

# **BREAKNECK**

## **Chapter One**

***Rockford, Illinois***

***Sunday, January 11, 2009***

***3:05 a.m.***

The kid's eyes snapped open. *Matt Martin. Twenty-year-old computer hacking loser.* It took only a moment for his expression to shift from sleepy confusion to horrified realization: there was a stranger in his bedroom. That stranger held a gun to his head, to the tender place between his eyes, just above the bridge of his nose.

The one called Breakneck smiled grimly. "Hello, son."

The kid went limp with terror. His mouth worked but no sound emerged.

"The gun I'm holding to your head is nothing fancy. An old-fashioned .38 caliber, semi-automatic. Serviceable at best."

He kept his voice low, tone soothing. "What's unique about this situation, of course, is the weapon's proximity to its target, your brain. When I pull the trigger, the bullet will rocket from the chamber and explode out of the barrel and into your head. In response, your brains will explode out the back of your skull."

Breakneck firmed his grip on the weapon. “The sound will be muffled by the fact that the barrel is pressed to its target, the mess contained by the pillow, bedding and mattress.”

The bony young man began to shake. The smell of urine stung the air. Unmoved by the kid’s fear, he went on, “I’m going to ask you a few questions. Your life depends on your answers.”

The kid’s eyes welled with tears.

“I know who you are and what you do. I want what you stole from me.”

“I don’t know what you’re--”

“Where is it?”

“What? I don’t . . . who are y--”

“I’m the guy you shouldn’t have messed with. I want my information. And I want my money.” He increased pressure on the gun; the kid whimpered. “What do you think, son? Do we do this the easy way? Or the messy way?”

“Easy,” he whispered.

“You jacked some information. And some money. Five hundred grand.”

Recognition flickered in his horrified gaze.

Of course it did. One didn’t forget stumbling into that kind of money.

Especially a small time little imp like this one.

“I see we’re on the same page now. Good.”

“I didn’t take your money.”

“Who did?”

“I don’t know!” His voice rose. “No one!”

His eyes darted back and forth. A clear sign he was lying. Breakneck could almost hear him thinking. Mentally scrambling for a way out, weighing his options: *Give him the information? How much--or how little-- would keep him alive? Did he dare lie? Struggle? Beg? What were the consequences of each?*

All animals responded to predators in the same way, Breakneck knew. They fought for survival. Using whatever means at their disposal. Over the years, he had seen them all.

Some predators, however, were so smart, so skilled, the fight was as pathetic as it was futile.

“I don’t want to hurt you, Matt. But I will. I’m going to count to three and then I’m going to pull the trigger. One,” he said softly. “Two . . . thr--”

“Okay, I found it, but I didn’t move it!”

“Who did? A name.”

“I don’t know . . . an e-mail address and screen name, that’s all I have. It’s marioman. At yahoo. Check for yourself . . . on my

laptop. I'm Gunner35. My password's 121288. You can get it all with that. I promise . . . go see. It's all there."

The kid's voice rose as he spoke. Breakneck laid a gloved hand over his mouth to quiet him. "You did good, Matt. Real good. Thank you."

He moved quickly, snapping the young man's neck before he had a clue what was happening. With little more than a gurgle, Matt Martin died.