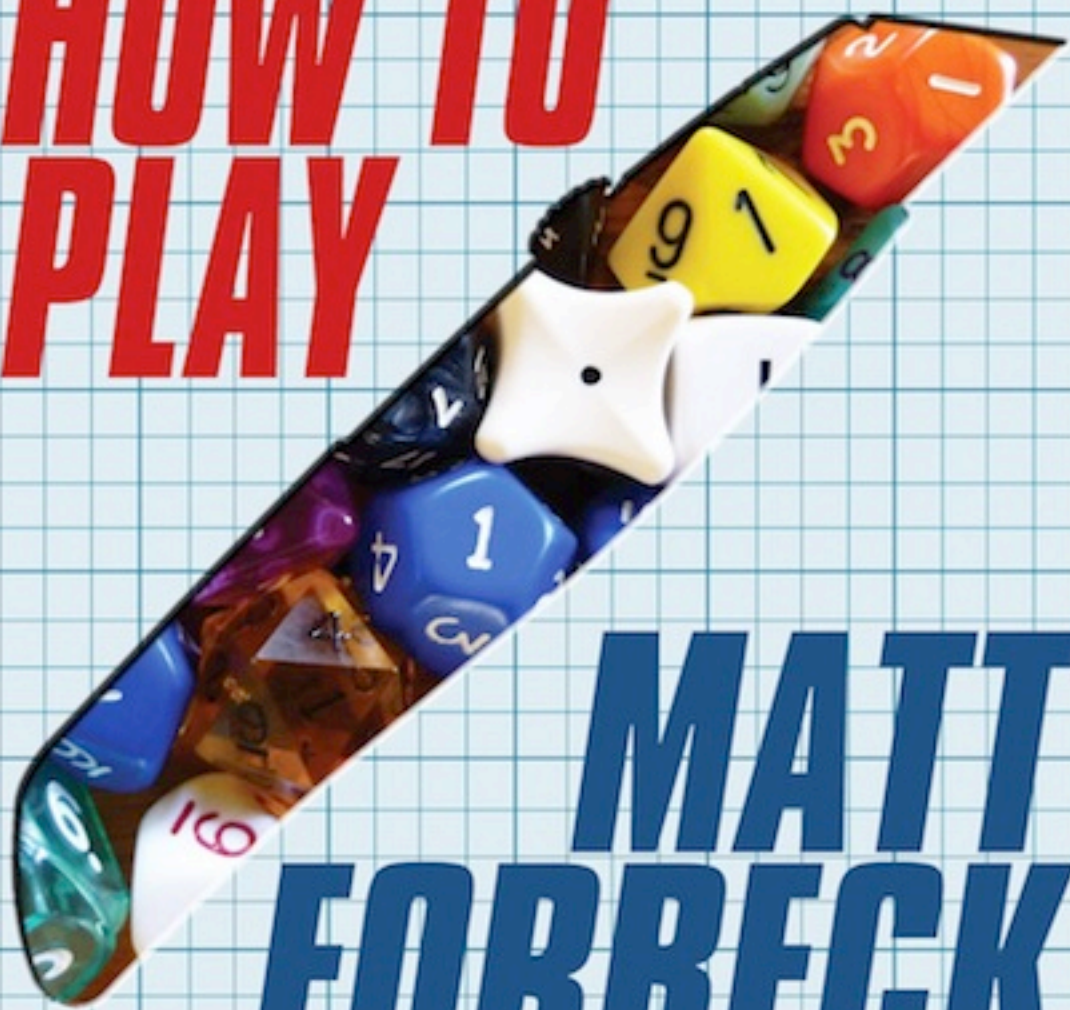


DANGEROUS GAMES:

HOW TO PLAY



MATT FORBECK

***DANGEROUS GAMES:
HOW TO PLAY***

[BOOK #1]

BY MATT FORBECK

ALSO BY MATT FORBECK

Hard Times in Dragon City (Shotguns & Sorcery #1)

Bad Times in Dragon City (Shotguns & Sorcery #2)

End Times in Dragon City (Shotguns & Sorcery #3)

Leverage: The Con Job

Matt Forbeck's Brave New World: Revolution

Matt Forbeck's Brave New World: Revelation

Matt Forbeck's Brave New World: Resolution

Amortals

Vegas Knights

Carpathia

Magic: The Gathering comics

Guild Wars: Ghosts of Ascalon (with Jeff Grubb)

Mutant Chronicles

Star Wars vs. Star Trek

Secret of the Spiritkeeper

Prophecy of the Dragons

The Dragons Revealed

Blood Bowl

Blood Bowl: Dead Ball

Blood Bowl: Death Match

Blood Bowl: Rumble in the Jungle

Eberron: Marked for Death

Eberron: The Road to Death

Eberron: The Queen of Death

Full Moon Enterprises

Beloit, WI, USA

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Dedicated to my wife Ann and our kids Marty, Pat, Nick, Ken, and Helen.
They're always my favorite players.

