

# An Adventure Novel By: Matt Rothchild



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# ***1-29***

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# Chapter 1



## *A Morning as the Others*

The vexing electronic screech of the alarm clock awoke Stephen from his blissful slumber, the noise assailing his unprepared ears; he jumped in fright at the sound. Rising up, he flailed an arm toward the noisy adversary to silence it. To his relief, his hand seemed to have unconsciously found the clock and switched off the alarm. With the sound stifled, Stephen paused several moments to gather his bearings. He rubbed his still-tired eyes; morning had crept into his bedroom too soon. Groping in the darkness, he searched for the lamp on a small table next to his bed. Feeling his way up the stem of the lamp, he found the switch and pushed it in, illuminating the room. He paused again to further collect his addled thoughts before falling back into the depths of the warm bed.

From the lamp, a soft glow shone through the room. Stephen looked up at the long window positioned high on the wall above him. Darkness still predominated outside; the faint light of his lamp seemed to fight against it. He turned his head toward the open bedroom door. Light spilled into the hallway, as if pushed there by some unseen force.

Sitting up, Stephen casually scanned the room. He was unsure when he last cleaned his room, but judging by the mess, he had neglected this task for some time.

A queen size bed, its covers disheveled and twisted in every direction,

took up a large portion of his room with a small closet across the floor from the foot of the bed. A wooden dresser with a mirror stood by the door; its drawers gaped open with various garments half hanging out. Assorted clutter filled its surface. Cast-off clothes lay scattered about the color-striped carpet covering the floor and rested in the very spots they landed when shed in previous days and weeks.

Deciding to get up and begin the day, Stephen adjusted his seated body and slid off the bed. He stepped through the bedroom door and into the hallway, his feet sensing the transition from the relatively flat carpeting of his bedroom to the long shag of the hallway. Another spare bedroom and a bathroom lay down the hallway while the entryway straight ahead beckoned him toward the adjoining living room and kitchen to start the day.

The brown shag carpet led Stephen into the dark and exiguous living room which contained his meager pieces of furniture. A small television set mounted atop a stack of three milk crates sat in the far corner of the room. Next to it, flat against the wall, was a fully-equipped computer desk; a six-foot tall floor lamp stood between them. A small brown couch facing the television occupied the floor on a rough parallel to Stephen's path to the kitchen. Beyond the end of the couch and in front of a large picture window, a recliner stood near the wall opposite the hallway. The window provided Stephen his usual view into the outside world, albeit limited as the window was presently shrouded by sheer drapes.

The kitchen was as much a mess as the bedroom. Stephen knew that greater efforts than his piecemeal cleanings were essential if his house was to be presentable. Time for sorting and organizing was invariably short and mail, assorted papers, receipts, and the occasional newspaper piled up on his early 1960's-vintage kitchen table from which he also ate when he felt the inclination to clear a space for a place setting. Dishes filled the sink, the choked basin long dry and its contents stagnant for days. Empty alcohol bottles of every sort could be found throughout the house, the brown and clear-colored containers spending days, weeks, and sometimes months without being picked up. By contrast, the linoleum floors of the kitchen were flawless, a seeming miracle standing out amid Stephen's otherwise inadequate housekeeping.

Stephen dawdled through the kitchen, his steps sluggish and dragging. Reaching the front door, he turned the knob and pulled the door open.

Exposing himself to the coolness of the fall morning, he looked out over his neighborhood with uncharacteristic interest.

Stephen's thoughts wandered away from his doorway and into the surrounding area. It was a neighborhood with a blue collar ambiance that hearkened back to its prime with its historic population of employees of the nearby railroad facilities whose yards still rumbled and boomed with trains starting and stopping or rail cars being switched between tracks. The area's gritty industrial character was readily apparent as it stretched across the breadth of Grand Forks, North Dakota south of DeMers Avenue between Washington Street in the east and Columbia Road in the west. Commercial buildings in the area bore the marks of the rougher, tougher generations that once called the area home. Every bar dotting the south side of DeMers was an ill-kept place with a patronage that would have felt out of place in the nightspots frequented by students from the nearby University of North Dakota campus; such a mixing of people and places would have violated the unspoken and voluntarily-imposed caste system of the town which kept the two worlds strangely separate.

Stephen turned his attention from the 1940's-vintage houses of the neighborhood to his own front step, a large cement monster four feet long and just as high. A mark of the architectural indifference of the time was found in the handrail of the steps: a single pipe supported by three similar pipes anchored in the giant cement block.

