are just as many

who believe, and they all tell the same story. Where this game goes, death soon follows.”

The camera zoomed in, moving ever closer to that mocking smile, and Danny felt a cold sweat break out across the back of his neck. The video’s creepy soundtrack was building and swelling, and though the faceless smile may not have had eyes, he still felt like he was being watched.

“Is it just an urban legend? Or maybe some harmless prank? Either way it’s a lot of work just to trick people, and as I always say, where there’s smoke, there’s fire. I can’t tell you if it’s real, but I can give you this warning. If you ever come across this machine in an arcade, you may want to think twice before putting a quarter in it. It might be the most important decision you ever make.”

The screen flashed red, and a stock sound of a woman screaming blared in his ears. It was enough to snap Danny out of his momentary daze, and he snorted another laugh.

Mr. Griller always put on a good show.

The camera cut back to the host, who sat in a gaming chair surrounded by detailed action figures from *Resident Evil*, *Five Nights at Freddy’s*, and too many others to count.

“My promise to you, my faithful viewers, is to continue my research into this game. I’ve been so hyped up ever since I found this picture that I just had to share it, but I’m hoping to have a follow-up video soon. Don’t forget to like, share, and subscribe.”

Danny looked out at the highway for the first time in

probably an hour. It was about a two-hour trip from his house to Uncle Bill's, but Danny hadn't really paid attention to when they left.

"How much longer?"

"About half an hour," his mom said. "And welcome back to the real world."

"What's that mean?"

"I mean when you're staring at your phone, you might as well be on another planet."

"What's wrong with other planets?"

She laughed. "Nothing . . . unless you like breathing oxygen. You know, small stuff like that."

Danny yawned. "Eh, breathing is overrated."

He leaned his head back and watched the fields and trees fly past. It was the dead heat of a Tennessee summer, and everything between the parking lots and rest stops was yellow and crunchy from lack of rain. As the sandpaper horizon drifted by, he couldn't help but think that his choice to stay indoors during the height of summer was the right one. No matter what his coaches, teachers, or parents said, it was *always* nice inside, and every video game came with a side order of air-conditioning. Most adults didn't understand that, but thankfully his uncle was the exception.

"You excited?" she asked.

"What do you think?"

"I'm just trying to keep the conversation going so you don't go back to your phone."

“I’m a thirteen-year-old nerd who’s about to spend a week with his uncle, who just happens to own the biggest arcade in the state. Uh, yeah, I’m pretty pumped.”

“You’re just like him, you know,” she said. “Bill was such a weird kid growing up.”

“Hey!”

“That’s not what I meant,” she said, laughing. “Just . . . different. I was always into softball, cheerleading, basketball. He was just the perfect example of an indoor kid. You could leave him alone for a month with a stack of Nintendo games and a case of Mountain Dew and he’d never even know you left.”

“Not sure if I should be offended or take that as a compliment.”

“Well, he made it work,” she said. “He didn’t go to college, and he always seemed to just bounce along from one thing to another, but his arcade is a success. People come from all over. If you told me that an arcade like that could make money nowadays, I wouldn’t have believed you.”

Danny was genuinely confused. “What do you mean?”

“When we were kids, arcades were huge,” she said. “But over time kids stopped coming and they just died out. All the games you could play at home got better, I guess. It’s like records and video stores and whatever else you can think of. Eventually something better always comes along.”

Danny tried to picture a world where people didn’t love arcades, but his imagination failed him. Sure, video games at home were fun, but there was something different about being in an arcade. It was like taking a time machine back to an era

that he missed by simply being born too late. “You know they still make records, right?”

“Yes, smarty-pants, I know that,” she said. “But it’s different. It’s just a niche thing now. I guess people miss what they had when they were younger, and it’s turned us all into collectors.”

Danny considered this for a moment. “So you and Dad watch college football.”

“Every single chance we get.”

Danny rolled his eyes. “So football is like your *favorite* thing, and games are my favorite thing. For just a second, think about how different our worlds are. You can just bump into a random person and talk about football, because hey, they love it too. And you can go to a store and just buy football shirts—”

“Jerseys.”

“Whatever! And once a year you can drive to a stadium and sit in uncomfortable seats with like eighty thousand other people who *all* love the same thing you do, right? Basically the entire world is a buffet for you. Meanwhile people like me *and Bill* have a handful of places on the entire *planet* where we can really just soak up this thing that we love. That’s arcades!”

Danny finished his mini-rant, and his mother furrowed her brow. “I thought you liked the UT game we went to.”

“It was . . . fine.”

“I guess I never knew what it was like to not be, well, like everyone else,” his mom said. “Like I said, you’ve got a lot of Bill in you. Honestly, you could both use some sun.”

Danny looked down at his extremely pale arms and scoffed.

She paused, then glared over at him. “But you’re still only thirteen. And you’re going to college.”

“We’ll see.”

Danny had been trying to set up a trip like this for a few years now, and it was finally happening. They’d gone to Uncle Bill’s arcade a handful of times, but it was always a day trip that ended far too quickly to really appreciate the utter majesty of the place. There were dozens of games, maybe hundreds, all of them set to free play, and after every trip his parents had to practically drag Danny away kicking and screaming. Not this time, though. This time he’d be there from opening to closing. It was summer, school was out, and for five days straight he would binge. Nachos and pizza from the snack bar, all the soda he could drink, and endless video games, pinball, Skee-Ball, and light guns. It was a history lesson, from the late seventies to now, from *Pac-Man* to *Street Fighter*, *BurgerTime* to *The House of the Dead*. It was all for him, and there wouldn’t be a parent in sight to tell him to take a break, to walk outside for a while, to maybe go easy on the Twizzlers. Bill would be the only adult in sight, and Danny knew from experience that his uncle wouldn’t ask him to slow down. If anything, Bill would hand him another slice of pizza and jump in as player two.

It was heaven, and Danny couldn’t wait.

CHAPTER 2



“There it is!”