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the Gen Con staff for being such great sports and even better friends.

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responsible for any of the horrible things that happen herein. That's all my
fault. The good things, though, believe those double.

Double secret probation thanks to Ben Dobyons, Matt Vancil, and the rest of
the folks at Zombie Orpheus Productions for the loan of Leo Lamb, a
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Finally, a huge thanks to all the readers who backed this book and the rest
in the trilogy on Kickstarter. See the end of the book for a full list of their
names. Each and every one of them is fantastic, and I can only hope that
this book justifies the faith they showed in me.

12 FOR '12

This is the standard edition of a book first released as a reward for the backers of my third Kickstarter drive for [my 12 for '12 project](#), my mad plan to write a novel a month for the entirety of 2012. Together, 389 people chipped in just over \$18,000 to successfully fund an entire trilogy of *Dangerous Games* novels.

Thanks to each and every one of you for daring me to take on this incredible challenge — and for coming along with me on the wild ride it's been. And thank you to all my readers, whether you're backers or not. Stories have no homes without heads to house them.



CHAPTER ONE

GEN CON WEDNESDAY: LIAM PARKER

"Welcome to Gen Con!" a dark-haired man in cargo shorts and a black polo said as I stepped into the raucous bar.

I can't tell you how long I'd been waiting to hear those words.

It was a sweltering August night in Indianapolis, and I'd been on the road for hours. Given how little sleep I'd gotten that week preparing for this, the largest tabletop gaming convention in America, I should have gone to my hotel room and checked straight into my bed, but I had so much nervous energy pumping through me that I couldn't think of it.

"Hi," I said, shaking the man's outstretched hand. I couldn't come up with anything more to say. I'd wanted to come to Gen Con since I was a kid, and I'd been planning for this day for more time than I cared to think about. Now that I'd arrived, the reality of it stunned me.

"Welcome to the Diana Jones Award party!" The man's devilish smile told me he was already a few drinks ahead of me and maybe everyone else in the packed room. It might have been a Wednesday night, but the party had already started and promised to last the rest of the week. "I'm Matt. And you are?"

"I'm sorry," I said. "Liam Parker. I'm a, um, game designer. I'm looking for Ken Hite?"

The man's grin grew wider. "Ah, Liam! You're in the right place. Just wanted to make sure you weren't a crasher. This party's for

gaming industry pros only.”

I patted my chest down. “I don’t need to show any ID? A twenty-sided die? Maybe a meeple?”

Glancing at the crowd behind Matt, I felt overdressed in my button-down shirt and khakis. Most of the people wore T-shirts and shorts and looked like they’d been working — or maybe playing — hard all day. I wondered if every one of them could tell I was new here.

“If you know who Ken is, that’s good enough for me.” Matt handed me a red ticket. “Have a drink.” He turned and pointed to a high table near the bar. “Ken’s holding court over there. Good to meet you.”

“You too.” I moved past him while he put out his hand to greet the next person in line.

I spotted Ken sitting on a stool at the table, sipping at a gin and tonic and talking with a group of friends. He wore a Green Lantern T-shirt under an open Hawaiian shirt that threatened to blind anyone who got too close. They all had to raise their voices so they could be heard, but Ken’s authoritative tone carried over the hubbub of the crowd.

“And that’s why Noel Coward lived up to his name, dammit,” he said with a thump of the flat of his hand on the table as I weaved my way out of the crowd. Without missing a beat, he turned to me.

“Liam!” He shook my hand and pointed at an empty stool across from him. “Glad to see you made it, my friend. Join us!”

I slipped onto the stool and nodded to the others with what I’m sure was a nervous smile.

“Liam? This is legendary game designer Robin Laws and his equally legendary publisher Simon Rogers of Pelgrane Press.”

“I love your work,” I said to Robin, who gave me a demure nod. “Robin’s *Laws of Good Game Mastering* changed the way I play.”

“Why, thank you,” he said, a thin smile showing through his glasses and goatee. “I’m always happy to hear that. And what are you here for? Other than just going to Gen Con, I presume.”

I blushed a little. “I’m here to show off a new game I developed

and see if I can find any publishers for it.”

“Well, what a coincidence.” Robin turned toward Simon with a mischievous smile. “We just happen to have a publisher sitting here with us.”

Simon forced a laugh at that. I wasn’t sure he wanted to hear about my game, but when he said, in his soft British accent, “What’s it about then?” I couldn’t stop myself.

“It’s called *Mojo Poker*. It’s a resource-management card game in which you take on the role of modern wizards playing Poker against each other while using your powers to alter the game.”

Ken narrowed his eyes at me. “Isn’t that the game Forbeck came up with in *Vegas Knights*?”

