

## Chapter 1

Titus scowled at the suddenly blank TV screen. He barely refrained from throwing the remote at the now useless system. That was the third time this week that the power had shut off in the middle of a game. And it was only Monday morning.

He hated the world he lived in. So many things were unpredictable. So many of the good things. Unfortunately, the bad and boring things were very predictable, like his dad. If he was home, Titus knew exactly what he would say. He would launch into one of his pompous tales of the “good old days.”

First, he would laugh cheerlessly when the loss of power suddenly terminated Titus’ game, then he would sonorously intone: “When I was a boy, we always had power to play our video games.”

“Maybe so, but you were tied to your system by a cord, Dad,” Titus always grumbled, with a heavy sigh and rolled eyes.

“A wire, son,” Dad would puff his chest proudly, “and a big shiny disc, but I could play whenever I wanted because we always had power.”

Titus couldn’t say much to that because he knew it was true. He vaguely remembered a time of bright lights, warm furnaces in the winter and air conditioning in the summer. But it had been over ten years since the power had been reliable to residential areas. In the past few years, even civilian businesses had started losing their power. The first summer that had been a big plus for the kids. They’d learned to hang around the grocery stores on hot summer afternoons. If the power stayed off for over an hour, the store would start selling ice cream to the kids for a dollar a carton. They would have all gotten pretty fat if it hadn’t been for the fact that there was no fuel for cars and buses that summer so they’d had to walk everywhere.

By the time school had started the new hybrid buses were in, with enough fuel to run them all year. The government was really enthusiastic about kids being in school. Truancy had become a felony offence. Even one occurrence would get you a thirty day stay in Carsie and a \$1000 fine for your parents. Two got you ninety days, and one parent got a month in county lockup. The third time, your whole family disappeared to a rehabilitation facility.

Titus hated going to school, but most days he did it anyway. He would go to his first and last classes but cut out on others throughout the day. The reporting system was so lax that as long as you didn’t skip a whole day, you rarely got caught. Unfortunately, when the power was off, there wasn’t much to do anywhere else, not at home or around town, so most days he stayed in school.

This morning Titus barely made it to the bus on time. His stop was one of the first, so it wasn’t a problem to find an empty seat in the back. He scrunched down with his knees on the seat in front of him and pulled out the only thing in his backpack, an old paperback novel.

He really missed the days of smart phones and ebooks, but they were pretty useless without power. Batteries were harder and harder to find and his ebook reader had finally quit charging over two

years ago. Fortunately, his mom had an attic full of old books. Lots of them were on the banned reading list, but that made them much more interesting to read.

Titus was engrossed in the story when suddenly someone dropped down next to him. He turned with an angry snarl that quickly turned to a friendly sneer.

“Where’d you come from, jerk?” he growled at the dark-haired, dark-skinned boy beside him.

“From my mother’s womb,” the boy grinned cheerfully back. “But that was almost sixteen years ago. Bet you’re talking about something more recent.”

“You think you’re funny, don’t you punk?” It took great effort to keep from smiling at the other boy, his unlikely best friend. How did an avowed atheist, the son of an indifferent agnostic of Jewish descent get along so well with an ardent Muslim, son of an imam? The answer was easy enough, though rather complex in its development. In a society where a gospel of “tolerance” had outlawed passionate belief, those who refused to conform soon found each other, regardless of their beliefs. Titus had first met Harun when the Amjad’s moved to town shortly after The Quake, but they’d only become friends about three years ago.

“I must be funny! I always manage to make you laugh,” Harun’s grin broadened.

“Only because I’m easy to please,” Titus grumbled, looking out the window to make it easier to maintain his sincere façade.

“Oh phul-eease!” Harun snorted loudly.

“Hey,” Titus quickly changed the subject, “you wanna cut out after lunch? I heard the arcade got in a game that doesn’t need electricity.”

“Two!” the other boy bounced with excitement. “Air hockey and fussball.”

