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Insignia

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S. J. Kincaid

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To my father and mother,
for encouraging my dreams and
giving me the strength to pursue them

THE COALITION OF MULTI

THE INDO-AMERICAN ALLIANCE:

European-Australian Block • Oceanic Nations •
North American Alliance • Central America

MULTINATIONAL CORPORATIONS
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LM Lymer Fleet

Kronus Portable

Stronghold Energy

Preeminent Communications

CHAPTER ONE

New town, new casino—same old plan. Arizona's Dusty Squanto Casino made it easy for Tom Raines, since he didn't even have to pay his way into their virtual reality parlor. He slipped into the room, settled onto a couch in the back corner, and looked over the crowd of gamers, taking them in one at a time. His gaze settled on the two men in the opposite corner, and locked onto target.

Them, Tom thought.

The men stood with VR visors on, wired gloves clenched in the air. Their racing simulation blazed across an overhead screen for anyone who wanted to bet on the outcome. No one would bet on *this* race, though. One man was a good driver—he navigated the virtual track with the skill of an experienced gamer—and the other was pitifully bad. His car's fender dragged across the wall of the arena, and the fake onlookers were screaming and dodging out of the way.

The winning racer gave a triumphant laugh as his car

plowed across the finish line. He turned to the other man, chest puffed with victory, and demanded payment.

Tom smiled from his solitary spot on the couch.

Enjoy it while you can, buddy.

He timed it just right, waiting until the winner started counting up his bills to rise to his feet and wander into his line of sight. Tom noisily rattled one of the VR sets out of its storage container, then made a show of putting on the gloves the wrong way, before painstakingly adjusting them so the cloth and mesh wiring clasped his arms up to his elbows. Out of the corner of his eye, he became aware of the winning racer watching him.

"You like playing games, kid?" the man said to him. "Wanna have a go next?"

Tom gave him the wide-eyed, innocent look that he knew made him appear a lot younger than he was. Even though he was fourteen, he was short and skinny and had such bad acne that people usually couldn't guess his real age.

"I'm just looking. My dad says I'm not allowed to gamble."

The man licked his lips. "Oh, don't you worry. Your dad doesn't even have to know. Put down a few bucks, and we'll have us a great race. Maybe you'll win. How much money do you have?"

"Only fifty bucks."

Tom knew better than to say more than that. More than that, and people wanted to see it before taking up the bet. He actually had about two dollars in his pocket.

"Fifty bucks?" the man said. "That's enough. This is just car racing. You can race a car, can't you?" He twisted an invisible wheel. "Nothing to it. And think: you beat me, and you'll *double* that fifty."

"Really?"

"Really, kid. Let's have a go." A condescending chuckle. "I'll pay up for sure if you win."

"But if I lose . . ." Tom let that hang there. "That's all my money. I just . . . I can't." He started walking away, waiting for the magic words.

"All right, kid," the guy called. "Double or nothing."

Ha! Tom thought.

"I win," the man said, "and I'll get fifty. You win, you get a hundred. You can't beat that. Take a chance."

Tom turned slowly, fighting the laughter rising in his throat. This guy must already taste his easy fifty bucks since he'd fallen for the act so readily. Most casinos had one or two gamers who practically lived in the VR parlors, fancying themselves gods among men who could beat any chump luckless enough to enter their territory. Tom loved the way they looked at him: as some scrawny, stupid little kid they could easily con. He loved even more seeing their smiles disappear when he wiped the floor with them.

Just to be safe, Tom kept up the act. He made a show of fumbling as he strapped on the VR visor. "Okay, you're on, I guess."

Triumph rang in the man's voice. "We're on."

They were off. Their cars roared to life and tore furiously down the track. Tom mentally ticked off the laps, taking it all very deliberately. He made a few token mistakes here and there. They were never enough to slow him down much, just enough to ensure he was lagging behind the other car. The man, puffed up with confidence and certain of winning, whirled his steering wheel with great, lashing sweeps of his wired gloves. As the finish line appeared and the man's car turned at the right angle, Tom finally let a grin blaze across his lips.

One flick of his glove did the trick. He rammed his car forward and clipped the guy's back fender, then floored his gas. The man bellowed in rage and disbelief when his car swerved off the road in a rain of sparks.

Tom's car sailed past the finish line while the other car crashed and exploded in the arena's side ditch.