Even in the daylight, the tall neon sign for PixelWorks Arcade seemed to glow like a beacon on the asphalt horizon. It was just off the main road, on a side street that once housed a series of enormous factories. Most of them were long gone, replaced by restaurants and banks. A former plastic-molding plant had been repurposed into the arcade. Now it was packed with glittering, pixelated goodness.

The huge arcade parking lot was half-full.

“It’s busy,” his mom said as she pulled into a spot.

“Of course it is,” Danny said.

“Wow,” she said with a laugh. “Middle of the day too.”

“What’s funny?” Danny asked.

“Ah, nothing,” she said. “I’m glad this place is doing well.”

Bill went through a bunch of schemes before this arcade. He was due for a win.”

Danny didn't quite understand what she meant. His parents had dropped little comments here and there about how flighty his uncle was, about how he would start up get-rich-quick schemes only to abandon them at the drop of a hat.

“Looks like he got his win,” Danny said as he jumped out of the SUV. He opened the back hatch and was pulling out his rolling suitcase when his mom gave him that motherly look he knew all too well. It seemed to say, *Stop and look at me, because I'm about to say something important.*

“What?” he asked.

“Your uncle Bill is a really good guy,” she said. “I know you know that. You've been around him plenty over the years, but, well, he's not the most responsible guy on the planet.”

Danny thought of his dad back home, probably dutifully mowing the yard as they spoke, and he almost said *Responsibility is overrated.*

“What are you getting at?” he asked instead.

“I mean,” she said, brushing a strand of blond hair out of his eyes, “that you need to be able to watch out for yourself this week. He's an adult, but he's not an *adult* adult, if that makes sense. I trust him to take care of you now, as a teenager, but I might not trust him to take care of a toddler. Most days, he's fine, but when he gets *wired in*, well, I might not trust him to watch a cat.”

“I'm thirteen,” he said as he flipped his head forward,

sending his neatly brushed hair directly back into his eyes. “I can *do stuff*.” Even as he spoke, he did feel a bit of doubt. This was, after all, the first time he’d be gone from home for more than a night. Still, even if he was feeling apprehensive, there was no reason to tell his mom that.

She looked him in the eye. The two of them were the same height now, and Danny knew that he’d be taller than her by the end of the year. He was taller and thinner than average, and though he wasn’t athletic in the slightest, Mr. Burke the PE teacher had told him he should try out for basketball, a suggestion that Danny was certain was a joke. He was, and likely always would be, about as far from being a basketball player as someone could get.

“I know you can handle yourself,” she said gently. “If I didn’t think so, I wouldn’t have let you make this trip. All I’m doing is reminding you. If anything doesn’t feel right, or if you just want to come home, all you have to do is text and I’m on the way.”

Danny thought back to sleepovers when he was younger, to watching horror movies at friends’ houses, to struggling to sleep in strange places. More than once he’d made the call of shame and gone home, sleeping bag in hand, but that was years ago. Now he had a handful of close friends he felt completely at home with. They would be having sleepovers and marathon online gaming sessions without him, but that was perfectly fine, at least for a few days. Nothing, not one single thing, was going to stop this trip from happening.

“Thank you for your concern,” he said, a bit more sarcastically than he meant to, “but it’s all good. When you pick me up in five days I’ll be the absolute champion of this arcade.”

She sighed. “Well, at least we were able to fill you with confidence. Did you pack everything?”

“Yes. Can we just go in, please?” he asked.

“You are the most impatient kid,” she said as she fiddled with her purse.

“You don’t get it,” he said as they finally started up the sidewalk to the entrance.

“What don’t I get?”

“There’s like a million games in here. You know how many of those I can beat? How many high scores I can get? My initials could be all *over* this place by the time I leave. People ten years from now will be walking from game to game asking, who is DND?”

“Daniel Nickolas Dawson?”

“Yes!” he exclaimed. “Exactly! I’ll never hit a grand slam in the *big game*, but this . . . this is my legacy.”

His mother stopped and tilted her head, studying him.

“I really don’t know how it happened,” she said.

“How what happened?”

“How you’re exactly like him.”

“Uncle Bill?”

“Yeah. It drives your dad up a wall, you know that, right?”

Danny thought of the pile of sports junk collecting dust in the back of his closet. The baseball mitt, the football, the tennis racket, the boxing gloves. He shrugged.

“I don’t know,” he said. “I just like what I like.”

She patted him on the shoulder, then changed her mind and went in for a hug.

“I love you,” she said, wrapping her strong arms around him. “You just keep being you, and it’ll all work out just like it did for Bill.”

“Oookay,” he said, somewhat confused. Where was this coming from?

“And if you start to have one of your episodes, you just call me.”

Danny felt something, a little splinter inside his brain, and he shook it off just as he broke free from his mother. He wouldn’t go there. Not this week. Not when there was an endless supply of awesome just waiting for him.

“I’m fine, Mom,” he said sharply. “Now come on, let’s go.”

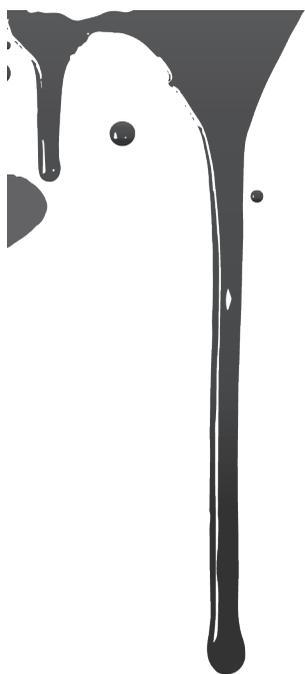
“Okay,” she said gently as she finally loosened her grip. “I just wanted to get my hug in before you got inside and all embarrassed and weird.”

“It’s fine,” he said as they continued toward the arcade entrance. “Not like I know anyone here anyway.”

“You can never be sure,” she said with a knowing-mom sort of grin.

“What’s that mean?”

“Come on,” she said, leading the way.



CHAPTER 3

Danny stepped through the door and was immediately assaulted by the arctic breeze of the world's hardest-working air conditioner. They were greeted with a long, dimly lit hallway, a threshold that reminded him of a Mario Bros. warp pipe between worlds.

