

Outside the Box

Chapter 1:

Three shots like thunderclaps rang out from surround speakers in the basement rec room. A white controller jumped in Reid Anderson's hand each time he squeezed the trigger. Tactile feedback. A speaker in the controller made snapping sounds like the action of a pistol. Reid felt this more than he heard it. The shots made his ears ring.

On the 42-inch HD screen hanging from a hardwood paneled wall, the head of a pretty blonde had disappeared. A spray of blood, bone and brains hit the white office wall behind her. *Holy shit*, thought Reid. He'd been sitting on a low leather sofa, his Emerica skate shoes that had never touched a skateboard up on the coffee table. He stood up to get a better look. Reid was nearly a head shorter than most of the sixteen-year olds at school, but otherwise wouldn't stand out in a crowd. He wore his brown hair long and sloppy like his rumpled clothes. His Abercrombie low rise cargo pants and vintage Hollister sweatshirt lost none of their slept-in look as he stepped closer to the screen and watched the gore drip down the wall of the office. Reid noticed one of the bullets had missed its mark. Instead of hitting his victim and losing itself in the mess behind her, it left a round hole in the tinted plate-glass window the secretary had been standing beside. Out the window, an urban background of steel and glass was undisturbed by the mess he'd just made of the foreground.

Reid put the Wii remote down on the coffee table. On-screen, a semi-transparent hand placed a nine millimeter Beretta on a mahogany desk. *That is so not supposed to happen in a game like this*, Reid thought. He was astonished by what he'd just been able to do. Reid had

been messing around with the game out of boredom. *Simulacrum* was the flagship title of the software company his dad worked for. It was supposed to be an E-rated city-building simulation game, suitable for all ages to play. Not a first-person adult shooter. The things he'd been able to do in this game shouldn't have been possible. No way he should even have a gun, much less be able to blow away his secretary in graphic detail. This was nuts.

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Reid wasn't a gamer. His dad's life revolved around computers and game software, so Reid was pretty much obligated to think they were completely lame. If only because the old man spent all his time working on them. Reid avoided showing any interest on general principle. But it was a cold Thursday afternoon before New Years, and he was bored to death. He'd been home alone all day, again. The novelty of gifts and vacation had worn off days ago. And it was too cold to do anything outside but ice-fish. Reid had no interest in that Minnesotan pastime, except as an excuse to drink beer. His parents wouldn't let him have a snowmobile like most of the guys at school. Too dangerous, they said. So he was trapped at home.

Reid had been surprised to see the new Wii game console hooked to the TV in the rec room. He figured his father must have brought it home from work. Reid was vaguely aware it was the hot new game platform. It was creating a lot of buzz at school among hardcore gamers. They were excited about the wireless remotes, which they said would change the way games were played. Reid had always been confused by the button arrangements the other platforms used. He never got the hang of them. Fumbling with all those buttons and looking like an idiot made it easy for him to hate gaming.

Both Reid's parents were working late again. Mom was a commercial real estate broker. When she wasn't doing deals she was networking with local businessmen. As Reid got older, his parents let him spend more time on his own. They were both at the peaks of their careers, and Reid was an only child who had all the stuff they could give him. He never objected to their absence, so they all got used to a family routine that included Reid popping a frozen dinner in the microwave and eating in front of the TV three or four nights a week.

Home alone for a week with nothing to do. The speed-dial buddy list on his cell phone was short, but he'd tried them all. He stood by a bay window and looked out over the Minnesota River Valley while he tried each number. So he wouldn't lose the signal if someone picked up. *Are they not around? Phones off? Or are they seeing my name and blowing me off?* Reid knew he couldn't be the only bored teen in Mankato. But he'd have been just as likely to blow those guys off if they called him. There was no real spark there; no genuine friendship. They were just guys he'd been in hockey or track with, before he'd bailed on organized sports. *Hell with 'em.*

Reid wandered downstairs into the rec room that occupied nearly the whole basement. He watched as much TV as he could stand; then shot a dozen games of pool. He messed around with his dad's weights in the workout room for a while without actually working out. Reid was completely bored and a little annoyed at the world for not being just a little more interesting. So he grabbed a beer from his dad's stash in the party fridge—just to calm him down after the six cups of coffee he'd drunk earlier—and turned the Wii console on.