"What—what—" the man sputtered.

Tom flipped up his visor. "Whoops. I think I *have* played that game before." He tugged off his gloves. "Wanna fork over my hundred bucks?"

He watched, fascinated, the way a vein began popping out and fluttering in the man's forehead. "You little—You can't—You're . . ."

"You're not gonna pay me, then?" Tom cast an idle glance toward the man's recent victim, now sitting on a nearby couch. The bad driver was suddenly interested in their exchange. Tom raised his voice to make sure the man could make out every word. "I guess no one's playing games for money in here. Is that it?"

The gamer followed Tom's gaze to his victim, catching the implication: if he wouldn't pay Tom, then the other guy shouldn't have paid *him*.

The man spluttered a bit like the engine of his wrecked car, then jerked a hundred bucks out of a wad from his pocket. He crammed the bills into Tom's hand, muttering something about a rematch.

Tom flipped through the bills, completely enjoying the man's outrage. "You want a rematch, I'm game. Double or nothing, again? I could really use another two hundred dollars."

The man turned a curious shade of scarlet, cut his losses, and fled the room. As for the newbie on the couch, he gave Tom a grateful thumbs-up. Tom returned it, then stashed the

bills in his pocket. One hundred dollars. Usually he had to pull off the bet with a few more gamers to make enough for a night's stay—VR sims involved such low stakes, after all—but at a dive like the Dusty Squanto Casino, a hundred would be enough for a room.

Tom's mind already whirled with the promises of the night ahead. A bed. Television. Air-conditioning. A real shower. He could even come back here and play games *just for fun*.

The ghastly realization hit just as he reached the door: he was at a casino with a VR parlor.

He had absolutely no excuse for missing school this afternoon.

Tom stayed in the VR parlor and logged into the Rosewood Reformatory sim for the first time in two weeks. In four years at Rosewood, he'd never skipped such a long stretch of school before, and he'd already missed most of class today. Just the sight in his visor of Ms. Falmouth's avatar and her virtual chalkboard killed any lingering satisfaction over his victory.

She immediately focused her attention on him. "Tom Raines," she said. "Thank you for gracing us with your presence today."

"You're welcome," Tom said. He knew it would just annoy her, but it wasn't like she had a good opinion of him to be ruined.

To be fair, he missed class a lot. Mostly not on purpose. Mostly he missed school due to losing access to an internet connection. It was just another hazard of having a gambler for a father.

Tom's dad, Neil, usually saved enough money to pay for a roof over their heads and some food at the gift shop. But some days he got totally cleaned out at the poker tables. It happened

more and more in recent years as the last of his luck deserted him. When Neil squandered their money, and Tom couldn't find any sucker to bet against him in the VR parlors, they had to skip on small luxuries like hotel rooms. They ended up in a park or at a bus station or lying on benches at the train station.

Now with Ms. Falmouth and his entire class watching him, Tom tried to think of an excuse he'd never used before to explain why he'd missed the last ten days. He'd missed school so many times, he'd repeated himself a couple times by accident. He'd already lied about going to the funerals of all his grandparents, and even a couple great-grandparents, and there were only so many times he could say he "fell down a well" or "got lost in the woods" or "got hit in the head and got amnesia" before even *he* thought he sounded like a colossal idiot.

Today, he tried, "There was this massive cyberattack on all the local VR parlors. Russo-Chinese hackers, you know? The Department of Homeland Security came in and had to interview everyone in a ten-mile radius. I couldn't even access the internet."

Ms. Falmouth just shook her head. "Don't waste your breath, Tom."

Tom dropped into a seat, irrationally disappointed. It had been a good lie this time, too.

The avatars throughout the classroom sniggered at him, the way they always did, at Tom the loser who never knew what assignments were due, who never turned in his homework, who couldn't even manage to show up at an online class most days. He tuned his classmates out and occupied himself with twirling a pencil, which was trickier in VR than most people realized. The sensors of most standard-issue wired gloves had a strange lag time, and Tom figured honing his dexterity with them could only help him in future games.

He heard a whisper from beside him. "*I* liked your excuse."

Tom threw a careless glance toward the girl next to him. She must've joined the class sometime in the last two weeks. Her avatar was a gorgeous brunette with striking yellow-brown eyes. "Thanks. Nice avatar."