Lying on the front step was the Saturday edition of the Grand Forks Herald, inert as if having waited eons to be retrieved. On the surface, it could have been from any other day. Instead, the newspaper reported the culmination of a whirlwind week of events in international relations. Stephen picked up the newspaper and cringed at the price printed on the corner of the front page. It was significantly more than he pensively remembered a seemingly scant few years ago as a student at UND.

Headlining the day's news was the simple announcement that Canada had been accepted into the European Union. The move was considered logical by observers who knew that country's relationship with the British Crown. The fact that the United Kingdom was a member of the social, political, economic, religious, and military amalgam into which Europe was still transforming appeared to dictate Canada's application to the group, though Canada was not in Europe and the United Kingdom not yet fully integrated

into the group, the UK still shunning the Euro for their Pound Sterling.

Stephen held the newspaper in his hands as he stood motionless in the doorway. The newspaper felt cold to the touch, but the ink smelled very fresh, the black print having been put to the paper only a handful of hours earlier. For him, it was unfortunate that the content of that morning's newspaper was not as vaguely pleasant. He shivered at the cool morning and stepped back inside, his gym shorts and tee shirt barely shielding him from the breeze.

He lazily trudged back through the house to the kitchen and dropped the newspaper on his kitchen table. The paper would have to wait until later; he had been scheduled to work that Saturday, hardly his desired use of the weekend. The results of a late night of drinking had caught up to him, making his head hurt and his senses dull, even though he thought he kept his consumption under control. He ambled to the hallway and into the bathroom to begin his morning routine, thinking about the day ahead.

Much to his chagrin, his schedule required he begin work at 8 A.M. Stephen quickly performed his daily routine before exiting his house and driving to the southwestern edge of town where he worked. After a brief trip on Interstate-29, he arrived at a modern-looking steel building.

Stephen parked his car at the far edge of the parking lot, both to avoid others when he left that afternoon and to prolong his arrival at work. He slowly exited his car and trudged lazily across the smooth asphalt parking lot toward the glass double doors leading inside the building. Reaching the door, he stretched out his hand and grasped the door handle. He paused, shaking his head as he built up the resolve to step inside. With a deep breath, he pulled the door open and walked in.

"Good morning!" a cheerful young woman seated at the reception desk greeted as Stephen sleepily walked in the glass front door.

"Eh, good morning," he lethargically answered.

"You too? It seems like nobody wants to be here today!" she lamented.

A passing man, with a prominently displayed scowl, loudly complained, "That's because everyone wants to be at home on Saturdays. Some of us have families we could be with!"

Another nearby employee complained, "Yeah, I could be doing anything else I want instead of being here. How many hours do we have to put in before Newsome is happy?"

"Oh, come on!" the receptionist replied. "We're all in this together."

“I don’t really care what the bosses tell us!” the employee replied cynically.

“I didn’t realize the attitude was so strongly against this,” Stephen casually said to the receptionist.

“It’s stress. We *have* been working a lot lately,” she quietly conceded.

Scoffing, Stephen walked away to find his desk.

“Stephen Christianson,” bellowed a boisterous voice as Stephen sat down. He recognized the voice and turned around to face Mike, a friend he met while both were students at the University of North Dakota. Mike was a man whose verve sometimes exceeded that word’s descriptive capacity. Sometimes known to friends as the “Blonde Bomber” for his prowess as his fraternity’s intramural football team quarterback while in college, Mike had led his Sigma Nu team to a pair of championship game appearances, winning the second of the two against the team of rival fraternity and next door neighbor, Sigma Chi.

“Good morning, Mike. What are you doing here?” Stephen said softly, still mildly subdued by the effects of the previous night. Mike’s presence was surprising as he was supposed to have the day off.

“Originally, I was going pheasant hunting,” Mike replied. “My friend cancelled on me a couple nights ago, and I didn’t feel like going alone. I don’t understand why he couldn’t go; this trip was planned over a month ago.”

Stephen replied sarcastically, “Maybe he forgot to get a hunting license and couldn’t scrounge one up.”

With a wink, Mike answered vivaciously, “More likely he was afraid I’d show him up in the field. He’s afraid of the new bird gun I got last week that promises to change the entire dynamic of bird hunting forever!”

“A new shotgun. Have you tried it yet to verify that hunting will actually be changed forever? For all you know, the thing won’t shoot for squat.”

“Aha, that’s where you’re wrong! I tested it out the day I got it. There’s this small gun range not far from my dealer. I usually stop there to try out anything I get from him.”

“And the gun works?”

“Of course it works! I really don’t make it out to the range as much as I used to when we were in college.”

“You never did show me the place,” Stephen said. “It was like you were trying to keep it a secret.”

Mike thought for a moment. “If I recall correctly, you would rather have spent all your time shooting at the sewage lagoon. I never did like that spot; everybody knew about it and went out there. Besides that, it always reeked. At least my spot doesn’t smell.”