The experience had begun.

Danny could feel his brain switching over from the outside world to this one. It was like venturing into the deep sea on a submarine or blasting into space.

He dragged his suitcase behind him, and soon the hallway ended at a pair of tinted glass doors. He pushed them open, revealing the hidden paradise, and couldn't help but smile. The main area of the arcade was an enormous rectangle with high

ceilings that stretched into blackness overhead. He glimpsed a faint metallic glimmer up near the ceiling. He couldn't quite make it out, but it looked like a set of tracks looping along the ceiling, as if meant for a high-level go-kart race. On the back wall, a massive neon sign in yellow letters displayed the words *PixelWorks* with a large, cartoonish mechanical gear next to it.

Directly to the right of the entrance was a long snack bar and a handful of tables and orange, tan, and brown chairs. It looked like how Danny imagined arcades in the 1970s looked—the seventies were the golden age of arcades. He took a deep breath, inhaling the smells of pizza, popcorn, nachos, chicken tenders, and fries. A high school kid stood at the counter looking bored as a small line of younger boys and girls tried to decide what they wanted.

Behind the counter, a pair of thin neon tubes ran along the wall, one purple, one yellow. They traced a line of electric color across the entire length of the gigantic room, occasionally forming random shapes—palm trees, a pixelated spaceship, a block with a question mark on it. The neon lights bathed the entire room with a vague glow that reflected off the smooth concrete floors like moonlight on the surface of a pond.

The enormous room was lined with an almost endless array of arcade machines, and the air was thick with the mingled atonal music of lasers, machine guns, and karate kicks.

“It’s so loud,” Danny’s mom said, raising her voice over the chaos.

“I know. It’s great!”

The machines were arranged against every wall and in smooth, symmetrical rows that created neat aisles. There were four rows in total, the games arranged by category.

“Check this out,” Danny said. “You’ve got the light gun games over here.” He stopped at one of the games and picked up a plastic gun and pointed it at the screen.

“*The House of the Dead 2*, probably the best in the series. Plus you got *Point Blank*, *Time Crisis* . . . oh, *Hogan’s Alley*, that one’s new since last time. And over here”—he ran to the next row—“all the fighting games. *Street Fighter*, *Mortal Kombat*, and even the weird ones like *Time Killers*. And down this row,” he said, continuing to drag his suitcase behind him, “these are the true classics. The early eighties stuff—so cool.”

“I remember some of these,” his mother said over the music. Danny barely heard her. He was already caught up in the whirlwind of the place. There were classics and crowd-pleasers mixed with oddities that even a seasoned fan like him might never have seen in person.

In the center of the room was a free-play jukebox blasting an upbeat song. On each side of the large hall stretched two long hallways that led deeper into the recesses of arcade history. The one to the right had a lit-up sign that read *Skee-Ball Lane*, a perfect name for it. There were old-fashioned carnival-style games, cartoonish ball tosses, lines of Skee-Ball lanes, claw machines, and basketball games. Danny remembered how quiet it was back in that little nook, and how the floor was lined with low-pile striped carpet that seemed to swallow up the sounds of the raucous main arcade.

Directly across from Skee-Ball Lane, the other hallway's glowing neon sign read *Pinball Alley*. An ocean of pinball machines lined both sides all the way down the cavernous hallway. Danny had never been the biggest pinball fan, but even he was impressed by the sheer number of glittering, blinking machines and the unmistakable clanging music they made.

He stood and gazed at the majesty of it all. It was like he was at the edge of the ocean, just about to dip his toes in for the very first time. He suddenly realized he was still holding a backpack and a suitcase, something that no one else in the place was doing.

"You guys need some help?" a voice said to his left. Danny turned and saw a teenage girl with bright red hair sitting behind a small counter running parallel to the wall just behind him. In his excitement, he'd walked right past her. She wore a name tag that read PATTI in huge block letters.

"Oh, we're looking for Bill," his mother said. "He's expecting us. Or at least, he's supposed to be."

Recognition dawned on the girl's face as she glanced at the suitcase. She put down the book she'd been reading. "Oh, you're Danny, right? Bill told me you'd be hanging out this week. I'm Emma. Let me go ahead and give you an armband. He's got you covered."

Danny held out his arm and she put a blue paper band on his wrist.

"Your, uh, name tag," Danny said. "It says Patti."

The girl laughed. "Bill makes us wear them. He likes to say

‘Customer service is job one,’ but he also forgets to order new tags when new people start.”

“That’s Bill,” Danny’s mom said with a smile. “How long have you been here?”

“Three months,” Emma said. “Everything is free play except for the claw games. Snack bar is open, but we ask that you eat any food in the designated areas. There’s more seating upstairs unless we have a party, which I don’t think we do today.”

She rattled all this off in a rote, monotone voice that told Danny she’d given this speech a thousand times. He realized as he glanced around that he hadn’t even known there was an upper floor. His previous trips were so short, he’d never had an opportunity to fully explore, but he intended to fix that problem this time.

“Is Bill around?” his mom asked.

“Yeah, he’s always around here . . . somewhere.”

They thanked Emma and walked away from the counter, Danny practically humming with excitement. “Okay, Mom, uh, thank you for letting me come . . . and I love you . . . and . . .”

“Hold on a second before you kick me out,” she said. “I’m not going to leave you standing in here with a suitcase until I talk to Bill.”

“Okay, let’s find him, then!”

Danny practically bolted away from his mother, who followed along behind him, dragging his suitcase and shaking her head. He marched methodically, weaving through clusters of kids and a few adults, all wrapped up in their games. Bill was nowhere to be found.