"I'm Heather." She flashed him a smile. "And this isn't an avatar."

Sure it isn't, Tom thought. People didn't look like that in real life unless they were celebrities. But he nodded like he believed her. "I'm Tom. And believe it or not, this"—he gestured to himself like he was proud of how very handsome he was—"isn't an avatar, either."

Heather giggled, because his avatar looked just like him, with acne and scrawny limbs and all. It definitely wasn't an image anyone would use to impress people online.

Ms. Falmouth turned back to face them. "Tom, Heather, are you done interrupting me, or do you need more time for your conversation?"

"Sorry," Tom said. "We're all through."

Tom hadn't seen eye to eye with Ms. Falmouth since he'd shown up for the first day of school a few years ago as Lord Krull from the game Celtic Quest. She'd yelled at him in front of everyone for being insolent, like he had done it as part of some elaborate scheme to mock her class. He'd just liked Lord Krull from Celtic Quest, that was all.

From then on, Tom always came to class as himself. He never signed on to the internet without an avatar if he could help it. It felt like he'd left his real skin behind, showing up at Rosewood as the same ugly, pale-eyed, and blond-haired Thomas Raines who tailed behind his dad in the real world. Never mind that he didn't believe for a second that the new girl sitting next to him really looked like her beautiful

brunette avatar, and Serge Leon, in the back corner, was way too blustering to be a hulking six-footer in real life. He was probably four foot something and fat.

But Ms. Falmouth didn't seem to care about them. Whenever Tom was around, her radar was trained on him.

"Our subject's the current war, Tom. Perhaps you can contribute to our discussion. What is an offshored conflict?"

His thoughts flickered to what he'd seen in the news and on the internet, the clips of the ships fighting in space, controlled remotely by the top-secret combatants identified only by their call signs. "An offshored conflict is a war fought somewhere other than Earth. It's in space or on another planet."

"And the sky is blue, and the sun rises in the east. I'll need much more than the blatantly obvious."

Tom stopped twirling the virtual pencil and tried to concentrate. "Modern wars aren't fought by people. I mean, they're kind of fought by people, because people on Earth control mechanized drones remotely, but the machines do the actual fighting. If our machines don't get demolished by Russo-Chinese machines, our country wins the battle."

"And who is involved in the current conflict, Tom?"

"The whole world. That's why it's called World War III." She seemed to be waiting for more, so Tom ticked off the major players on his virtual fingers: "India and America are allies, and the Euro-Australian block is aligned with us. Russia and China are allies, and they're supported by the African states and the South American Federation. The Coalition of Multinationals, the twelve most powerful corporations in the world, is split down the middle between our two sides. And . . . yeah. That's about it."

That was pretty much all he knew about the war. He wasn't sure what else she wanted. He couldn't list all the tiny little

countries allied with the two sides if he tried, and he doubted anyone else in the room could, either. There was a reason Rosewood was a reform school—most of its students couldn't cut it in a real, building one.

"Would you like to explain one notable characteristic about this offshored conflict, as opposed to wars in ages past?"

"No?" he tried hopefully.

"I wasn't really asking. Now answer the question."

Tom started twirling his pencil again. This was how Ms. Falmouth operated. She questioned him until he ran through all his knowledge, messed up, and looked like an idiot. This time he'd give it to her. "Dunno. Sorry."

Ms. Falmouth sighed as though she expected nothing more, and moved on to her next victim. "Heather, you two look to be making fast friends. If you're talking during class on your first day here, maybe you can list a notable characteristic for Tom."

Heather gave Tom a quick, sidelong look, then answered, "By going to war on other planets, and avoiding fights on Earth, we resolve issues through violence, but we avoid most of the consequences of traditional warfare such as debilitating injuries, human deaths, disruption of infrastructure, and environmental contamination. That's four notable characteristics. Do you want me to list more than that, Ms. Falmouth?"

Ms. Falmouth was silent for several seconds, perhaps stunned at how readily Heather had answered the question. "That'll quite do, Heather. Very well articulated. Offshored conflicts are practical socially as well as ecologically." She strode to the board. "I'd like you all to think of some ways the nature of conflict has shifted the consequences we face. . . ."

Heather took the opportunity to whisper to Tom, "I didn't mean to get you in trouble."

Tom laughed softly and shook his head. "You didn't get me in trouble. This is just Ms. Falmouth letting me know how much she missed me."