The disk in it was his dad's game, *Simulacrum*. It was a simulation game, where you created your own city. You could pick the time period and the location, and then build things

yourself or let the software do it for you. Along the way you learned about how societies worked. That's what his dad spent his life working on. Educational. Boring.

Reid wasn't a history geek. He had no interest in rebuilding the pyramids or retracing the development of the Roman Empire. So he chose the present and a location on an equatorial river delta. He let his tropical city grow on its own in hyper-accelerated time, thinking of Rio or Manila. Bangkok.

He sipped a bottle of expensive St. Paul micro-brew and explored the city the game had built. The statistics on-screen said it was an industrial center with a population of five million. He navigated with the analog stick on the Wii's nunchuk in his left hand. The nunchuk was attached to the remote by a short cable. The combination allowed Reid to use both hands to move himself around and do things in the game. He flew down into the city center between reflective glass high-rises. He switched to character mode and flagged down a taxi by waving the controller over his head. It took a few tries; the taxis blew right by him until he waved like he meant it. When the toothpick-chewing cabby asked "Where to, pal?" he picked "The Office" from a menu that popped up. The taxi dropped him off in front of a high-rise tower marked City Hall. Apparently he was the Mayor of this sim-city.

Reid finished the beer and carefully disposed of the bottle so his parents wouldn't be aware. He rinsed it so there'd be no smell and shoved it to the bottom of a trashcan in the garage. Not that his parents paid very close attention. Reid had been dipping into the supply in the party fridge for months. And he'd never actually seen his dad use the rec room or drink a beer. Always working. The slate pool table had been a gesture of good intentions. But it hadn't turned out to be the bonding experience his dad had talked about. Oh, well. Their twice-a-week maid replenished the fridge, so as long as Reid didn't drink all the beer at once he was safe.

When he came back to the TV, the game was waiting for him. It was evening, judging from the spectacular purples and reds that painted the sky out his office windows. Whatever city management decisions the game had been waiting for the Mayor to make, Reid wasn't interested. He'd let the game figure that out. Reid navigated his semi-transparent character out of the office and down onto the street. Another taxi picked him up and he told it "Just drive."

The taxi took off in the direction of the setting sun. Away from the city center, toward the waterfront. This was an older, less attractive part of town. High-rise office buildings and fancy hotels with uniformed doormen gave way to blank-faced warehouses and corner bars advertising cheap beer in neon. Reid had never been anywhere like this in real life, but he'd seen a lot of movies. He picked out the girls standing on street-corners in stilettos and fishnet for hookers. As they drove on, Reid was surprised to see neon signs announcing strip clubs. *They shouldn't be in a family-rated game.* He stopped the cab and got out to walk these streets.

After he'd gone a few blocks and passed a dozen bars, Reid pulled open a red door beneath a neon of a girl sliding down a pole. A burly bouncer stood in a corridor, arms crossed over a heavily muscled chest in a black tank shirt. Beyond him Reid saw the corridor opened onto a mostly empty collection of tables. Red and yellow lights lit a stage where a voluptuous blonde was already topless and getting to work on her satin shorts. The bouncer waved him on, but Reid pulled the nunchuk's stick toward his chest and backed out of the bar.

As he walked, a couple of girls approached and asked him if he wanted to party. They wore chains and black leather and reminded him of the hookers in *Sin City*. Reid was curious, but hesitated. *How would that even work?* He wasn't ready for game sex. What if his parents showed up in the middle of it? Something was wrong with this software. Or it was some kind of

programmer's joke not intended for him. Reid didn't need his folks walking in while he was enjoying game porn.