I nodded. “I loved that book, and when I found out there wasn’t a real game behind it, I designed my own version of it.”

“You really should talk to Matt about a license for that,” Robin said. “I mean, you could file the serial numbers off it and make your own game out of it, but it’s the professional thing to do.”

I put up my hands. “Of course! I would never go ahead and steal something like that. I just graduated from the police academy back in Detroit.”

“So you’re a cop?” Simon said.

I shrugged. “Not yet. It’s a tough market out there right now, even for police officers.”

Simon raised his pint of ale toward me. “Well, then here’s to you getting a day job.”

“You don’t think I can make a living with my game design?” I said, only half kidding. I’d harbored the dream of working on games full-time since I was a kid, and now that I was at Gen Con I could feel it there, almost in my grasp.

The arching of the eyebrows around the table told me that I had missed my mark by miles. “Really?” I said. “It’s that hard to manage?”

Ken leaned forward with a wry grin. “You know what the difference between a pizza and a full-time game designer is?”

The others gave the kind of smiles that told me they knew this

joke all too well. They weren't any help at guessing the answer though. I shook my head at Ken.

"The pizza can feed a family of four."

"Ow." I bent over the table like the joke had stabbed me in the belly. "Ow, ow, ow."

"He's kidding, of course," Robin said. "Well, a little. I mean, *we* all make a living at it. Most of the people in this room here do, in one way or another."

"We don't all exactly make a *good* living at it," Simon said. "There are few millionaires here, but they're remarkable by being so few."

"So how do you do it?" I asked. "I'm young and hungry. I want to do this. What do I need?"

"You're an American?" Robin said.

"Born and bred."

"As a Canadian, I don't have to deal with this, but a spouse with a day job and benefits always helps."

Ken gave me a sage nod at this.

I grinned. "I mean beyond that. Come on."

"Well, the Industry Insider Guest of Honor track, of which I'm once again a proud participant, holds seminars on that exact topic," Ken said. "Show up and ask whatever questions you like. It helps keep the crickets from chirping."

"Can't you nutshell it for me?"

Ken shrugged. "Sure. Do good work. Hit your deadlines. And follow Wheaton's Law."

"Which is?"

"Don't be a dick."

"You manage all three of those, and you'll go far," Simon said. "It sounds simple, but most people can't hit more than one of those at a time."

"Seriously?"

That made me feel better. I couldn't tell you how good my work was. It looked fantastic to me, but it's hard to judge your own efforts.

When it came to hitting deadlines, though, I made that a point of

pride. I never turned in anything after it was due. In fact, I always strove to get my assignments done early, just in case something got in the way at the last minute. I hated being late.

On top of that, I always tried to be professional. My mother was a college literature professor, and my father worked as a software engineer. They'd both drilled it into my head that how I behaved was more important than what I accomplished. Becoming a millionaire game designer wouldn't mean a thing to them — or to me — if I had to be a jackass to manage it.

"I'd drink to that, but I don't have a drink."

"Go make use of that drink ticket Forbeck handed you," Ken said.

That set me back on my stool. "That was Matt Forbeck? The guy at the door? I didn't recognize him."

Robin cocked his head at me. "You've never met him before?"

"Well, we're Facebook friends, and I follow him on Twitter, but no. I have a meeting with him during the show to talk with him about my *Mojo Poker* game."

"You should go over and introduce yourself," Simon said.

"Yeah." I glanced over at Matt again. Having just gotten through my training to be a police officer, it embarrassed me that I hadn't recognized him on the spot. "He doesn't look like his photos."

"He closes his eyes during most of those, I think," Ken said with a chuckle. "He's in his natural element here: a bar filled with gamers. Watch him shine."

"Ah." I slid off my stool. "I'll go right over and say hi then. Thanks."

"Have a great Gen Con," Robin said with a little wave.

I resolved to do just that.

CHAPTER TWO

GEN CON WEDNESDAY: LIAM PARKER

There were still a few people waiting to get in at the door, so I decided to make use of my drink ticket before I introduced myself to Matt. I bellied up to the bar and glanced around while I waited for the bartender to get to me. As I did, I decided to play a little game with myself to see how many people I could recognize in the place.

In short order, I spotted Richard Garfield — the man who'd invented *Magic: The Gathering*, the world's first collectible card game — chatting with Peter Adkison, who'd published *Magic* and who now owned Gen Con. Next to them, I saw a man teaching people how to play a card game I'd never seen before. It featured tentacles and other parts of Cthulhoid creatures being assembled to create some kind of elder god.

From the homemade look of the cards, I figured the game had to be a prototype the designer was showing around. I recognized one of the players as Mike Stackpole, a game designer who'd gone on to make a name for himself as a novelist, writing *X-Wing* novels for Star Wars. The third person in the game was Aaron Allston, who like Mike had gone from creating roleplaying games to writing science-fantasy tales for Lucasfilm.