“It’s a much further drive,” Stephen answered matter-of-factly. “Going clear down to Buxton just to do some plinking seems excessive.”

“It’s in the countryside southwest of Buxton. If you ever come with me, we’ll stop there.”

“Fine,” Stephen accepted. “You’d better get back to work before the boss comes over here and demands he be taken along. No telling what misuse and abuse of the range he’d do.”

“Oh, come on. Joe won’t make any such demands,” Mike reassuringly contended.

“Oh yeah? He demands that I call him Mr. Oberbelast. What supervisor demands such formality anymore? It’s all so useless! I never like to see him, it’s always such a drag!” Stephen exasperatedly griped.

“Ah, yes. Still railing against the way things are. I like that you’ve not changed since we were at UND,” Mike replied.

“Is that a bad thing or something? All I want in life is to be left alone to do my thing and live my life. What’s so bad about that?” Stephen asked defensively.

Snickering and smiling, Mike teased, “And are you still living in that old wreck on the wrong side of the tracks?”

“Spare me the sarcasm. You know I bought that because my first job out of college could support it,” Stephen said, rolling his eyes.

“And you’re still working here!” Mike exclaimed in a raised voice.

“So are you,” Stephen shot back. “Besides, it’s not like we’ve been here terribly long.”

“No. Seems like just yesterday when we got through the door,” Mike fondly remembered. “At least we got something expected of a UND alumnus in town. There are guys I knew who are still stuck working the jobs they had back when we were in school.”

“Whatever floats their boat,” Stephen answered unfeelingly. Whispering and bearing nearer to Mike, Stephen said, “I hope they aren’t bored where they are like I am here.”

“Don’t say things like that. At least we have work. By the way, have



you been following the news about the elections or the Dollar?” Mike asked excitedly.

“Ugh, they talk about it in the newspaper every day. I’m tired of the constant stuff about high inflation, the Dollar, Canada, the EU, all of it. To me it’s all a collection of impossibly prestigious people of great power in high places guiding the course and events of human history. Nothing I say or do will change that, so I don’t try,” Stephen complained.

“There you go again with the cynical apathy. It’s actually a wonder you even read the paper,” Mike observed.

“Well, I liked reading the comic pages when the paper was available back in school. After graduation, I felt I *had* to get the paper,” Stephen hesitantly conceded. “Now they just drone and have been for months about the inflation.”

“And how do you feel about that?” Mike beckoned.

Shaking his head at Mike’s ignorance to earlier statements, Stephen answered, “It never ceases to amaze me how desperate others are to make their opinions known to me or even try to rein me in and think like them.”

“And you don’t like that?” Mike asked consolingly.

“All I want is to be left alone,” Stephen answered, becoming less thrilled by Mike’s continued inquiries. “And I’d like you to do the same right now.”

“Will do. Say, did you want to come out for some pheasant hunting sometime while it’s still in season?”

“I don’t have a shotgun, just the .22 rifle I used to shoot when we hunted in college, remember?”

Mike answered, “Ah, yes. Had we not met, you’d have never met your two loves: drinking and hunting.”

“You had the best parties. And who could resist going to parties hosted by a math tutor?” Stephen jested, remembering past fun.

“That was supposed to be a volunteer project for my fraternity too,” Mike answered, recalling his own memories. “I couldn’t believe how well you took to hunting though.”

“Me either, but I’ve enjoyed it even though I don’t go often,” Stephen replied. “Anyway, I don’t have a shotgun. Do you have an extra one I could borrow?”

“The one I got is the only one I have. I traded my last one to get it. Perhaps we should arrange to finally get you one of your own,” Mike suggested.

Stephen smiled, saying, "I could go for that. That way, I can meet this dealer of yours and go to your test place."

"It sounds like a plan," Mike said.

"Christianson!" growled a deep voice behind the pair.

"Uh oh, I'd better go," Mike said softly, scurrying away.

"Yes, Mr. Oberbelast?" Stephen expressionlessly answered, rolling his eyes and sighing before turning and looking up toward the inquiring voice. Behind him stood his boss, a tall, stocky, clean-shaven man of obvious Nordic stock. He was clad in his usual brown dress slacks and a plain, white dress shirt contrasted by his fury-reddened face.

"Are you here to work or are you just screwing around talking to him?" Joe asked gruffly, pointing to the fleeing Mike. "You know that we're on a tight timetable for this project and are running a crash schedule! Now get to work!"

"Yes, sir, Mr. Oberbelast," Stephen said heavily. As Joe left, Stephen turned away and back toward his desk, thankful that Joe's stay was short-lived.