

PANDORA'S GAME

A Novel by
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The story you are about to read was written by my son, Neil. It's all I have left of him, and I feel obligated to share it. I don't know how it will be received. To be honest, with all the madness happening in the world right now, I'm not sure how to take it myself.

I hope you'll forgive me if I sound a bit disjointed. Writing is not my area of expertise. That's one of Neil's many fortes. Unfortunately, my wife hasn't been dealing with recent events very well, so the responsibility has fallen to me. I'll give you what little background I know.

First, there are some facts here that I can personally confirm. Neil's life behind the scenes, of course; the facts that he majored in Theatre at college, that he took a Psychology class, and that he staged *Deathtrap* last semester. More specific to the story, you can ask anyone about the recent murders that have the whole state in an uproar.

Over the few months that this story covers, I didn't spend as much time with my son as I would have liked. That isn't just the regretful musing of a parent looking back. His Theatre degree and other activities (which I now know included hypnosis) left him with little free time. I was proud of him, yes, but still missed seeing him.

When I did see him, he never seemed to be under any unusual duress. Granted, he was an actor, but he was also my son. If he was growing ... *unbalanced*, he hid it well.

Five days ago, Neil came to me to see if he could spend some time in our trailer home up by Lake Thunderbird. When I asked him why, he merely told me he had "some things he wanted to get down on paper," and that he thought the seclusion would help him write faster. Well, Neil was an actor *and* a writer, and writers are sometimes eccentric, so I gave him the keys. I actually suspected he might be

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taking a girlfriend with him, although I have since learned that this was not the case.

Two days ago, the police rang my doorbell. It seemed they wanted to ask Neil a few questions concerning these recent, bizarre murders. I'd seen the news, and my stomach churned at the thought of Neil's being involved, but I quickly agreed to escort them to our lot at the lake. If Neil *were* involved, I hoped we could help him better by cooperating right from the start.

When I unlocked the door to the trailer, I felt my heart in my throat. His car was parked out front, but inside we found nothing. Neil was gone. He hasn't been seen or heard from by anyone since I sent him on his way last week.

Yesterday morning, I found this manuscript in an envelope in my mailbox. It had been placed there sometime in the night and addressed to "Mom and Dad," although I don't recognize the handwriting.

That's everything I knew, leading up to the reading of this story. Is it true? It can't be, of course. But it was written by my son, and he apparently believed every word of it. So here it is. Make of it what you will.

Neil, if you're out there and see these words, please come home. Your mother and I are worried sick, and we will do everything we can to help you.

And if *you* really are reading these words, Mr. Bachman, then *damn you* for what you've done to my son!

Delano Carpenter

GENESIS

ONE

Russian Roulette.

A standard, six-chamber revolver. One bullet.

Load the gun, spin the chamber, press the barrel to your head, squeeze the trigger.

Simple rules, simpler results. Five-in-six wins you a chance to brag about your immense bravery. The alternative needs no explanation.

A lot of people associate this game with the movie *The Deer Hunter*. A multitude of similar wagers with basic rule variations exist, but they all boil down to the same thing: A gamble with your life.

Russian Roulette is the extreme example with which most people cannot truly identify. After all, what idiot in his right mind would willingly aim a loaded gun at himself, right?

Unfortunately, not all games of deadly chance are so conspicuous, so clearly foolish or demented. We don't always see them for what they are. Sometimes, with ignorance paving our way, we play games with fire.

And we get *burned*.

Tonight is a dark and stormy night. Sounds cliché, but it happens to be true. As I sit here and type out the only written account of my incredible experiences, I can hear the rain spattering against the roof of this trailer, the constant creaking of the torrential wind against the thin walls, and the frequent thunder rolling through the clouds above. I see the lightning flashes from the corner of my eye, and occasionally the lamp light flickers and threatens to fade altogether. I couldn't ask for a more appropriate night to record these memoirs. The only thing

missing is a voice-over by Vincent Price.

My name is Neil Carpenter. Neil Joshua Carpenter. But if you were to catch me off guard, perhaps if I were sleepy or distracted, and you asked me what my name is, I might very well look you straight in the eye and answer, "Alistaire Bachman."

Right now, at this moment, I can remember most of what has happened to me over the last few months. At any given point, I may actually be recounting something that I *didn't* have any real knowledge of at the time. But, for the present, Alistaire Bachman is graciously allowing me full access to my own mind, and I don't want to waste the opportunity.

My life prior to ... *encountering* Alistaire Bachman was somewhat short of note. I had my share of friends, played trumpet for seven years, oil painted every now and then, got hooked on acting in the eighth grade, collected comic books, and enjoyed creative writing. I'm the older of two brothers, lost my first grandparent last year, and have had a few girlfriends.