Beyond them, I spotted Lisa Stevens of Paizo standing and chatting with Ryan Dancey. They'd both worked at Wizards of the Coast years ago and had headed up the launch of the third edition of *Dungeons & Dragons*, maybe my favorite game ever. Lisa had gone

on to form Paizo and publish *Pathfinder*, a new variant on *D&D* that I played with my pals back home. As I watched them, a thin man with wire-rim glasses who I thought I recognized but couldn't quite name came up to speak with them.

There were so many people there, many of whom I knew from following them online. Designers, publishers, podcasters, journalists, artists, retailers, distributors, and gamers of all stripes huddled around tables, chatting over drinks like old friends who'd finally gotten back together for their annual reunion. Some played games right there at their tables. Most of them just swapped war stories about the past year as they tried to get a feel for what was happening in the industry. A few of them looked grim, but most seemed happy just to be there.

I'd never met any of them before, not in real life. I'd been too busy and too broke to attend any convention before, even the local ones in Detroit and Ann Arbor. This was my first real exposure to the reality behind the games that I loved to play and tinker with.

I wondered if I'd regret that, if I should have stayed outside of the industry, maintained my fan status rather than trying to become a professional instead. Would it be too much like watching sausages be made? Would it ruin the fun for me?

I'd heard rumors of game designers who never played games any more. I didn't want to wind up like that, but I'd dreamed about having a game published since I was a kid. Other people wanted to be football players or writers or astronauts. I just wanted to see people having a ball playing a game I'd made for them.

I traded my drink ticket for a beer and strolled over to the entrance. No one was there with Matt at the moment, so I walked up and introduced myself again.

"Mr. Forbeck?" I said.

He spun around and nearly tipped over but grinned at me. "Yes! Liam, right? I'm lousy with names, but we'll all have tags hanging around our necks tomorrow. What can I do for you?"

"I just — I didn't recognize you before when I came in. We have a meeting later this week to talk about *Mojo Poker*."

“Right. I’m looking forward to that. It sounded like you had some good ideas for it.”

“Thanks. I hope you like it.”

“Me too. I — Whoa!”

Behind us, someone had started shouting in an angry tone.

“You’re not listening to me!”

I spun around and spotted the man who’d been chatting with Lisa Stevens and Ryan Dancey laying into them. His face had gotten red, and he looked like he was about to take a swing at someone. He was shorter than both Lisa and Ryan — who were both over six feet tall — and he didn’t look like he had a prayer of taking them in a fair fight. Still, that didn’t mean he couldn’t do some damage.

“Shit,” Matt grimaced at the shouting man. “Can you watch the door for a minute? I need to go talk Allen Varney down off a ledge.”

“Let me take care of it,” I said.

“You know those guys?”

I was already on my way, and I called back over my shoulder. “I just graduated from the police academy.”

“I hope that helps!”

I strode straight through the crowd, beelining toward the angry, middle-aged, potbellied guy with short brown hair gone gray at the temples. He wore a tan T-shirt with the words “I MAKE STUFF UP” emblazoned across it, under an unbuttoned khaki traveler’s shirt covered with pockets. With thick glasses perched on his bulbous nose and pale cheeks pitted with acne scars, he fitted the archetype of an aging nerd. He didn’t stick out in this crowd.

I remembered then where I’d heard of Allen Varney. He was a long-time tabletop game designer who’d moved into working on video games like *Epic Mickey*. I had some of his work on my iPad back in the car. For a guy who designed funny games about cartoon characters, he didn’t look especially fun or cheery.

“Put one lousy ‘Donate’ button on the Paizo site,” Allen said, his voice rising as he spoke. “Do a fundraiser. Offer a bundle of *Pathfinder* novels at a discount for donors. You’ve got so many fans at Paizo, so many ways to make a difference!”

Silver haired and bearded, Ryan towered over the rest of the room in terms of both height and style, dressed like he belonged at a country club. Lisa, tall and blonde, carried herself like she owned the place, loved the people in it, and meant to enjoy every minute with them. She had the best business record of any executive in the roleplaying field, having helped found White Wolf, Wizards of the Coast, and now Paizo Publishing.

“If you’re in the one percent,” Allen said, then glanced at Lisa, “or maybe I mean the one-tenth of one percent, you have an ideal opportunity — no, an obligation to —” He broke off and began to cough.

“You all right?” Lisa asked with real concern, but he just waved her away.

Ryan took the opportunity to interrupt. “We’re in the entertainment business. It’s not smart to bring in politics.”

Allen started shouting again. “Is it smart to let them reshape society and run it like their own set of electric trains? Entertainers have a moral duty, just like artists, just like everyone —”

“Hey,” I said, trying to use an authoritative voice. “Can we all calm down here a bit?”

“Calm down’?” Allen glared at me through his thick lenses. “You’re the one barging into a private conversation. What are you, a cop?”

