

DANILO COELHO ALVES

PROJECT
O·T·H·E·R
LOVE, BUSINESS
& VIDEO GAMES



VIEGAS EDITORA

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Chapter 1

Alan

January 13th, 2024

It started like any other day for Alan. He went out for his weekly jog in Gallagher Park, near his house. During his routine, he thought about how much he enjoyed Edmonton's winter in January, and since it had become a habit of his to walk every Saturday morning, he could take the opportunity to see his city in all its natural beauty.

Most of the people he knew didn't appreciate that time of year, when nature's green changed color, the cold took over the air, and the trees lost their leaves, but Alan wasn't like most people. Born in Cartagena, Colombia, Alonso Acevedo Hill grew up learning that, unlike the cold, unbearable heat had no solution. Eight years ago, when he moved to Canada for work, the well-defined seasons amazed him, especially winter, and that feeling persisted to that very day.

It was 10 a.m. when Alan finished his walk. A little past Gallagher Park, he stopped at a small café called Martin's Coffee, as he did every Saturday, and placed his order with the barista behind the counter.

- Hey, Julia! How have you been?
- Hi Alonso! What's it going to be today: cappuccino or latte? - the barista asked.
- Julia, I know you've known me for five years now, but please, just call me Alan. I don't care much for the name Alonso.

Julia giggled.

- I can imagine. I've been serving you coffee for five years, and only recently did you mention your name was Alonso. I felt bad thinking I've been calling you the wrong name this whole time. But I admit, Alan sounds much more natural.
- Today I'd like a cappuccino and a chicken sandwich - Alan replied, ignoring the small talk and answering the original question.
- Yes, sir. It'll be ready in a few minutes.

Alan was blunt, and he felt comfortable with those who got used to that side of him without complaining, and Julia was one of those few people. Being someone not always easy to get along with, Alan didn't make many friends outside of work, but those who knew him closely understood. After all, Alan was only 34 years old, but he'd been through so much in life that he could've been 64, and no one would be able to tell the difference.

Douglas, a friend from another company, once said he had an old man's soul, something everyone who knew Alan would agree with.

Alan began checking his phone when Julia returned with the order.

- Here you go, Alan.
- Thanks, Julia - said Alan, putting his phone away.

Almost immediately, Alan noticed an unusual flyer behind the counter.

- Could I have one of those flyers, Julia?

Julia, clearly excited, said yes, turned around to grab one of the many copies, and handed it to Alan.

- I should've remembered to give you one. It's a small outdoor art exhibit featuring some of my friend's work. It'll be happening in about an hour, at Gallagher Park.

Alan was intrigued, and Julia kept talking.

- She's great, a very talented painter. I tried asking my boss for the rest of the morning off so I could go see the exhibit, but it's a busy day and we're short-staffed.
- Can you tell me her name? - Alan asked, before the barista had to tend to other customers.
- Of course, her name is Laura Wright. You should really go check it out.

Alan nodded as Julia moved on to the next customer. He ate the sandwich, drank his coffee, and the whole time he kept staring at the flyer, which mostly showed photos of some of Laura's paintings. His fascination had a simple reason: the artworks were clearly inspired by video games — a subject Alan was deeply interested in, for many reasons.

It was unusual for him to feel that way, but at that moment, so many thoughts were running through his mind that he had trouble organizing them. Still, the one that wouldn't go away was: he had to see that exhibition.

It was 10:20 a.m. when Alan paid the bill and left the coffee shop. To get back to Gallagher Park and reach the exact location of the exhibition would take about 50 minutes on foot. Normally, at that time, he'd be catching a bus home to prepare lunch, but today, he was stepping outside the routine a bit.

At exactly 11:10, Alan arrived at the exhibition and began looking around. There were a few small tents set up to protect the paintings in case of rain. There were plenty of works on display, but only about five potential customers, including him. Prices varied widely, but none exceeded C\$ 80,00 dollars. From what Alan could tell, not all paintings were hand-made; some were clearly printed images on large paper. Still, the content of the exhibit was impressive.

There were pixel art pieces referencing classic video games and others inspired by well-known or recent indie games, a very interesting collection.