His gloves vibrated, signaling that someone was making physical contact with his avatar. Tom glanced down, startled, and saw her hand resting on his arm. Her voice was a breathy whisper. "You sure?"

Tom stared at her as Ms. Falmouth's voice carried on: ". . . exported conflicts serve several purposes . . ."

"I'm sure," he told her, so keenly aware of her touch she might as well have been next to him touching him in real life, too.

Heather's hand trailed down his arm and then slipped away. She nestled it back on her desktop. Tom found himself wondering what she actually looked like. Her avatar didn't even look like a ninth grader. Was she older than him?

"With the weaponry we use nowadays," Ms. Falmouth said beside the board, "we could destroy the ionosphere, irradiate the planet, vaporize the oceans. By exporting our wars and engaging Russia and China on, say, *Saturn* instead of on Earth, we can hash out our disagreements over resource allocation without the devastating consequences of traditional warfare, as Heather explained just now. In ages past, people believed that World War III would end all civilization. A famous quote by Albert Einstein: *'I know not with what weapons World War III will be fought, but World War IV will be fought with sticks and stones.'* But we're in the middle of World War III, and we're far from ending civilization."

Ms. Falmouth twitched her finger and the chalkboard morphed into a screen. "Now, I'd like to focus upon the current Intrasolar Forces. I want you to turn your thoughts to the teenagers who are out there deciding the future of your

country. We'll play a short video clip."

Tom sat up straighter, watching the screen resolve into an outdoor view of the Pentagon and the tall tower jutting from the middle—the Pentagonal Spire—and then to a newsroom where a familiar teenage boy sat with a reporter.

It was Elliot Ramirez.

Tom slumped back down in his seat. Behind him, Serge Leon actually cried out in dismay, "Not *Dorkmirez*!"

Elliot Ramirez was everywhere. Everyone knew him—the handsome, smiling, all-American seventeen-year-old who represented the future of Indo-American supremacy in the solar system. He was in commercials, on bulletin boards, his bright grin flashing and dark eyes twinkling on cereal boxes, on vitamin bottles, on T-shirts. Whenever a new Indo-American victory was announced on the news, Elliot was trotted out to give an interview and to talk about how America was *sure* to win now! And of course, Elliot was front and center in Nobridis, Inc.'s public service announcements because they sponsored him. He was one of the young trainees who controlled American machines in outer space, one of the Americans dedicated to taking down the Russo-Chinese alliance and claiming the solar system for the Indo-American allies.

"How did you get the call sign Ares?" the reporter asked Elliot. "That's the Greek god of war, I understand. It says a lot about your battlefield prowess."

Elliot's chuckle flashed his white teeth. "I didn't choose 'Ares' for myself, but I guess my fellow soldiers thought it should be my call sign. They pleaded with me to take it. I couldn't refuse the appeals of my brothers-in-arms."

Tom laughed. He couldn't help it. Several female avatars whirled around to shush him.

The image on the screen flickered briefly to a battle in

space, where a vessel digitally labeled "Ares" was flying toward a dispersed mass of ships. At the bottom of the screen, the caption read "The Battle of Titan." The reporter's voice carried on over the image: ". . . great deal of attention these last few years, Mr. Ramirez. How do you feel about the public's fascination with you?"

"To tell you the truth, I don't see myself as a great hero the way so many people do. It's the machines that do all the fighting in space. I just control them. You could say"—and here the image flipped back to Elliot just as he threw a wink at the camera—"I'm just a kid who likes to play with robots."

Tom kept remembering the only interview of Elliot Ramirez he'd ever sat through before this one. His father was in the hotel room with him, and he'd insisted on watching the entire thing several times because he was convinced that the famed Elliot Ramirez wasn't a real person. He refused to change the channel until Tom was convinced of it, too.

"That's not a boy. That's a computer simulation," Neil had declared.

"People have seen him in person, Dad."

"No human being acts like that! Look how he blinks every fifteen seconds on the dot. Time it. And then look at his eyebrows. He raises them to the exact same height every single time. That smile, too. Always the same width. That's a computer-generated simulation of a human. I guarantee it."

"Who's the reporter talking to, then?"

"She's in on it, too. Who owns the mainstream media? Corporations. That's who."