“Just graduated from police academy,” I said with what I hoped would be a winning grin.

Allen sneered at me. “You look it. I see you’re already learning to swagger.”

Lisa cleared her throat. “That’s Allen: always Mister Tact.”

He had just enough grace to look abashed. “Yeah, well. I’ve always had — what should I say?”

“Authority issues,” Ryan said with a wry frown.

“No hard feelings.” I shook Allen’s hand. “Liam Parker. I loved *Paranoia*.”

That settled him down. “Thanks. I’m kind of surprised anyone still knows me around here. There’s always been a huge turnover

among game designers. All these new faces..." He looked around the room and shook his head. "Half the people here don't know me, and half of the rest wish they didn't. When I die, they'll throw a party."

Ryan raised his glass. "We decided not to wait."

Allen sized me up. "A cop. Well, Liam Parker, maybe you'll be useful. Sometimes this hobby sees a few, ah, dubious operators. And they always seem to debut at Gen Con."

Lisa laughed. "But they rarely make it two years in a row."

"But it was never practical to call them out," Allen continued. "Now, with social media like Facebook, Twitter, and Google Plus, when I put the word out on this guy, everyone at this con will know it within an hour."

"Oh no." Lisa shaded her eyes with her hand and shook her head. "Who is it this time?"

"If I get the papers I need tonight, you'll find out tomorrow. And maybe young Liam Parker will be on the scene to expedite the results."

I started to tell him I didn't have the jurisdiction to expedite a parking ticket, but Ryan broke in. Frowning down at Allen — he must have been six-four — he pointed a thick finger at the man. "You overestimate your reach — and maybe your credibility."

"Then it's a good thing I'll have proof, isn't it?" Allen glared at Ryan with defiance. I had the feeling he looked that way a lot. "That's one thing about me. I know how to make an argument."

"But not always a good one," Lisa said with a grimace. "It isn't so much what you say, it's the way you say it. You grate on some people's nerves."

"The right people, I hope. When I see something wrong, I speak up."

Ryan snorted. "The gaming industry's Jiminy Cricket."

Allen smirked at Ryan with naked contempt. "No one will ever say that about you."

Ryan arched an eyebrow at Allen and opened his mouth to protest. Lisa intervened. "Come on, guys. Play nice."

Allen started to reply, then broke into a prolonged coughing fit. As the conversations nearby fell quiet, the rest of us exchanged uncomfortable glances.

Lisa waited Allen to recover, then said to him, "So, where are you off to next?" She turned aside to me and said, "He's a big traveler."

Allen cleared his throat a few times. "I expect a long trip pretty soon," he said raggedly. From beyond the front windows, out on the street, a movement caught his eye, and he started in surprise.

"Whoa! Someone I need to see," he said. "Excuse me." He strode away before anyone could object.

Lisa gazed after him with concern. "He looked terrible."

"He is terrible," said Ryan.

"He practically called you a sociopath," I said to Ryan.

Ryan rolled his eyes and chuckled.

"As long as he's Paizo's sociopath," Lisa said, slapping Ryan on the shoulder.

We laughed, and the party went on.

CHAPTER THREE

GEN CON WEDNESDAY: ALLEN VARNEY

As Allen made his way to the bar's exit, his mind flashed back to Kenya, 1998. Lost in a rundown patch of Nairobi on a hot summer day, he'd spotted a hand-lettered sign over a wooden shack that read "Tea," and he'd ducked inside to get out of the sun. The instant he'd entered, everyone stuffed into the tight place had gone dead silent. As he'd sat there on a ramshackle bench sipping tea from a dirty glass in a room gone tense and nervous, it had occurred to him he was probably the first white customer the place had ever had.

He felt that same kind of discomfort from the crowd at the party now. Everyone stared at him as he left, curious about what he was up to but at the same time relieved to see him leave. He didn't care about that though. For better or worse, he'd never worried about what people thought of him. And if the doctors were right, he didn't have time to start.

He leaned out the bar's door and looked down the street. He saw no sign of Jewel Yin, even though he'd just spotted her strolling along the sidewalk, peeking into the bar through the front window. He considered trying to chase her down but gave the idea up. He'd already made enough of a fool of himself that evening.

He stood there in front of the bar, seething, trying to bring his temper under control. He liked Lisa fine, but Dancey was heading up their new computer game division, for God's sake. That man was a shark in a polo shirt.

A big guy with short blond hair walked out of the bar. "Hey," he said, "you doing all right?"

Allen nodded. Reflexively he looked for the man's convention badge, but he wasn't wearing one. "Have we met?"

"Todd Luikart. I've written a lot for Black Industries and Green Ronin. I go by T. S. Luikart. You need a drink ticket?" Todd held up one. "I'm not using mine."

Allen waved it away. "Thanks, I don't drink."