Alan noticed the artist, Laura, sitting off to the side talking to someone who appeared to be a customer. Not far from her, a young man was clearly acting as a salesman, talking to a customer who, moments later, walked off, leaving him mid-sentence. The salesman soon headed toward Alan.

- Hi, did any of the paintings catch your eye? - the man asked.
- Yes, a few.

The guy launched into the kind of overly eager sales pitch that Alan immediately tuned out, only pretending to listen.

- What's your name? - Alan asked.
- My name's Lucas Wright. Nice to meet you.
- Are you the artist's husband? - Alan asked, a bit disappointed.
- No, I'm her older brother.

Alan decided to cut to the chase.

- I'd like you to get me the painting titled Moonstone Island and the one called Virtue's Last Reward. In the meantime, I'll introduce myself to the artist. if you'll excuse me.

Before Lucas could thank him or say anything else, Alan quickly headed towards the woman. As he approached, their eyes met, and for the next ten seconds, which felt like an eternity, they stared at each other until he spoke.

- Nice to meet you. My name is Alan Hill.
- Nice to meet you. I'm Laura Wright - the artist replied.
- Tell me something, how many of these artworks were made with artificial intelligence?

Laura was startled by the question but quickly replied.

- Around 40%. I use the software and then print the image. The idea is to add volume to the exhibition, but the focus is still the work I do myself.
- Only 40%? I'm very impressed with your talent.

Laura thanked him, though her eyes revealed a bit of discomfort toward the man. Alan continued and finally said what he had wanted to tell her since he entered the tent.

- I'll get straight to the point. Laura Wright, I'd like to hire you.

Laura was caught off guard, and all she managed to say was...

- What?

To Alan, he had just found the missing piece he needed to set his most ambitious project into motion.

Chapter 2

Lucas

January 20th, 2024

Lucas tried to rush his sister.

- Laura, the meeting is in 30 minutes. What are you doing?
- I just need to dry my hair and put on my shoes – Laura replied.

He was nervous about the meeting. A week ago, a man named Alan Hill had appeared at his sister's art exhibition and said he wanted to hire her to create graphic designs for a project he was developing. When Lucas heard about it, he interrupted the conversation to inquire further, as he was suspicious of Alan's intentions. Before Lucas could even finish a sentence, Alan countered by saying that he was also looking for someone for sales and negotiations and that Lucas would be perfect for the job, immediately shutting him up. Alan had arranged a meeting with both for the following Saturday.

- Laura, I'll go downstairs and wait for you. As soon as you're ready, I'll call us a cab.
- Okay, Lucas.

Laura's brother went downstairs to be alone and reflect on the situation. It had been three years since he graduated as a Business Major and two years since Laura graduated as an Arts Major. Shortly after, their mother passed away, leaving them with no family other than each other.

Since then, they had struggled financially, and for Lucas, the job hunt had been nothing but one failure after another. Eventually, they decided it would be better for Lucas to help his sister sell her artwork.

Although he had been helping Laura for more than seven months, he still harbored a certain resentment about his situation. When he graduated, he thought he would quickly land a well-paying job in a large company or something similar. He had judged his sister's choice of career as unprofitable, yet now it was her work that was essentially paying the bills, or at least part of them. Their mother had left them a good amount of money after she passed away, but after two years, that money was running out. This made Alan's proposal even more intriguing, a job opportunity for both Lucas and his sister.

However, the way Alan had interacted with him that day, a week ago, still bothered Lucas deeply. It was almost as if Alan had looked at him and thought: "This one desperately needs a job. I'll offer him one to shut him up so he doesn't interrupt my conversation with Laura."

Lucas felt like he was caught in something that had nothing to do with him, but he needed a job. And this was his chance.

- Can you call the cab? – Laura arrived and asked.

Lucas pulled out his phone and requested the ride through an app. The car arrived in less than a minute and took them to the meeting place in West Edmonton Mall. Upon arrival, they went directly to the food court to wait for Alan.

Alan texted Laura, saying he would be about five minutes late. So, they sat down in one of the empty chairs.

- I'm a little nervous about this situation. It might be a scam, – Laura commented.

- Why?

- This whole thing has been strange from the start. A mysterious man walks into the gallery offering jobs for both of us like it's the most normal thing in the world. Plus, I searched for him online and found nothing, he has no social media. It's like the guy doesn't exist.