“Don’t tell me. Your mom knew all about them.”

“Of course,” Harun rolled his eyes. “She told me about them, but first I had to listen to her story about how ‘country’ they were back then.”

“I bet that was fun,” Titus shook his head. “Let’s go to the arcade. The school won’t even know we’re not there since there’s that stupid assembly the last half of the day.”

A shadow of sorrow killed Harun’s smile. Titus was concerned. He didn’t like the idea of listening to the sexual tolerance lecture either, but he didn’t think it was *that* bad. Harun usually wasn’t too bothered by the stupid assemblies that they had every couple of weeks, unless they were anti-religion assemblies. They always sat together and played hangman, which Harun usually won. No, the assembly wasn’t the cause of Harun’s sorrow. Something else was bugging his friend.

“What’s up?” Titus asked.

Harun sighed and looked away with a small shrug. Titus nudged him.

“C’mon, punk. Something’s wrong. Spill it.”

“Did you hear about Venus?” Harun leaned closer and whispered.

“What happened to Venus?” Titus asked with narrowed eyes.

“Her family was taken this weekend,” Harun looked down quickly but not before Titus saw a glimmer of tears.

Titus looked out the window and blinked back his own tears. Venus was the only other friend he had. She couldn’t be gone.

“Why?” he growled, even though he was pretty sure he knew the answer.

“I don’t know,” Harun still didn’t look up. “Probably her dad.”

“It was just a matter of time,” Titus sighed.

Ringo Star Dearlove was a fourth generation hippie. When his girlfriend had given birth to a baby girl almost 16 years ago, they’d named her Venus and they loved her dearly even though they didn’t change their lives for her. In fact, her mother had drifted off to another man and disappeared before Venus’ third birthday, leaving her daughter and infant son. When The Quake hit, Ringo had found Jesus. Unlike eighty percent of the millions who’d flocked to the Christian churches, he hadn’t abandoned the faith when the quakes ended and the Rapture hadn’t happened. Instead, Ringo had dived deeply into the Bible, trying to find out what had gone wrong. What he’d learned had convinced him that the Bible wasn’t wrong. It was the preachers of End Times prophecy who were wrong. Ringo never missed an opportunity to “witness” to someone. He’d already been arrested twice. Once more and his whole family would pay.

“Why does he do it?” Harun asked in an angry whisper.

“Why does your dad do it?” Titus snapped back.

“That’s different!”

“Oh yeah! How?”

“My dad keeps it at the mosque,” Harun glared at Titus. “He only talks to other Muslims.”

Titus wanted to argue the point, but something outside the bus caught his attention. “Who told you Venus was taken?”

“No one *told* me,” Harun frowned. “I saw it with my own eyes.”

“Oh yeah?” Titus sneered slightly. “Then why’s she getting on the bus?”

“She is?” Harun whipped around to stare at the front of the bus, then he quickly dropped his head, his mouth falling open. He whispered furiously, “But I *saw* it!”

“Obviously not,” Titus snorted then grinned happily at Venus when she dropped into the empty seat across the aisle. “Hey Venus! How’s it shakin’, baby?”

“It’s Monday, Titus,” Venus shook her head gently. “Isn’t it a little early in the week to be so crass and crude?”

“It’s never too early for that,” Titus gave her a cheeky grin.

“Hi Harun,” Venus smiled at her friend. The smile faded quickly as she realized he was troubled about something. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing really,” Harun gave himself a mental shake. “Titus is trying to convince me to cut school.”

“If it’s after lunch, count me in,” Venus sighed.

“Miss Goody-Two-Shoes is going to cut school?” Titus asked with exaggerated shock. “Isn’t your God going to send a plague on you if you break the rules?”

“This is one time I think it would be more sinful to keep the rule than to break it,” Venus shuddered slightly. “I heard they’re going to have a demonstration.”

“Gross,” Harun scrunched up his face.