"I understand." Todd smiled. "I'm only interested in a drink if it could potentially have a small umbrella in it."

Allen glanced at him. "Those are good companies you're working with. Be careful, though, or this business will chew you up like a wood chipper." He gazed down the street in the direction where Jewel had vanished.

"It's getting better now, especially with Kickstarter," Todd said. "You know *Far West*? We crowdfunded that RPG."

While Todd went on about the many benefits of putting creative projects up on Kickstarter, Jewel walked back around the corner. She stopped, stared directly at Allen, and held up a handful of papers. Then she turned and vanished around the corner again.

"Excuse me, Tom," Allen said, distracted. "I gotta go."

"It's Todd."

"Sorry." Allen ran down the street.

Startled, Todd called after him. "Uh, nice to meet you? I think?"

The Indianapolis night felt steamy. Gen Con was always held in August, and it was weather like this that made Allen miss the days when it had been held at the MECCA in Milwaukee. The Wisconsin weather had always been a bit cooler. Still, even this was better than the steady summer broil back home in Austin, Texas.

Allen loved the freelance life, even though it meant living close to the poverty line. He was proud of some of his work, but even prouder that he'd made his living for decades in a tough field. It had seemed more like a privilege than a burden. He'd been happy to make sacrifices to live independently, under no one's control but his own.

He knew his pride had hurt his career — well, pride and his lifelong failures of tact. Privately he suspected he had some kind of low-grade Tourette's syndrome. He could suppress it for a while, even be charming, but then, inevitably, he'd start saying what he really thought — about everything.

As Tourette's went, at least it beat random cursing and war whoops.

His eccentricities may have cut him off from jobs he might have otherwise taken, but at least he could still look himself in the mirror. The trouble now, though, was that he couldn't even afford a mirror, let alone health insurance, not to mention the hospital bills already mounting.

It all came down to cancer.

Because of his diagnosis, he'd taken design jobs he would otherwise have ignored if not outright mocked. He needed every dime he could find, and he no longer cared where the dimes came from. Of course he'd expected problems, and he'd gotten plenty of them. This economy hadn't been good for anyone, it seemed — especially for companies with iffy finances sinking loads of cash into new ventures.

Allen wasn't just angry about the late payments though. It wasn't only due to the fact that the people he was working with were idiots, thieves, or worse. A good chunk of his rage lay rooted in the fact he hated himself for taking the work in the first place, as well as for letting the situation get so bad.

He knew now that the clock had been ticking that entire time. He'd never listened until it was too late, but maybe he could still do some good, if he could catch Jewel.

Allen raced to the end of the street and turned left. He spotted her still striding away from him. "Jewel!" he said, trying not to shout.

She kept walking. If anything, she picked up her pace. She glanced back and waved the papers over her shoulder at Allen, and he broke into a run.

The street was almost abandoned. The Diana Jones Award party was in full swing, just about to hand out its annual award for the

most excellent thing in gaming. Allen had never cared about awards, but he wished he was in there instead of out here in the dark, literally chasing down the money he'd earned.

Jewel reached the mouth of an alley and gestured down it with the papers in her hand. Then she ducked into its darkness.

Allen groaned at her stupidity. If she wanted privacy, she could have led him into the next bar on the street, not even a half a block away. Did she really think secret papers could only be handed off in dark alleys?

Allen resolved to find out.

CHAPTER FOUR

GEN CON WEDNESDAY: ALLEN VARNEY

Allen stole into the alley after Jewel. As he turned the corner, he slipped and fell. From the smell of it, a hot dog cart must have drained the water from its heating trays right there at the mouth of the alley. The greasy residue it had left behind had taken Allen out like an oil slick. He went down hard, skinning one knee and tearing open his pants.

Bleeding and coughing, Allen cursed. He cursed his injuries, he cursed his cancer, and he cursed the chief financial officer of International Entertainments, who didn't even know not to go wandering into alleyways after dark. She needed to be more careful about such things, and maybe so did he.

Of course, if he'd been careful in the first place, he never would have gotten involved with Tollak Spielmacher and his International Entertainments. But Spielmacher had offered so much money for Allen's talents. He'd even paid up — at first. Because of Allen's circumstances, he'd overextended himself with Spielmacher, and the man had burned him like a toddler with a blowtorch.

As a freelance game designer, Allen knew he didn't have much leverage with a publisher, even one as relatively new as International Entertainments. There were always people willing to design games for little to no pay, just so they could work toward fulfilling their dreams. Every time they stepped forward and worked for nothing — designing a game for the sheer fun of it so

they could cross it off their bucket list — they made it that much harder for professionals to make a living.

But Allen meant to threaten Spielmacher with the only weapon he had: exposure. Once Jewel gave him the corroborating evidence of IE's corruption — and once he started spreading the word — not even amateurs would ever work with Spielmacher again.

God bless Twitter.