“Will you slow down?” his mother asked as he dashed past her, making his way up and down the long aisles. Danny had realized over the years that coming back to places you haven’t been in a long time always made them seem smaller, like when he went back to his grade school to see his cousin’s kindergarten graduation. As he grew up, the place seemed to shrink. Somehow PixelWorks was the exact opposite. Even though it had been over a year, the place seemed bigger than ever. The lights of arcade cabinets he’d never seen before reflected in his wide eyes as he took it all in. Each of the aisles was broken up with mini-lounges here and there—couches, tables, chairs, places to hang out and talk, to set drinks and snacks, to just sit and watch the people passing by. Crowds of grade school kids flew past like flocks of birds, while teen boys leaned on tables, talking to girls. Occasionally an actual adult would walk by wearing a Mario or Zelda shirt. All of them had that same look of wonder in their eyes.

Danny was among his people. It was a feeling that he rarely got back home.

Rarely, but not never, he reminded himself as he thought about an old friend he hadn’t seen in years. She loved this place just as much as he did.

Danny rounded the corner underneath the PixelWorks sign and spotted a pair of legs protruding into the aisle in front of him. One of the games, a classic called *Berzerk*, had been pulled halfway into the aisle. Danny knew it well. It was an early shooting game where you moved your tiny character from room to room, blasting a series of robots who

occasionally threatened you with synthesized voices. “*The humanoid must not escape!*” was a line that stuck with Danny the first time he played it.

“Come on,” a familiar voice said from behind the machine, which appeared to be broken. “You piece of—”

Suddenly the screen blinked to life. Bill sat up, wiped his forehead, and slowly pulled himself to his feet with a loud groan.

“Uncle Bill!”

Bill turned, saw his nephew and sister, and smiled broadly.

“There you two are!”

His uncle was an absolute giant. Six foot seven, with a frame like a grizzly bear in cargo shorts and flip-flops. He was far from athletic, but he’d spent enough time hauling ridiculously heavy machines around to make him nearly as strong as a bear too. Danny ran up and Bill caught him in a monster of a hug, easily lifting him off the ground for a few seconds.

“You’re getting heavy,” Uncle Bill said as he set him back down. “Tall too.” He looked at Danny’s mom with a grin. “Hey, Alice, what are you going to do if he gets to be my size?”

“Get a second job,” she said as she gave her brother a hug. “If he starts eating like you, I’m in trouble.”

He waved a dismissive hand. “Ah, that’s what the snack bar’s for.”

“Speaking of which, let me give you some money.”

“No!” Bill said. “He’s my guest. This place is his. And besides, I’m doing a public service here. These youngsters gotta learn history.”

He reached over and slid the heavy arcade game back into place with one hand.

“I mean, George Washington and Ben Franklin are all well and good, but without me how will these kids learn about *Berserk*? This is one of the first games to ever have digitized speech.”

“I thought it *was* the first,” Danny said.

Bill’s mouth fell open, and he looked from Alice to Danny as if he had never heard such a ridiculous statement in his life. “See? This is what I’m talking about. What are they teaching at these schools? The first game with digitized speech was *Stratovox*.”

“I’ve never even heard of that one.”

“I know,” Bill said in a solemn tone. “*That’s* why this week is so important, Danny boy. *That’s* why you got a cool uncle. And we’ve clearly got a lot of work to do, so follow me and let’s get to it.”

Danny turned back to his mom with an *Are we good?* glance.

“Give me a hug,” she said. “I’ll miss you this week.”

Danny hugged her back, and it hit him—excited as he was, he hadn’t realized until now that this would be the most time he’d spent apart from his parents in his entire life. He pulled away and saw a sad look creep into her eyes, even as she continued to smile.

“You be good this week,” she said.

“I will.”

He took the suitcase and followed Bill.

“And stay out of trouble!” she called before they rounded the corner.

“I’ll keep an eye on him,” Bill said.

“Plus, we’re in an *arcade*, Mom,” Danny added. “What could happen?”

CHAPTER 4



“All right,” Bill said as he led Danny down an aisle to the opposite side of the main hall. “This week will be a real education for you, but it’s not all fun and games.”

He fiddled with a giant ring of keys as he talked, and Danny had a vision of his uncle as the master of some grim dark dungeon. The thought made him chuckle as Bill led them to a plain black door with a sign that read Employees Only. He slipped one of the keys into the lock, pausing to turn back to Danny before opening it.

“Now, out here,” he said, motioning to the arcade, “that’s where the magic is, but it takes a lot of elbow grease to make that magic work. Welcome to the *other side*.”

A wave of anticipation sent butterflies racing through Danny’s stomach, and as the black door swung open he held

his breath and stepped over the threshold. The door slammed shut behind them and he found himself in a service tunnel a world of boring gray. Gray walls, gray tile floors, dust-covered pipes, cobwebs in the corners.

“Uh . . .”

Bill slapped him on the back and laughed.

“Yep, that’s lesson one! Never learn how the sausage is made, kid. You’ll always be disappointed. Come on.”

The drab hallway ran along the back of the building and eventually opened onto a massive dark warehouse that seemed to stretch for a hundred yards in every direction.

“Whoa,” Danny said.

“Yeah, it’s not pretty, but it’s big,” Bill said. “The factory we bought out was just gigantic. I thought I’d never fill the room, but I’m making a dent in it.”

Bill walked over to a small, enclosed office set in the corner of the warehouse and flipped a switch. Harsh fluorescent light spilled out of the office windows and into the warehouse, revealing countless old arcade machines that loomed in the darkness like the bony fingers of a dead, buried giant. Danny stood at the edge of that silent garden, trying to take it all in.

“Come on,” Bill said. “Drop your suitcase in here. We got plenty of time to explore the graveyard, as I call it.”

He led Danny into his office. Danny saw exactly what he thought an office belonging to Bill might look like. There was a desk overflowing with piles of papers, invoices, and junk mail. A file cabinet bursting with old bills. A rickety office chair. A stack of unopened energy drinks in the corner.

“I’ve learned the hard way that paperwork *is* important,” Bill said.

“I can see that,” Danny replied. He wasn’t sure what he expected to see behind the scenes, but he felt a bit like a balloon slowly deflating.

“All right,” Bill said. “Forget about all the boring crap. Come check this out.”