"Right. So I guess cereal companies are putting a fake kid on their boxes, and Elliot's big sponsor, Nobridis Inc., is also parading around a guy they've never met? Oh, and don't forget all those people on the internet who say they've gotten his

autograph. . . . They're *all* in on it, too, right?"

Neil's spit began flying. "Tom, I am telling you, this Elliot kid is not a real person. This is how the corporate oligarchy works. They want a pretty face to make their agenda look good for the masses. A real human being is unpredictable. Create a computer-generated human to be the representation of your organization? Then you control everything about that representation. He's no different from a logo, an action figure, a piece of insignia."

"And you're the only one in the world who's picked up on this."

"What, you think the American sheeple are going to question the corporatocracy? They're too busy doing their patriotic duty, gutting their own country to fund a war over which Coalition CEO gets the biggest yacht this year. Wake up, Tom! I don't want any son of mine buying into the establishment propaganda."

"I don't. I don't," Tom had protested.

He wanted his dad to be right. He really did. Even now, he studied Elliot and tried to see something fake and computer simulated about him, but he just saw a cheesy kid madly in love with himself who laughed at his own jokes way too much.

"What message would you like to leave viewers with tonight, Mr. Ramirez?"

"I want them to know, we kids at the Pentagonal Spire aren't making the big sacrifice. Saving the country's pretty fun! It's you, the American taxpayers, who keep the fight for our nation going strong. And thanks to Nobridis, Inc., the Indo-American alliance is more—"

"Saving. The. Country." Ms. Falmouth flipped off the video segment as Elliot launched into promoting Nobridis. "The next time you think you have too much homework, I want you

to consider the burden on this young man's shoulders. Elliot Ramirez is out there forging a future for our nation, securing the solar system's resources for us, and you don't hear him complaining, do you?"

The bell filled the sim. Ms. Falmouth didn't even get a chance to dismiss them. Students began fizzling away.

Tom was normally among the first to sign off. He wasn't this time because just as he raised his hand to yank off the VR visor, Heather spoke up. "Are you signing off already?"

She sounded disappointed about it. Tom dropped his hand again. "Not yet."

She scooted her desk over so they were sitting right next to each other. Despite himself, Tom felt his hands grow sweaty in his wired gloves.

"Can you believe Elliot Ramirez?" Heather said, tossing her dark hair out of her eyes. "His ego almost explodes out of the screen, doesn't it? I felt like ducking and covering."

"I can't believe you're a real girl and you're not in love with Elliot Ramirez," Tom said appreciatively. Then it occurred to him: she might not even be a real girl. For all he knew, she was a guy with a voice modifier who'd hacked the school feed.

"Let's just say, I feel like I know enough about Elliot not to buy the hype." There was something coy in her voice that made him wonder if he was missing a joke.

"And you really *are* a girl?" Tom couldn't resist asking.

"I am so a girl!"

"Yeah, well, I won't believe it till I see it."

"Is this your way of asking me to video chat?" Heather bantered.

Tom hadn't thought to ask her to do that. He recovered from his surprise quickly. "Yes?"

Heather twirled a lock of her dark hair around her finger.

"So, this *is* an online school," she said coyly. "Is video chatting Rosewood's version of a date?"

Tom opened and closed his mouth. She didn't sound like she hated the idea. He broke into a grin. "Only if you're gonna say yes."

Heather smiled. "What network address will you be at tomorrow, Tom?"

He was only half in the moment as he gave her his network address, as he promised her he'd be right at the same network address tomorrow when they met. He didn't care if they were meeting at an obscenely early hour of the morning. Heather said it was because of the time zone she was in. Tom decided he'd stay up all night if he had to. His brain was whirling. He had a date . . . kind of. With a real, live girl . . . he hoped.

After she logged off, his avatar remained by his desk, his real body sitting stock-still on the couch in the VR parlor, the enormity of asking a girl out for the first time *and* having the girl say yes beating through his brain. He'd thought this would be just another ordinary day. . . .

A throat cleared.

Tom noticed suddenly that he and Ms. Falmouth were the only ones left in the virtual classroom.

"I was just logging off," Tom said quickly, and reached up in the real world to snatch off his visor.

"Not quite yet, Tom," Ms. Falmouth said. "Stay a moment. I think we need to talk."

Oh.

A heaviness settled in Tom's chest, because he'd half expected this, and it wasn't good.