The events that led up to my recent troubles started early last semester. I was a Junior at the University of Oklahoma, diligently working on my Theatre degree, and I'd been hanging out with a guy named Mark Hudson.

Mark and I had been bumping into one another for years at the Theatre department without ever really getting to know each other. Then we both got stuck costume-crewing the same show, and we hit it off great. It turned out we had a lot of the same interests, read the same kinds of books, watched the same kinds of movies, and pretty soon we were spending a lot of time together. Mark sort of fell into acting after starting out as an Art major. He'd spend hours doodling in his notebook, sketching caricatures of people around the department and posting them on the call board. I'd seen his art countless times and admired it for what it was, but it wasn't until I got a glimpse of his real, hardcore illustrations that I recognized his true talent.

It was a Sunday night. Mark was over at my place for our usual weekend ritual of watching *Star Trek*. Afterward, we talked about how the school productions were going, which professors issued too

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much homework ... nothing special, just shootin' the shit, so to speak. Mark was wanting a new book to read, so I suggested he go through the pile at the foot of my bed.

Between my copies of *Refuge Among the Stars* and *Dream Parlor*, Mark stumbled across an issue of my homemade comic book series. In the second grade, my teacher had us take three sheets of regular notebook paper, fold them in half, and make our own comic books as a lesson in creativity. The idea stuck with me, and to that day I made little comics as a hobby.

"What's this?" he asked, flipping open my seventeenth issue of *The Invincible Team*.

"Mmm? Oh. Nothing really." I explained my hobby to him.

He sat on the edge of the bed and quickly read the short comic. It kind of embarrassed me to let him read it; I'm a much better *writer* than artist.

Closing the little booklet, he retrieved his own notebook. "I want to show you something." Finding the appropriate pages, he turned it around and handed it to me.

I raised an eyebrow at what I saw. It was an impressive — *very* impressive — sketch of a woman in leather sporting a sword in one hand and a gun in another. She was crouched as if to spring, the tension in her muscles well captured. Her long, dark hair swirled in a way that suggested her head had just whipped around into this pose. The art was as good as any I'd seen in Marvel, DC, or any other professional comics.

"Check out the next few pages," he suggested, sounding both timid and excited, his eyes eager behind his thick-ish glasses.

Every page displayed a single figure, usually armed to the teeth. A tall, black man in rags leaning against a dead tree. An elf-like woman landing from an apparent somersault. A hideously deformed man leveling his one-armed cannon at the viewer. The drawings were far better than anything I'd seen him do around the department, caricature or otherwise.

"What are these from?"

"I made them up. What do you think?" he asked as I handed back the notebook. That same apprehension and eagerness in his voice

suggested not many people had seen them.

“They’re good,” I told him honestly. “I’m serious. They are *really* good. You ought to submit them to Marvel or somebody.”

“I’ve thought about it,” he admitted, “but I’m not sure I could handle a letter telling me I have no talent.”

I laughed. “Seriously, Mark, I *really* don’t think you have to worry about that. They’re excellent. I mean it.”

“Thanks,” he said. “You’ll have to let me read more of your comics sometime.”

I scrunched my face into a tight ball of disgust. “After seeing how good *you* are, I’d rather not.”

Blushing, he grinned and glanced at his watch. “I’d better get going. ‘Play Structure and Analysis’ is going to come way too early.”

Mark gathered his things and I saw him to the door. As he headed for the stairs, he glanced back and chuckled, “You know, we ought to do a comic *together* sometime. You write it, I draw it.” He waved. “Later!”

Mark’s suggestion didn’t really soak in until after I’d gone to bed. Doing a comic together ...

I had always wanted a shot at that, but it’s hard to break into the big companies without knowing someone, and I certainly couldn’t draw well enough to do my own and submit them to an independent. The longer I thought about Mark’s illustrations, the more impressed I was.

My head began spinning with ideas. What kind of stories could we do? We couldn’t do *The Invincible Team*. I’d started that series when I was in the fifth grade, and the characters would be way too corny without a major overhaul. Besides, Mark’s drawings had been very gothic, very dark. If that was his style, I should try to stick to that.

My thoughts turned to other stories I’d written. Which ones might work as a comic series? *The Blue Man*? No, it was a ghost story, but it was self-contained, not episodic enough to warrant an ongoing saga. *The Marshland*? Nah. *Heart of Steel*? Not dark enough to fit Mark’s technique.

Then it hit me. Not so much a former story as a concept, one I’d

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never even titled. I'd read an occasional story about a vampire who wasn't all that bad, or a werewolf who controlled his animal fury. What if a small group of such supernatural beings banded together for the common good? I'd decided on a trio — a vampire, a werewolf, and a zombie — but nothing else had come from the idea until now.