“You’re such an old lady,” Titus shook his head in disgust.

“Do you want to see a demonstration?” Venus asked with a troubled frown.

“Well, no,” Titus mumbled, “but not because it would be gross, just because ....”

“It would be disgusting,” Harun snickered.

“Yeah, that’s way different from gross,” Venus grinned broadly.

“I was going to say inappropriate,” Titus glared at both of them. “I might not believe in God, but I do believe that some things should be private.”

“Well, thank God for that,” Venus said with a straight face but a twinkle in her eyes.

“Praise be to Allah,” Harun also seemed quite serious.

Titus knew better. Not that they weren’t both serious about their Gods. They certainly were. What they weren’t serious about was their thankfulness to their Gods for his concession to morality. They were simply jerking his chain.

“You’re both jerks. You don’t have to be spiritual to be moral,” he scrunched down even further in his seat and buried his face behind his book.

“Seriously, Titus,” Venus said apologetically. “I am thankful that you share some of my convictions.”

“Me too,” Harun elbowed him. “Quit pouting and tell us what the plan is for this afternoon.”

Titus heaved a long-suffering sigh and closed his book. He was glad that the program this afternoon was offensive enough to get his friends to join him in his immorality. Normally they wouldn’t even consider cutting one period, much less the whole afternoon.

By the time the bus arrived at the high school, they’d agreed to meet outside the convenience store two blocks from the school. It would be easier for them to sneak off campus individually than in a group of three.

Titus followed his friends off the bus, giving them a shrug and half-nod when they waved before heading toward English lit. He envied Venus and Harun the time they got to spend together in their first class of the day. Somehow he’d ended up with no classes with either of them this year, and they only

shared English. Titus didn't even get to eat lunch with Venus this year, but at least Harun had the same lunch shift as he did.

Slinking into the back of his history classroom, Titus once again yearned to have his friends by his side. Sitting with them would make the class more bearable. He hated this period. History he loved, which made class with Mr. Morse even more agonizing. The teacher was dead boring, even on his best days. Most days weren't his best.

Mr. Morse had a horrible tendency to talk about The Quake and its aftermath, regardless of what historical era he was supposed to be covering. According to Morse, the height of the Roman Empire proved that the best way to settle the chaos after The Quake was to adopt the "live and let live" attitude of the Roman Empire when everyone was encouraged to worship all gods, and to give their devotion only to the emperor and the country. The Middle Ages with the constant wars between the Muslims and the crusading Christians proved how dangerous powerful religions were, which was why in the post-Quake era devotion to a single religion was considered the early stages of terrorism. The world-domination of colonizing Christianity and the resulting destruction of indigenous people and their cultures proved how wrong Christianity was and why, post-Quake, it could no longer be allowed. Morse used the violence of the Russian Revolution to make a similar case against atheism which was now acknowledged as a religion, even though it had never been organized as well as Christianity and Islam were. Judaism proved its unfitness to exist in a healthy society when the Jews of Israel tried to annihilate the Muslims that surrounded them after they took over the so-called "Holy Land" in the mid-twentieth century, which is why after the Quake, America gave all Jews a final choice, emigrate to their "homeland" or assimilate into secular America. And of course, when talking about the Islamic extremists of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, Morse proved that Islam was also unfit for a people who wanted peace, which was why post-Quake America had finally outlawed any public practice of it, right alongside Christianity, Judaism, atheism, and anything else that recognized a "truth" that could not be proven by scientific experiment.

Titus saw the logic in the argument, but he didn't really believe it. Hearing about it *ad nauseam* from Morse was offensive, especially since it frequently cropped up in every class from English lit to chemistry to calculus and even in gym class. Titus knew that the anti-religion teaching was part of indoctrinating his generation, and he hated it just for that. That made it worse for it to be so overwhelming in what had always before been Titus' favorite subject, history. Adding insult to injury, when he was bored, which was almost always, Titus would look around and see the other kids swallowing the garbage, and he hated it even more!