His uncle led him back into the warehouse and flipped on the overhead lights. The gloom lifted and Danny realized that the arcade building was actually twice as big as he thought. Above him, he saw what looked like go-kart tracks, the same ones that stretched high overhead above the games in the main hall. Bill took a few steps out into the tangle of old machines and slapped a hand down on a *Time Traveler* game.

“This is the part no one ever sees.”

“Wow,” Danny said, “I had no idea you had this much stuff in the back.”

“Yeah,” Bill said, “that’s the good and the bad of having a lot of space to play with. Eventually you fill it up. Plus, it takes a lot to keep these things going. It’s part electronic know-how, part carpentry, with a little bit of everything in between.”

“I’ve never seen *Time Traveler* in person,” Danny said, stepping forward. “It’s an old hologram game, right?”

“Sorta,” Bill said. “It’s all live video reflected off the back of the cabinet with mirrors. Makes it look like a hologram, but it’s basically just a fancier version of *Dragon’s Lair*. Restoring this one is giving me a headache. But to be honest, it’s a blast bringing them all back to life.”

Danny smiled. His uncle wasn't just a guy with a huge warehouse filled with old, busted games. He was Dr. Frankenstein, pumping life back into those old wires.

Danny pointed up at the strange tracks. "What are those?"

"Oh," Bill said with an almost sneaky smile, "that's the old conveyor system. This place used to crank out all kinds of plastic-molding products day and night, and they would use those conveyor belts to move things from one end to the other. I had to take down some of the tracks to hang the lights, but every once in a while I think about jumping into a box and riding it around like in a *Mario Kart* level." He shook his head. "Probably not the best idea."

Danny walked deeper into the warehouse, feeling strangely overwhelmed by the dark silence of the blackened screens and lingering shadows. Most of the cabinets were in pieces and parts, with the front panels ripped open and their mechanical guts in disarray. The silhouettes reminded him of crumbling tombstones in an old graveyard. Along the walls were huge metal shelves packed with components, some old and greasy with age, others shiny and gleaming, waiting to be put to use. Sheets of particleboard painted black leaned against one of the cabinets.

"What are these for?"

"Oh, those are just replacement panels," Bill said as he followed along behind his nephew. "If I get a game in that's beat to heck, I can take the old panel off the side, slap one of those on, and order a whole new set of side art to put on there."

That's what you got to understand about this little hobby—it's not just buying old games and cleaning them up. This whole warehouse gets put to good use. Sometimes you get a cabinet that looks great on the outside but has a family of rats living in it."

"Are you serious?"

"You'd be surprised. Other times, you get one that looks like trash but runs like a champ. These things are all pieces and parts, and sometimes you just have to put replacement art on the outside. It really is a never-ending little puzzle." Bill smiled as he gently laid a hand on a *Gyruss* machine. "I can't imagine doing anything else."

Danny smiled back, proud this was the guy his mom always compared him to. "Looks like a pretty sweet job."

His uncle winked. "Hey, we're always hiring."

"Maybe if I can convince Mom and Dad to move a little closer."

"Or . . ." Bill said as he hung a giant arm over Danny's shoulder, "maybe by the time you're out of school, I'll be ready to expand. A PixelWorks in every town, and I'll need somebody to run 'em."

They laughed, and Danny glanced around the room.

"Looks like you've got enough stock to work with here."

"Yeah, and they keep on coming. Speaking of which, I got a new acquisition yesterday, haven't even cracked open the box yet. Figured you might like to help me unwrap it."

"For real?" Danny asked. "Of course I would!"

“It’s in the back next to the garage door. This one is so rare, I bet you’ve never even *heard* of it. Let’s crack this thing open.”

Uncle Bill went in search of a hammer as Danny ventured deeper into the graveyard of video games. The cabinets were all taller than he was, so it felt like he was wandering the world’s strangest hedge maze, and he kept expecting to see someone standing around every corner. His imagination always went to the darkest places, and he could practically see a sinister kid standing next to one of the games, face hidden in shadow, hand outstretched, holding a fistful of quarters.

Finally he reached the back wall and found the loading dock and a huge garage door. There, right in the center of the concrete floor, stood a wooden box as big as an upright coffin.

Anything could be in there, he thought. He imagined opening the box, expecting a game but finding only a mound of black dirt crawling with bugs.

Why? he thought. *Why do you always go to the weird, messed-up places?*

It was a question his mom had been asking for years, and now that he was almost in high school she was certain he’d grow out of it any day. If they were lucky, he’d even grow out of the *other* thing as well. He heard a voice in his head, the familiar, soft-spoken sound of his childhood doctor talking as if he weren’t in the room.

“All kids have *some* anxiety,” the doctor had said, “but what we’re seeing with Danny is—”

The sound of something heavy and metallic clattering to the ground snapped Danny back to reality. Somewhere in the distance, he heard Bill curse.

He looked back at the box and shook off the darkness. The warehouse was just playing games with him.

“No,” Danny whispered. “We’re not doing that. Not here. Not this week.”

He turned to go back to the front of the warehouse and help Bill clean up whatever mess he’d made when a faint sound caught his ear. Danny spun back around and stared at the box. Something . . . shuffled inside, so soft that Danny almost convinced himself he’d imagined it.

“Uncle Bill?” he called, still gazing at the box.

“Yeah, just give me a sec. Nothing’s ever where I leave it.”

Danny took a step closer to the box and tilted his head, trying to hear the sound again. He leaned closer and held his breath, wondering if maybe this new game had a stowaway. For a few moments all was quiet except the soft hum of the air conditioner—then he heard it.

“You should smile.”

Danny stumbled backward, bumped into another cabinet, then fell flat onto his backside. The spill hurt, but he barely felt it. All he could feel was his own heart pounding in his chest. It was his imagination playing with him. It simply had to be. And yet . . .

“Always the last place you look, right?” Bill said, coming around the corner. He paused. “You okay?”

“Yeah,” Danny said, climbing to his feet. “I just . . . heard something.”

“There’s all kinds of pops and cracks in this place. We had to do a ton of stuff to fix it up. You wouldn’t believe how much—”

“No,” Danny interrupted, “it was coming out of the box.”