"Let's go to my office." Ms. Falmouth twitched her fingers

to alter the program, and the landscape shifted around them into a private office. She settled at one side of the imposing desk. Tom navigated himself into the seat opposite, and waited for some hint of what she needed to hear before she'd let him off the hook this time.

"Tom," she said, folding her hands on her desk, "I am concerned about this attendance situation."

Tom let out a breath. "I figured."

"You were referred to this institution because your father somehow let you reach age eleven without enrolling you in school. We've worked to catch you up, but I don't feel you're making the same progress as the rest of the class. In fact, considering that you're very rarely *in* class, I am finding this situation outright unmanageable."

"Maybe I need an alternative school," Tom suggested.

"This already *is* an alternative school. This is the end of the line."

"I try."

"No, you don't. And what's more, your father doesn't try, either. Do you realize you missed two quizzes and a history paper last week?"

"It couldn't be helped."

"Russo-Chinese hackers, right?" she said. "Or perhaps you were taken hostage by terrorists again, or washed out to sea and stranded on a desert island without internet access?"

"Not quite." But he'd really get a kick out of using that one sometime in the future.

"Tom, you are not taking this seriously—and that's your problem. This is not some silly game: this is your future and you are throwing it away with both hands. You promised me a month ago that you would never miss class again." Ms. Falmouth's avatar gazed at him with an unnatural,

unblinking intensity. "We signed a learning contract, don't you remember?"

Tom didn't point out that she'd demanded that he promise not to miss class again. What had she expected him to tell her, the truth? Should he have outright admitted he probably wasn't going to show up at school? She would've just yelled at him for "being insolent" or something.

"This is not about me," Ms. Falmouth went on. "It's not about your father, even: it is about you, Tom. You realize that whatever actions I take from here, they're for your own good. I cannot sit back and allow a fourteen-year-old boy's entire life to be sabotaged by an irresponsible parent who will not even ensure he gets a proper education."

Tom sat up in both the sim and the VR parlor. "What does that even mean—'whatever actions you take from here'?"

"It means you're under court order to attend school, and you have not been attending. Last week, I reported your absences to Child Protective Services."

Tom slouched back, feeling like he'd just been socked in the stomach. This was not going to end well. Maybe he wasn't reaching great heights of achievement with Neil, but life in foster care wouldn't be a land of hope and opportunity either.

And no way could he stay at his mom's.

No way, no way.

Dalton, her boyfriend, paid for her fancy apartment in New York City. Tom had visited her once, just once, and he'd met him. Dalton Prestwick was this rich, yacht-owning executive at some big multinational company, Dominion Agra. His job was to talk to politicians or something.

Dalton had looked him over like he was something nasty smeared on the bottom of his leather shoes and said, "My attorneys have documented everything of value in this house,

punk. The second something goes missing, I'll have you in juvenile hall."

Oh, and Dalton already had a wife. And another girlfriend. Yeah, and Tom's mom.

"I don't have anywhere else to go, Ms. Falmouth. I know that you think you're doing me a favor, but you're not. I promise you."

"You're fourteen, Tom. What do you expect to do with yourself in a few years when you need to make a living? Do you plan to be a roving gambler like your father?"

"No," Tom answered at once.

"A roving gamer?"

He wasn't quite sure how much Ms. Falmouth knew about his gaming, but he didn't say anything. If she'd asked him what he planned to be, he might've said he'd make his living one day the same way he was doing it now.

Hearing it said by her made him think of living like this forever, of going nowhere in life . . . of turning into his father . . .

Suddenly Tom felt kind of fuzzy and clenched up inside like he was getting sick.

Ms. Falmouth leaned back in her seat. "You're competing in a global economy. One out of three Americans is unemployed. You need an education to be an engineer, a programmer, or anything of use to the defense industry. You need an education to be an accountant or a lawyer, and you need connections to go into government or corporate work. Who do you think will hire a young man like you when there are so many high-achieving candidates out there who are desperate for work?"

"It's years away."

"Pretend it's tomorrow. What are you going to do with yourself? What are you good for?"

"I'm good at . . ." He stopped.

"At what?"

He couldn't come up with anything else, so he just said it. "Games."

The word sat on the air between them, and to Tom it suddenly sounded utterly sad.

"So is your father, Tom. And where is *he* now?"