Reid was surprised to find he liked the lights and shadows; the atmosphere of the dark wet street. *Somebody put a lot of work into this.* He was impressed in spite of his long-held conviction that these games were pitifully lame. *Somebody Dad works with has a twisted sense of humor.* He wasn't sure what this was, but there was no way it could be the regular game they sold at Toys-R-Us with an E rating on its side.

He wandered into an alley away from the neon of the bars and clubs. The only sign was a painted one at the end beneath the single streetlight. Pawn and Loan. Reid pushed open the battered door and entered a small shop crowded with musical instruments, old TVs and stereos. A man in a leather vest with a ponytail and faded green tattoos stood behind a glass case. Reid looked down and saw watches, jewelry and guns. The tattooed guy nodded to Reid. A cigarette in his hand sent hypnotic swirls of smoke into the air above the counter. Reid could almost smell it.

Reid pointed with the controller. The pawnbroker reached into the case and pulled out a heavy black pistol. The words Pietro Beretta were stamped on its steel side, and the guy congratulated Reid on his choice. "This weapon kicks ass," he said. He smiled, exposing a line of broken teeth crowned in gold. "And luckily, there's no waiting-period in this state." Reid walked out with the gun and a box of 9mm ammunition. He followed the onscreen help and loaded it with a shake of the nunchuk.

What now? Back to the hookers? Reid wandered the red-light district of his simulated city, his new gun tucked into his belt. He went into a bar and sat in the back for a while, far from the stage. As he watched a series of strippers come and go onstage, Reid wondered what this all

was. Had he stumbled on a bootleg version of *Simulacrum*, something his dad's programmers had cooked up for their own amusement? He drank another beer and stared at the steady stream of girls. When one he'd already seen stepped back onto the stage, Reid left the bar and walked his character around the dark streets some more. The hookers invited him again as he passed by, but he turned them down and walked on. Reid was suddenly shy and embarrassed. As if they were real. Annoyed with himself for reacting this way to a game, he disposed of his second beer and cracked another.

It was morning again in the simulation. Reid's embarrassment over his discomfort with the hookers in the game had touched a nerve. *I'll show them.* The game had jumped forward to the Mayor's morning routine in his office. Reid noticed he still had the gun he'd acquired the night before. He had no interest in the normal parts of this game after what he'd just seen. That would be too tedious. *Let's push the envelope.* The Mayor's pretty blonde secretary brought him the coffee he'd chosen from an onscreen menu, and he pulled the gun from his belt and blew her head off.

Holy shit! This is nuts. No way that's supposed to happen. The secretary had been flirting with him as she set his coffee on the desk. When she saw the gun, her smile turned to a scream. She looked like a real woman. A cute one. Reid felt a little sorry he'd decapitated her. Like he'd kicked a puppy or squashed a cute little frog with a brick. He looked down at the crumpled body on the office floor. Dark blood formed a widening pool on the tweedy carpet.

Reid moved his character so it stood over the body. In addition to the coffee, she'd been holding a folder in her other hand. Reid opened it to find a schedule of his day. A tour of the port in the morning. The educational part of the game again: this is how a city works. Boring. Lunch with the President of the sim-nation at noon: a little instruction on politics. Then planning

meetings in the afternoon. The city's water supply was inadequate, the people wanted more playgrounds, and the baseball team wanted a new stadium.

Lunch with the President. And there he sat with a loaded gun. Reid had already messed with this game more than he'd planned to. It had held his attention way longer than he'd ever admit to anyone. But not for the reasons printed on the label of the clamshell case. It was what shouldn't be there that fascinated him.

Reid popped up a menu and dialed the clock ahead to a couple of minutes before noon. He stood in front of the TV screen and looked out his office window. Reid almost craned his neck to watch the President's motorcade arrive thirty floors below. Secret Service agents in dark suits and mirror-shades flanked the limo and fanned out into the crowd. They escorted their man into the building, and Reid went out to the lobby to greet them. A couple of agents came up the elevator with the President, but they were at ease. Their responsibility was outdoors; this was a secure building. Reid was able to walk right up to the President when the elevator doors opened, and, instead of shaking his hand, point the gun at his head. The bodyguards reacted immediately, but they were too slow. Reid put two rounds in the President, right between the eyes. Again the shots almost deafened him. *Is that how loud gunshots really are?* He quickly gunned down the Secret Servicemen, who'd rushed to cover and protect the President rather than drawing their guns to protect themselves.