“Really?” Bill took a step closer and knocked on the crate with his hammer. “I swear, I paid a pretty penny for this one, and if it’s full of roaches or something . . .”

He flipped the hammer around and dug the clawed end into one of the wooden planks, prying it free with one quick swipe. Danny started to object, but what could he say? That he heard a voice whispering to him from inside the box? The idea was so silly that he kept his mouth shut.

“You were saying earlier,” Bill said as he pried away each plank with a loud *crack*, “that you’d never seen *Time Traveler* in person. Well, I’m about to show you the Holy Grail. *This* is the kind of game that most collectors only dream of.”

Crack.

Danny suddenly felt hot, and even in the cool air of the warehouse a bead of sweat rolled down his back.

Crack.

“This one was *not* cheap. I’ve been tracking it for years, and even I thought it was just a rumor for a while, but it’s a little like fishing. You just got to be patient and keep your eyes open, and soon enough”—*crack*—“you catch the big one.”

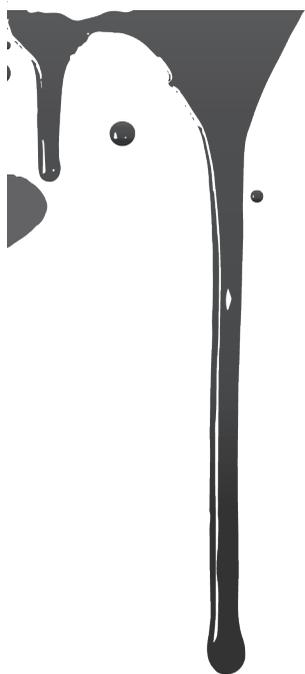
Bill took a step back and one entire side of the tall wooden box fell like a chopped tree. A plume of dust rose into the air,

and once it cleared Danny and his uncle gazed at the side of the cabinet, the bold art splashed along the wood.

“No way,” Danny whispered.

A huge toothy smile grinned at him from the darkness.

“This,” Bill said, beaming, “is *Grin!*”



CHAPTER 5

It was impossible. This couldn't be. The odds of him watching a video *on the way there* and seeing the actual machine in person felt astronomical.

"You've heard of it?" Bill asked as he pried out the rest of the nails, revealing the entire machine in all its dusty glory.

"It's just . . . such a weird coincidence. I was literally watching a video about it on the way up here."

"What video?"

"Just this YouTuber I follow. He talks about random horror games, but the way he talked about this . . . He just built it up like it was some lost relic or something."

"Oh, it definitely is," Bill said as he began to peel off the pieces of cardboard taped to the corners. "It's one of a kind—as far as I can tell, no other copies are floating around."

I got it yesterday, but I held off on opening it, since I knew you'd appreciate it."

Danny took out his phone and tapped the flashlight for a closer look. All he could see was one side panel of the game, but that was enough to send a shiver down his spine. The deep black finish was dappled with specks of red that looked eerily like blood. In the center there was that inhumanly wide grin of bright white teeth. There were no other details of a face, no eyes, no nose, no lips, just that mocking smile that stretched across the panel like a clown's disembodied mouth. Below it, in green, was the title, *Grin*, in hand-painted lower-case letters.

"Yeah, I probably started hearing about this baby in maybe the late nineties, when the whole collectors' scene started to take off online. Before that, you'd have to skim through estate sales, garage sales, swap meets. Every once in a while I'd run into a fan like me, and we'd trade stories about rare finds. That's when I heard about *Grin*."

"Who developed it?" Danny asked. "Definitely not Midway or Namco."

"No way," Bill said as he peeled the last bit of cardboard free. "This thing is a mystery from top to bottom. Zero records of who made it. All just rumors."

Danny thought of the video he'd seen. Mr. Griller's overly grim tale seemed less ridiculous now that the creepy game was in front of him. As ghoulish as it looked, Danny couldn't deny how thrilling it was to see such a rare find in person.

"What kind of rumors did you hear?" Danny asked.

“Ah, you know. That some hobbyist built it in his garage. That it didn’t actually exist at all and somebody was just throwing some custom art on an old *Pac-Man* machine before selling it for cash. To be honest, I’m a little worried about that one.”

He walked over to one of the shelves and, finding an old rag that was moderately clean, began to wipe the dust off the machine.

“She’s in a lot better shape than I expected. Makes me a little nervous to plug it in. If you’re looking for originals, sometimes they can be *too* clean.”

“Any other . . . rumors?” Danny asked. He didn’t like to admit it, but he could still hear Mr. Griller’s story echoing through his head. *Where this game goes, death soon follows.*

Bill looked up from his precious prize and frowned a bit.

“Such as?”

“The video I watched just made it sound, I dunno, cursed.”

Bill laughed. “The only thing cursed about it was the price tag. I paid eight grand for it.”

“Is that a lot?” Danny asked.

“More than I normally pay . . . probably more than I have any business paying, but just look at this thing. It’s a beauty.”

“Who sold it?”

“It came from a home collector in Illinois. Guy must have been loaded. When he died his daughter started posting all the arcade units on eBay. Turned into a bidding war for this one. I’ve never paid that much for a machine.”

He took a deep breath. Danny could see in his uncle’s eyes

that Bill was second-guessing his choice. An idea crept into Danny's mind, and a smile crept onto his face.

"The video I watched said there wasn't even any footage of the game," Danny said. "If it's legit, we could totally document it! The first official playthrough of the *only* known copy of the game ever!"

Bill laughed. "That's an idea right there. Man, we'd get collectors coming in all across the country just to check out PixelWorks! All right now, I'm really hoping we don't plug this in and find a bootleg copy of *BurgerTime*. Grab that extension cord!"

Danny threw one end of the cord to Bill, who plugged it into a socket behind one of the metal cabinets. A few seconds later, he was holding the power cord and the extension cord a few inches apart. He looked at Danny.

"This is it."

"Fingers crossed," Danny said.

Just then a loud crackling ripped through the warehouse, and both uncle and nephew jumped and screamed. "Boss," an electric voice said from the walkie-talkie on Bill's hip.