Today, Morse was in rare form. This close to the end of the year, they were studying the late twentieth century.

"One of the most awful things about the AIDS crisis of the '80s and '90s was the way the Christians tried to lay the blame for it on the poor victims themselves," Mr. Morse sighed sadly and shook his head.

Titus groaned and sank further into his chair. Here it came, the anti-religion spiel!

"To call homosexuality a sin was an abomination in itself, then they compounded the problem by claiming that AIDS was a God-given punishment for the supposed sin of homosexuality," Morse warned

up quickly. "They terrorized poor hapless men, then when they discovered that drug addicts could also get AIDS by sharing needles, the accursed Christians spread their net of terror even further! When science proved that AIDS had nothing to do with sin, and when straight people got AIDS too, the Christians simply changed their tactics, but their intolerance grew. They hated homosexuality, and abortion and anyone involved in it, but they loved their guns! They were anti-science, anti-government and anti-any fun! Then, just over ten years ago, when the New Madrid fault began going off and eventually killed over three million people, as well as causing the greatest economic crisis the world has ever seen, the idiot Christians started crowing about their God coming back to redeem his people and punish the wicked. They spread more terror during the quake and in the months following than in the more than two thousand years of their prior existence! When their God still hadn't come back a year later, the Christian spin doctors were trying to 'fix' their rhetoric of terror, but the people were tired of it! So the government started shutting them up along with all the other fools who claimed to have some inside scoop in an unseen world, or absolute knowledge that there *is* no unseen world! Those kinds of ideals are not conducive to public peace! We must ...."

*And here we go!* Titus slumped down enough to bang his head on the back of the chair. He was way too big to easily slide down that far anymore, so his knees accidentally banged against the chair in front of him, which just happened to be inhabited by Melinda Johnson, Morse's most ardent fan and one of the biggest narks in the whole school. She hated Titus because he was an atheist. She never passed an opportunity to get him in trouble, and he'd just handed her one on a silver platter!

"Titus Markovic!" Melinda squealed and jumped from her chair, turning to point an outraged finger at her. "How dare you assault me like that! And right here in class!"

"What happened Ms. Johnson?" Mr. Morse rushed down the aisle.

"He hit me!" Melinda was still pointing at Titus.

"You hit her?" Morse scowled at Titus.

Titus rolled his eyes as he carefully inched his way up a little higher. Being slumped that far down was mighty uncomfortable.

"Do you have anything to say?" Morse frowned harder.

Titus glanced up at Melinda whose quivering finger was almost poking his nose.

"It's not polite to point," he said the first thing that came to his mind. The truth didn't matter anyway, not in school.

"That's it mister! Get up!" Morse jerked on Titus' arm. His eyes flared in surprise when Titus' arm remained anchored to his side.

Titus was surprised too. He hadn't consciously tried to keep Morse from moving his arm, even though he was opposed to the idea.

Morse flung his hand toward the door. "Get out, Markovic! Go see the vice principal."

Titus rose slowly, not because Morse wanted him to go but because he, Titus Markovic, wanted to be gone! He was pleased that Morse was looking at his nose when he'd risen to his full height, and even

more pleased that he'd hung his backpack on the back of the desk chair rather than throwing it under the chair like he usually did. He walked out without having to bend over, so from the moment he stood, Morse had to look up to him.

Sauntering from the room, Titus' mind was already long gone before the door swung shut behind him. He'd always been a pretty scrawny kid even though he'd been very scrappy. But his fighting days had ended after his first trip to Carsie. He never wanted to go back there, so for the last three years, he hadn't tested his strength against anyone but Harun, who was even skinnier than he was. Titus had known he was growing taller, but he also knew the scales weren't going up proportionately. The mirror told him he was skinnier than ever, so why had Morse been unable to budge his arm even an inch?

Titus snorted softly then chuckled to himself. Dad was wrong, of course. Playing video games *did* build muscles!