"Are you all right?" Jewel called to Allen from somewhere in the darkness ahead. The streetlights didn't reach all that far into the alley, but he could see her there in the shadows, a darker spot in the blackness, standing next to a Dumpster down the way. Despite her words, her tone somehow managed to avoid expressing concern.

"One more doctor bill to add to the pile." He staggered to his feet and limped toward her. "Lesson One, Jewel: Don't hang out in dark alleys. Now come on back out and —"

As he reached her, her smile stopped him. Her perfect teeth shone as white as if they'd collected every bit of the alley's dim light. "Mr. Spielmacher received your threat," she said. "He wasn't pleased."

Her hand swept up in a smooth arc right under Allen's chin. Something flashed in the light. Then she stepped back and showed him a vicious grin that exposed every last one of her perfect teeth.

It felt like she'd scratched his neck. He touched his throat. Then he saw the box cutter in her hand.

Gaming companies used them at Gen Con to slice the cling wrap off the shipping pallets they'd sent there, and then to cut open the boxes full of books and games and dice and such so they could put them on the tables in their booths and sell them to the crowds of gamers who would flood the floor and —

Why was his neck hurting?

Allen rubbed his hand across his throat and brought it away covered in blood. In the pale light, the fluid looked black. Now he felt it flowing out of him, spilling down his neck and onto his chest, soaking his shirt.

He stared at Jewel and tried to chuckle. "I guess *I* was the idiot all along," he croaked. "Story of my life."

His feet already felt wobbly, and his knees buckled. His heartbeat roared in his ears, the darkness in the alley deepened.

Jewel took a handkerchief from her pocket and wiped the handle of the box cutter. She pitched the knife into the Dumpster, where it landed with a muffled clang. Then she walked past Allen and emerged from the alley.

The irony of Allen's situation slammed into him like a runaway truck. He'd already been dying. Jewel had just accelerated the process. All she'd taken from him was a few more months of chemo and radiation and worry, of losing his hair and strength and dignity.

As he knelt there in that filthy alley, growing weaker by the moment, he wondered if Jewel hadn't maybe done him a favor. And the funny part was that she'd never know it.

He started to laugh. He just couldn't help it.

It wasn't much of a laugh, weak and gargling blood, but it shook his chest and then his shoulders before he keeled over on the cold pavement. From there, the shakes consumed the rest of him, and he gave himself over completely to the joke, letting it take him, consume him, devour him.

The best part of it all was that no matter what he could have done to Jewel and Spielmacher and International Entertainments, it would only have dented their already questionable reputations. People got stiffed in the gaming industry all the time. It wouldn't have raised too many eyebrows.

Getting murdered over something like that, though, hadn't ever happened. Especially not at Gen Con. And if anyone ever figured out what had happened to him — who had murdered him — that would ruin International Entertainments with a scandal far worse than anything he could have done.

He wanted to thank Jewel for that, for giving his death some kind of meaning. Or maybe that was just the lack of blood in his head talking. He couldn't tell.

But he'd been right about one thing. He'd often joked that when he died, they'd throw a party. Starting tomorrow, forty thousand people were about to attend the biggest party in gaming.

It was all just too funny.

CHAPTER FIVE

GEN CON WEDNESDAY: LIAM PARKER

I couldn't remember the last time I'd had as much fun at a party as I did at the Diana Jones Award event. Almost the entire evening had been given over to drinking and schmoozing, rubbing elbows with the gaming industry's elite. That had only been interrupted for about ten minutes near ten o'clock when Matt had grabbed a microphone to announce this year's winner of the Diana Jones Award.

I had a chance to look at the traveling trophy before Matt gave it out to the new owner. It was a Plexiglas pyramid, inside of which someone had encased parts of a burnt copy of the *Indiana Jones Roleplaying Game*. The only part of the game's logo that was left read "Diana Jones," which is where the name of the award had come from.

"I'm told the people at TSR UK made it after their offices got closed down back in the late '80s," Jason Morningstar — who'd won the thing twice already for his games *Grey Ranks* and *Fiasco* — told me. "It was a trivia trophy for a while, and it somehow fell into the hands of James Wallis, the man behind the storytelling games *Once Upon a Time* and *The Extraordinary Adventures of Baron Munchausen*. He decided that since he had a trophy he needed to come up with an award for it, and so here we are."

"It all started out at Matt's birthday party back in 2001," said Wolfgang Baur — who'd won the award in 2008. "He turned thirty-

three on the Saturday of his twentieth Gen Con in a row, and he decided to throw a beer and pretzels party for all his friends here at the show. James showed up with the award and handed it out to Peter Adkison that year. I think Tracy Hickman accepted his Hall of Fame award at the party that night too."

My jaw had dropped. "And it's kept going ever since? That's one hell of a tradition."