"Yeah?"

"It looks like the *Tapper* machine is crapping out again."

"I'm on my way," Bill said, his tone exhausted as he turned to Danny. "I love that game, but it's the bane of my existence, I swear." He dropped the cord and added, "Come on. We can check this out in a little . . ."

His eyes narrowed, and Danny could see that his uncle was deep in thought.

“Or,” Bill said, a sneaky smirk spreading across his face, “here’s a better idea. Quick, grab that dolly!”

Bill pointed to the two-wheeled contraption leaning against the wall. Danny had used one before when they moved a few years back, but it was tiny, with small, hard rubber wheels. This one was the deluxe model, with huge treaded tires. It weighed a ton, and Danny awkwardly dragged it over to Bill, who snatched it away with one hand.

“Now we’re cooking with gasoline,” his uncle said as he kicked the remains of the wooden box away and easily slid the heavy cabinet onto the dolly.

“What are you doing?” Danny asked. “Don’t you want to test it out first?”

“Did Ben Franklin test electricity? Did Einstein test gravity?”

“I . . . don’t think I understand the question.”

Bill pressed on the bottom of the dolly with his foot and the entire machine tilted back into his arms. Danny didn’t know how heavy it was, but it was clear that Bill barely noticed the weight.

“My point is, the best way to test things is just to do ’em. Come on, let’s get this baby out on the floor where she belongs.”

CHAPTER 6



It all happened so fast.

Bill wheeled the cabinet through the warehouse, past the office, down the hallway, and into the main hall while Danny followed, trying desperately to keep up. He didn't know how such a big guy could walk so fast, but the excitement had taken hold of his uncle in a way that almost made him seem possessed.

"I totally shouldn't do this," Bill said, talking a mile a minute, "because who knows what we're gonna find, but that's the fun, you know? Just gotta go for it sometimes. I mean, I don't think anything too bad will happen, just an arcade game, right? It can't be worse than most of the games these kids play nowadays, like have you played the new *Mortal Kombat*? It's just nuts!"

Danny couldn't really get in a word besides the occasional "Yeah," "Uh-huh," or "Mmm-hmm." He'd seen his uncle like this before, but never quite this bad. As far back as Danny could remember, he'd known that games were his uncle's life, but he had never been this close to what his mom would affectionately call Bill being *wired in*. Danny was fired up as well, but something about the entire situation kept him from matching his uncle's excitement. The combination of the video, the gruesome appearance of *Grin*, and Bill's complete lack of caution was keeping him from enjoying the moment as much as he wanted to.

Danny remembered what his mom had said earlier: *You need to be able to watch out for yourself this week*. He hadn't quite understood what she'd meant, but he was beginning to as he and Bill made their way up the center aisle of games. *Tapper* was dead center, right under the PixelWorks sign. A young man who looked to be in his early twenties was standing next to the broken game, still holding the walkie-talkie. He was a head taller than Danny, thin as a rail, and wore his hair in a small Afro. His name tag said Brendon, but Danny didn't trust it.

"I think it's the controller . . ." the young guy said, his voice trailing off when he saw the giant dolly bearing *Grin*.

"Newest acquisition!" Bill said.

"Never even heard of that one," "Brendon" replied.

"No one has," Bill said as he dropped the dolly and started fiddling with *Tapper*. "Trey, this is my nephew, Danny."

The employee reached his hand out and smiled. As Danny shook it he glanced down at the name tag.

“Nice to meet you . . . Trey?”

Trey laughed. “Don’t get me started on the name tags. Anyway, is this guy really your uncle? Your family must have been wild growing up.”

Danny laughed. “There’s only one Bill per family. I think that’s a rule or something.”

“Not a bad rule,” Trey said. “All right, nice to meet you, Danny. I got to get back to it. I’ll be back to play . . . whatever that is later.”

“Dang controller,” Bill said. Danny looked over his shoulder. He remembered *Tapper* from the last time he’d visited. You controlled a little bartender who flings beers down a bar as thirsty patrons line up impatiently.

“That’s a fun one,” Danny said.

“Yeah, it is, but I’m gonna have to order a new control stick for it. I knew it was coming, but . . . sorry, *Tapper*. You’ve served your last beer for now.”

Bill reached his enormously long arm over the top of the machine and scooted it out as gently as a mother lion carrying a cub. In a few seconds, he had it unplugged. He went straight to work unloading *Grin*, but when he reached around the side he winced in pain.

“Dang it!”

He held out his left hand, revealing a one-inch slice across his palm that oozed blood. Bill took a filthy rag out of his back pocket and wrapped it around the open wound.

“Don’t you need to clean that?” Danny asked, feeling suddenly lightheaded. He was used to seeing literal buckets of blood in movies and games, but it was rare to see *so much* in person.

“In a minute,” Bill said as he leaned down, searching for the cause of the cut. “There it is,” he said. “Loose nail sticking out. I’ll have to smooth that down before I move it again.”

Danny noticed a fat drop of blood on the side of the machine running down onto the grinning mouth. Bill, busy uncoiling the game’s cord, didn’t see it.

“Uh, Uncle Bill?”

“Yep?”

“There’s some . . . blood on the game.”

“Yeah, it’s a creepy one, all right.”

“It’s *your* blood.”

Bill leaned in to the side of the machine where Danny was pointing. The large drop had left a trail of thin red blood before coming to a stop on one of the large white teeth. Bill took his bandaged hand and tried to wipe it away, grunting in surprise. The drop wouldn’t budge. He licked the tip of one finger and began to scrub vigorously, but the stubborn mark refused to lighten. Danny looked at the rest of the spattered red paint on the game and was struck by the sudden suspicion that it might not be paint at all.

“Huh. The wood must not be finished all the way. Looks like it soaked right in.” Bill stared at it a moment longer, tilting his head like a dog before adding, “Well, at least it blends in.”

He reached down for the cord and leaned into the gap between the machines, where there was a power strip packed with plugs.

“Hold on tight,” he said, glancing at Danny with a slightly deranged smile.