The more I thought about it, the more episodic it seemed. A vampire who never drank human blood ... no, let's say that he never took it directly from the living, never took a victim. A werewolf with phenomenal control over his lycanthropy, except during the full moon, at which time he voluntarily locked himself up. And a zombie ... well, George A. Romero depicted them as cannibals in *Night of the Living Dead*. So, a zombie who never ate human flesh.

Yeah. I had something here.

I couldn't sleep now. My excitement built until I finally decided to call Mark.

He'd just gotten into bed himself when he answered. "What's up?"

"Mark, how serious were you when you suggested that we do a comic together?"

He paused a beat. "I don't know ... pretty serious, I guess. Why, you interested?"

"I think so. Wanna hear my idea?"

"Shoot."

His enthusiasm built as I described the concept to him.

"I like that," he said. "I like that a *lot*."

"Good. Tell you what. Meet me in the Green Room tomorrow after Acting class. Bring your notebook, and we'll kick around a few ideas..."

We talked for a while longer, pitching back and forth mundane details like the characters' genders, countries of origin, stuff like that, until we finally realized that we had to try to get some sleep.

Sounds harmless enough, doesn't it? Simple, meaningless. Just two friends talkin', two guys with an idea.

How could I have known?

The Green Room was filled with its usual clouds of cigarette smoke and clusters of theatre and dance students. People sat around on well-worn, ugly couches and chairs, talking about everything from test results to the latest dating gossip. Two Coke machines, a snack machine, and a coffee, tea, and juice machine lined two walls, and there were more ash trays than you could shake a stick at. Mark was sitting on an especially battered brown couch in one of the corners; I slipped my backpack from my shoulder and onto the floor beside it.

“I’ll have you know,” Mark chastised as I sat next to him, “that I didn’t get any sleep last night, thanks to you.”

“Really? Any progress?”

“Much. You?”

“Some. I’ve come up with the names for each character, rough backgrounds, that sort of thing. Still haven’t thought of a title though.”

“How about this?” He handed me his notebook and lit up a cigarette.

Across the top of the page, in large, creepy-style letters, stood the word, “*TRIUMVIRATE*.”

“Cool,” I responded with a smile.

“Hoped you’d like it. Keep flipping.”

The first sketch was a broad-chested, wide-shouldered black man of impressive size. He wore rugged jeans with no shoes and a white T-shirt with a picture of Mickey Mouse on the front. In his left hand he held a large LEGO piece. His expression was totally void of emotion, and his eyes were milky, the irises fogged over. The man sat cross-legged, his vacant gaze regarding the plastic toy.

“The zombie,” Mark told me. “If we’re going with the ‘Living Dead’ slant, then I figure he’d be pretty slow on the uptake. Maybe even childlike, peaceful until provoked.”

“We think alike,” I said. “I picture him spending half his time watching ‘Sesame Street.’ ” With his permission, I jotted the name “*TREY MATTHEWS*” at the bottom of the page.

I flipped to the next drawing. Another casually dressed man, this time Caucasian. His build was also taut and defined, though not nearly as overbearing as the zombie’s. A thick mane of hair swept back over his head to hang just above the collar of his black T-shirt, and bushy

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sideburns ran down each cheek about three inches. A faint smile danced on his lips and his eyes issued a friendly, personable sparkle. I gave Mark a thumbs-up, scribbled "*SEAN MALLORY*" below it, and turned the page once more.

There he stood. An immaculate, expensive grey suit, crafted from the finest silk. A tall, slender and yet powerful frame. Strong, fine hands, the nail on each finger a little long but otherwise a manicurist's vision. Chiseled features, potent jaw, dark, wavy hair that fell perfectly into place. Only the whites of his eyes peaked from behind squinted lids, even as pronounced canines lurked between slightly parted lips.

"Hello, Alistaire Bachman."

II

The old man pushed the cup across the counter. He offered a kind smile and suggested, "You might wanna drink it here, son. This ain't the safest part of town to be walkin' around, not at this hour. 'Specially for a tourist. Why doncha stick around for a while?"

The Irishman took the hot coffee and returned the smile. Little did the considerate old bloke know that he was a far cry more deadly than most muggers could ever dream. Still, this was his first trip to America and the Big Apple, and he was in just as much danger of getting lost as the next man. So he paid for his drink and agreed, "Sure, why not? Do ye mind if I take a look at the menu while I'm at it?"