Just like they would in real life. Reid was impressed with the vividness of the blood and gore. The destruction was really hi-rez. Part of the President's face was gone, and the side of his head. Reid could see the wormlike surface of the brain, washed in blood and partly spilled out onto the shiny floor. Someone had gone to a lot of trouble to animate stuff that wasn't even

supposed to be in this game. It almost turned his stomach to look at it, so he went back into his office and looked out the window with the little round hole in it.

Thirty floors below, police SWAT teams were arriving. Dozens of men with assault rifles poured into the building. There was no way to escape, at least not without acquiring superpowers and flying out the window. *This game is over.* As cops in black Kevlar swarmed out of the elevators into the lobby, Reid pointed the controller at his head and pulled the trigger one last time.

This time there was no sound. The point of view on the TV screen shifted and everything went into slow motion. Instead of staying behind his semi-transparent character so it looked like its movements were his own, the view slowly swung around until it came to rest at head-height, looking back at the Mayor.

In ultra slow motion, a bullet from the 9mm in the Mayor's hand went in below the ear. The muzzle flash followed and carried the back of the head off without slowing down. The eyes bulged and went glassy in a face that it took Reid a couple of seconds to realize was his own.

What the hell? How had the game managed to get his face and paste it onto this character? Reid was shocked. It was weird and scary to see his own face on a figure whose brains were still flying upwards away from its head. As he watched the spray of red with horrified fascination, he realized a figure stood behind the Mayor, mostly hidden by the fountain of gore.

The figure stepped out from behind the bloody Mayor. It moved at normal speed even though the rest of the screen was still moving in slow motion. Reid felt as if the figure had stepped out of the TV picture and into his space. Into the rec room where Reid stood stunned in front of the big screen.

“Good evening, Mr. Anderson,” said the long-haired figure in a dress-like black cassock, his voice clear over the room’s surround speakers. *This is insane.* Reid took a breath. The scene behind the figure had frozen into a still frame. The spray of red was an elongated roostertail over the Mayor’s head. The figure looked like a horror movie demon. It stared directly at him with a malevolent smile. Instead of eyeballs the sockets were filled with flames.

“What the fuck?” Reid said aloud in spite of himself. “Are you talking to me?”

“You’re Reid Anderson, are you not?” the demon answered with a slight British accent. “This is 35420 Cardinal Place? This Wii and the game you’ve been playing are both registered in your name.”

Registered? My Dad set the thing up in my name? But that doesn’t explain... “Yeah, okay. But how are you doing this? What the hell are you?”

“You’ve heard the expression ‘ghost in the machine,’ haven’t you? Well now you’ve met one.” The demon’s smile made Reid’s skin crawl.

“I don’t believe in ghosts and demons,” Reid said.

“That’s revealing and quite funny, considering you’ve just made yourself one.” The figure stepped aside and gestured casually toward the Mayor with Reid’s face. The image abruptly came back to full speed. The shot rang through the rec room. Reid jumped at the sound. Onscreen, the spray of debris and blood finally reached the ceiling and wall behind the Mayor, who crumpled to the floor. He rolled so Reid’s own lifeless face stared up at him.

“Nuh-uh. Thanks but no-thanks. This is too damn weird.” Reid dropped the remote and nunchuk, and thumbed the power button of the Wii. Nothing happened.

“Not so fast, Mr. Anderson,” said the demonic figure as it stepped back to center-screen. “We have some important matters to discuss.”

Reid thumbed the power button again, but the machine still behaved as if he hadn't touched it. The demon stepped forward until its face nearly filled the screen. "Reid."

Reid dropped to his knees and lunged for the wall outlet behind the entertainment rack. With a rough jerk he unplugged the surge strip. The TV went dark. On the floor behind him the Wii remote's blue light slowly faded to black.