Danny held his breath as his uncle plugged in the game. Immediately the lights in the room blinked so fast that Danny wasn't sure if it was just his imagination. Bill noticed it too, and he glanced around, eyebrows raised.

“Hmm, must be a power surge.”

From where he stood, Danny could see the side of *Grin's* screen as it slowly went through its boot cycle. Random numbers, lines, and indecipherable symbols raced up and down the black screen. Bill was still glancing up at the overhead lights as if he expected to hear a crash of thunder.

“Guess it passed,” he said, then stared down at the screen. The bluish light reflected off his uncle's glasses, and for a single, eerie moment Danny couldn't see Bill's eyes at all. “Come on now. You've been sleeping long enough.”

The reboot cycle ended and an ominous hum began to drone out of the speakers. Slowly it grew and pulsed, becoming an electronic heartbeat that pumped in time with the image onscreen. With each beat of the heart, the image became clearer and brighter.

“Whoa,” Danny said.

“Whoa indeed.”

The same eerie smile on the side of the arcade cabinet

glowered at them from the screen, but it somehow looked even more disturbing on the monitor. The smile wasn't animated, but it did pulse in and out like a beating heart, fading from black to light. After a dozen or so beats, the title appeared in the same scrawled green letters, and a growling digital voice spoke.

"Grin."

"It's *real*," Danny said.

"Really real," Uncle Bill repeated, somehow sounding more boyish than Danny did.

Bill grabbed the sides of the machine and pushed it gently back into its new home. Danny could finally get a good look at the front of it. Above the screen, there was a lit-up marquee. Danny expected to see the title again, but what he saw instead made his heart skip a beat. In glowing green font were the words *You Should Smile*. Danny felt very cold, and all he could think about was the whispering voice he'd heard in the warehouse.

"There she is," Bill said, oblivious to Danny's newfound terror. "Perfect fit. And just look at her."

Below the marquee, the screen continued pulsing and the heartbeat kept on pumping. The flat control panel was decorated similarly to the rest of the cabinet, black with spattered drops of blood. There was a joystick with a red top, and a single button labeled *Begin*.

"You got a quarter?" Bill asked. "I need to turn it to free play, but *I just can't wait* to give it a spin."

Danny shook his head. The glowing marquee seemed to glare down at him, repeating that same phrase from before. There was no whispering voice, but somehow Danny still heard it echoing inside his mind.

“Ah well, shouldn’t take too long,” he said as he took a knee and began inspecting the front of the machine underneath the control panel. “Wait . . . what in the world?”

“What is it?”

“There’s no coin slot,” Bill said. Danny leaned down and saw for himself. “No service door either.”

“That’s weird, right?”

“I mean, I knew it had to be a custom job, but how the heck are we supposed to set it to free play?”

The speaker was near the front of the machine, and it growled in a cold digital voice.

“Free play mode.”

Danny’s stomach clenched and he leaped back from the machine.

“Oh, that’s convenient,” Bill said as he stood and reached for the button.

“Uncle Bill, maybe that’s not a good idea.”

“What do you mean? I figured you’d be excited to play it.”

“I am, it’s just . . . I don’t know, that video kind of got me freaked out. Plus, I’m getting weird vibes off this thing.”

Bill laughed. “Ah, you kids and your phones. You believe everything you see on YouTube.”

The walkie-talkie crackled again and Bill sighed heavily.

“Boss, can you come to the kitchen?” Trey asked. “The fryer’s acting up.”

“Yeah, I’m on the way,” he said, shaking his head. “You want some advice, Danny? Hit the lottery and then build an arcade for someone else to run.” He looked over at the grinning game. “I guess you get the first round.”

He walked away, leaving Danny standing speechless among the wandering crowd. An eighties synth song played over the speakers, and as eager as he was to start his week of gaming, the air felt suddenly stifling to him. He heard his mom’s voice in his head, pleasant and gentle.

Let’s hope you don’t have one of your episodes.

How long had it been since his last panic attack? Everything surrounding that time in his life felt untrustworthy and hazy, like looking out a window on a foggy day. He never knew why they started, and despite endless conversations with his parents about his feelings, his fears, how school was going, bullies, and screen time, there was never really a clear reason for them either. Third grade rolled around, and suddenly he’d somehow become scared of *being* scared, and once the idea got into his mind that maybe, just maybe, he was starting to panic, it would only make the feeling grow stronger and stronger until he literally couldn’t breathe.

It kept on throughout all of third grade, and it didn’t seem to let up until he discovered what would soon become his obsession. His parents wouldn’t dare buy him anything horror-related, not when he was having panic attacks twice a week.

In their minds, he needed to be coddled and protected, surrounded in soft padding like an egg that might crack at any moment. It turned out the opposite was true. His dad didn't agree to let him play a horror game until fourth grade, but he learned all about them online. Streams, Let's Plays, and long video essays eased him in, and before he knew it he was begging for his first horror game for Christmas. Soon enough, scary movies and books followed, and once the doors were open there was no closing them.

His parents had been well-meaning, but they missed an important point. By scaring himself intentionally, Danny was teaching himself how to deal with fear and anxiety in a safe way, and soon enough the panic attacks ended entirely. The games and horror stuck around, though, like gruesome guardian angels, there if he ever needed them.

So why now? Why here?

Danny inhaled deeply, concentrating on breathing like he used to. He needed air and a moment of silence, so he walked to the front of the arcade and out through the dark hallway. Outside the daylight made him squint, but not as much as he thought it would. The sky had grown heavy with low storm clouds. He took a few steps down the sidewalk, breathing in the fresh air.

"Okay," he said, speaking to his own fear. "I'm in control. You can go back where you belong. I don't need you this week."

His fear, sometimes beyond his control, seemed to listen to his demands. It receded back to whatever dark place it had

crawled out of. In the distance, he could see the sun shining beyond the thick black summer clouds. It looked as if the rain would come in any second. Danny turned and noticed that far off in every direction the sun was shining, but PixelWorks was cloaked in murky clouds.