"'Course! Gotta make a livin', might as well take advantage of my captive audience, right?" The man laughed heartily at his own joke and gave Sean a greasy, laminated sheet. Sean chuckled out of courtesy and headed for a booth. He took a load off of his tired feet and stretched, then took a long sip. He'd have preferred a beer, but alas, this humble establishment did not come so stocked.

Oh, well. He'd live.

So, this was America. New York, New York. Sean had heard about it, read about it, and seen it in the movies and on the telly, but to actually be here and experiencing it was an entirely different thing. In the hours since he'd gotten off the plane, it seemed as though his heightened olfactory had picked up more scents than he'd ever experienced in all of his homeland put together. Even Dublin was dwarfed by the sheer immensity of this place. Impressive, to say the least.

Sean settled in and looked over the menu. Not much of what he saw appealed to him — the steak, assuming he could get it rare, was the

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only thing even in the neighborhood — but he felt obligated to order something, so he drew a breath to call the proprietor over.

The door opened, reminding Sean that in the reputed City That Never Sleeps, two middle-of-the-night guests would be nothing out of the ordinary. But when the newcomer stepped inside, “ordinary” was the last quality Sean could apply to the man.

He wore a fine suit that must have been Armani, or some other designer that required a credit check just to touch it. He floated into the diner with a gliding step that suggested both grace and power. What, exactly, was he doing in a place like this?

Sniff. No doubt about it, this guy was not human. Sean didn't detect any trace of werewolf redolence, either, so that left one big possibility ... and it didn't make him a very happy Irishman.

Great, he thought. My first night in the States, and I run into one of the local undead.

The vampire moved fluidly toward the counter and the old cook, then he stopped. He turned his head, locking eyes with Sean. A heartbeat passed, and the creature strolled Sean's way.

Here we go.

Sean tensed. He tried to avoid the damned beasts whenever he could, but if this one was looking for trouble, then he'd find Sean Mallory up to the challenge. He started to rise, to draw the fight outside and away from the cook if he could ...

... and something inside told him to hold off a moment. As the vampire drew closer, Sean saw no indication that the man was preparing to ... well, to vamp out on him. The man was keeping his supernatural characteristics in low gear, and that did not fit someone who wanted to start something.

So Sean stayed where he was, and the vampire came to him.

The man reached the booth, his gaze still locked with Sean's, and then asked, “Pardon me. Would you mind if I sit with you?”

Sean shrugged and gestured to the seat across from him. The vampire nodded and joined him.

“You are new to this area, are you not?”

Sean grunted. Guy talked a little funny — with speech that had many accents, and yet none — but considering what he was, there was also no telling how old he was or where he was originally from. “Just

got into town tonight. And ye?”

“I have been here for a short while.”

“Mm-hm. And I suppose ye’re going to tell me I’m trespassin’ on yer territory?”

The vampire cocked his head to the side. “That was not my intention, no. I am, however, curious as to your intentions?”

“ ‘My intentions?’ I don’t understand ...”

The cook turned around from whatever he had been doing, and gave a little start when he realized that his clientele had doubled without his knowledge. “Oh! Hey, Mr. Bachman. I didn’t hear you come in. You want anything?”

The vampire turned his head slightly toward the cook, but his eyes never left Sean. “Not this time—”

(“What else is new?” Sean heard the cook mutter, without true irritation, under his breath.)

—I merely stopped by to ask you about those donations we had discussed.”

“Oh, yeah, the church,” the cook nodded. “I’ll, uh, I’ll check my receipts and be with ya in a sec, okay?”

“Certainly.”

“You okay, buddy?” the cook asked Sean.

“Sure. I’ll order when ye’re ready.”

“Thanks. I’ll be right back.” The cook hustled down to the other end of the counter and dove into a disorganized shoe box of loose paperwork.

The vampire, Bachman, returned his full attention to Sean and continued as though they had never been interrupted. “If you were planning to prey upon this man, lycanthrope, I’m afraid you—”

“Listen, vampire,” Sean snapped, “if ye’re worried I’m stealin’ off yer plate, I’ll have to suggest ye dine elsewhere tonight. That man’s been a bit too friendly for me to leave him to the likes of you.”

The vampire regarded him silently for a long moment after that, and Sean still did not scent any indication that he was preparing to take an offensive. Who the hell was this guy?

“You are something of a quandary, my friend,” Bachman said at last.

“No more than you are, I’m sure.”

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The vampire actually smiled a bit at that, and then he did something that stunned Sean Mallory more deeply than any other action the undead creature might have taken.

He offered his hand.

“I am pleased to make your acquaintance, Mister ...?”

“Mallory,” Sean answered, not knowing what else to do but accept the offered handshake. “Sean Mallory.”

The vampire's smile broadened. “My name is Alistaire Bachman...”

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