Wolfgang shrugged. "Matt passes around a virtual hat every year now, and a bunch of companies pitch in a few bucks each for drink tickets. It's easy, it works, and after a long day of setting up our booths in the convention hall, it's exactly what we all need."

"Makes for a great way to kick off the convention," I said. "And tomorrow we play games?"

Wolfgang smiled at me. "For some of us. For the rest? Tomorrow we *sell* games!"

I had to drink to that.

I had to drink to a lot of things, it seemed, and by the time midnight rolled around and the party was shutting down, I realized that I'd maybe drunk too much. I didn't want to embarrass myself in front of all these giants of the gaming industry, and I wondered if maybe I'd considered that too late.

"We're heading over the Pub," Ken said when he found me sitting alone at the bar, taking a breather. "It's just down the street if you want to join us."

"We're not done?" I said, confused. "The party's wrapping up."

"We're done here, but bar time in Indy's not until three."

"Doesn't anyone here have to get up in the morning? The convention's starts tomorrow, right?"

"At 10 AM if you have to work in a booth. Do you have to work in a booth?"

I shook my head.

"Then for you it starts whenever you get there. Let's go."

"Sounds good," I said. I slipped off my stool, and the world tilted in a different direction. I caught myself on the bar's rail and held steady there until the ground stabilized.

“Or you can stumble back to your place — wherever that is — whenever you like. Most of the convention hotels are conveniently within staggering distance.”

“I really should have checked in before I got here.”

Ken smiled. “Yes, you should have, but I don’t think you’ll be only person trying to check in during the wee hours of the morning in this city tonight. That’s what the night clerk at the front desk is for anyhow.”

I nodded in agreement then followed Ken out of the bar. “Lay on, McDuff.”

“And damned be him who first cries, ‘Hold! Enough!’”

Ken turned left coming out of the bar, then took another left at the corner and strolled down the street as if he was enjoying the fresh air on a sunny afternoon.

“How do you do that?” I said as I caught up with him, trying to make sure the pavement didn’t jump up and try to bite my shoes. “You’ve had at least as much to drink as I have, and you don’t look like it’s affected you at all.”

Ken gave me a wink. “Well, I am a professional.”

I felt much like an amateur at that moment. I didn’t usually drink all that much, but I’d gotten carried away in the excitement of seeing so many famous game designers in one place. My head swam, and my stomach did its level best to try to keep up with it. I could tell, though, that it was going to fail.

“I don’t feel all that well.”

Ken shrugged. “And although we hardly know each other well enough for me to judge, you don’t look all that good either. But hey, what’s this?”

He pointed to the opening of an alley just ahead of us. I tried to reply, but I didn’t think it would be a good thing to open my mouth at that point.

“An alley! Hey, if you’re going to get sick — and mind you, I’m not suggesting that you do — but if you’re going to do that, you couldn’t find a more time-tested place in which to indulge yourself in violently ridding yourself of your nausea than in a dark alley. Am

I right?"

I nodded in agreement and staggered toward the darkness. At least this way I wouldn't wind up vomiting in front of all the wonderful people I'd just met. Sure, Ken would know, but he didn't seem the sort to needle me about it too much.

I wasn't sure I was going to throw up, just that it might happen. I had hoped the night air might help clear my head, but the extra oxygen seemed to be accelerating my problems instead. As I moved into the alley, the urge became stronger, but I fought it hard.

I hated throwing up. It always felt like my body was trying to punish me for being an idiot rather than trying to save me from my own stupidity.

I bent over and held my knees, then tried to force the beer back down into my body, willing it to run in the direction I'd always meant for it. It took a long moment, but it seemed like I might actually manage it. I swallowed over and over, as hard as I could, until I felt like I could breathe normally again.

When I stood up, something caught my eye. I spotted a shoe resting on the ground, just past a Dumpster on the left side of the alley. In the darkness, I wouldn't have seen it from the street, but this far into the alley, it seemed obvious.

"You all right?" Ken said from the mouth of the alley. "The Pub awaits!"

"I think so," I said, distracted. "Hold on just a minute."

"Take your time," said Ken. "Better here than in there, after all."

I stared at the shoe, thinking something was wrong with it. Then I saw that there was a leg sticking out of it. Given the way the shoe lay there, the person wearing it had to be face down on the pavement.

"There's someone back here," I said.

"Try not to throw up on him," Ken said.

He stayed where he was, but I moved forward, squinting my eyes and hoping that would help them adjust to the darkness faster. Adrenaline started to pump through me as I crept closer to the shoe and its wearer, and that cleared my head faster than anything.

“Hey, buddy,” I said as I moved closer. “You all right?”

I knew he wasn’t. If he was all right, he’d have moved the moment I’d entered the alley, or at least while I’d been calling back and forth to Ken. The fact that he hadn’t twitched a muscle while I’d been standing there meant he had to be passed out there in the night-shrouded alley, or something much worse.

Oh, it was so much worse.