Lucas had already discussed Alan's lack of social media presence with his sister earlier in the week. It was unusual but not necessarily suspicious, many people kept a low profile online. Lucas himself didn't use social media. But the fact that Alan had no professional presence on the internet? That, Lucas found unacceptable for a businessman, or whatever Alan was.

When he turned to respond to Laura, they both spotted Alan arriving with two other men. To his right was a broad-shouldered man with hazel skin, bald, dressed casually. On the other side stood a man who looked strikingly similar to Alan. Both were wearing suits, with the only thing that seemed to distinguish Alan was that he wore glasses.

They approached Lucas and Laura.

- Hello, Laura, and hello to you as well Lucas! This beside me, is my friend Douglas. He won't be part of today's meeting, but you might see more of him if you decide to work with me. – Alan greeted them and introduced Douglas.

The man named Douglas extended his hand and shook theirs.

- And this here is James, my lawyer. He'll talk with us about the contracts, – Alan pointed to the other man in the suit.

Lucas was startled upon hearing the word "contracts". Whatever Alan wanted from them, he was clearly ready to get straight to business.

After the introduction, Alan bid farewell to Douglas and asked him to return to the mall in two hours to pick them up.

Alan and James handed them the contracts.

The siblings spent about fifteen minutes reading them. Both were seven-month contracts, but the similarities practically ended there.

Lucas's contract was vaguely structured under the role of an Administrative Assistant, it contained clauses but didn't clearly specify what would be required of him. Laura's contract, however, was completely different. It explicitly detailed the work as a Digital Art Designer, outlining the number of monthly deliverables expected, along with confidentiality and data security clauses.

As Lucas had suspected, the salary wasn't particularly high, in fact it was exploitative. They wouldn't earn much per month, but it was still more than they were making from selling Laura's art. However, two things stood out in the contracts.

First, both contracts stated that their work was for a project referred to as "Project O.T.H.E.R." and that they would receive a share of its profits, Laura would get 10% and Lucas would get 5%. Since they knew nothing about the project, this didn't excite them much. After all, there was no guarantee that the project, whatever it was, would generate them any money.

The second thing, however, was far more appealing.

Both contracts included a signing bonus clause. In addition to their monthly salary, they would receive, upon signing, an upfront payment equivalent to three times their salary.

- Clause 9 in both contracts, the signing bonus. Is this for real? – Lucas immediately asked.
- Yes, it's real. You both will receive it today in your account, as long as you agree to all the terms – James confirmed.
- This offer is only valid if you agree to the terms today. My interest in your services won't disappear, but I will revise the contract with a new expiration date and different terms, perhaps ones that won't include such a generous bonus or such a high profit percentage – Alan remarked.

Lucas froze at Alan's words.

Normally, in a negotiation, Lucas would have tried to counter Alan's terms, to tip the scales in his favor. But in this situation, the employer had all the leverage.

He wanted to turn the negotiation in his favor without risking losing the opportunity, but he knew that at that moment, neither he nor his sister had the luxury to negotiate. The cards were in Alan's hands.

Lucas considered raising concerns, but Laura stopped him. She grabbed his hand, looked him in the eye with an expression that seemed to say: "I believe we should take the risk and do this." She nodded reassuringly.

Lucas appreciated his sister's protective nature, but he felt that as her older brother, it should have been his role instead.

- Do we both have to accept the contract? – Laura asked.

- No, not at all. As you can see, your roles are completely different. One can accept while the other declines. However, it's worth noting that if one of you refuses, we will seek other candidates to fill that position next week – the lawyer explained.
- You don't need to feel pressured by each other. Make your own decisions, – Alan reassured them.

Lucas was surprised by Alan's comment, it felt strangely human coming from someone who seemed like such a ruthless negotiator.

- Lucas, I'm going to sign it. But you don't have to if you don't want to... – Laura said.
- I'll sign it too. This is what I want – Lucas agreed.

While both of them signed their contracts, Lucas immediately noticed a nearly malicious, overly smug smile on Alan's face.

- That was much faster than I expected. And I told Douglas to come back in two hours. What am I supposed to do for the next 90 minutes?

Lucas seethed internally at what, to him, was a blatant taunt, but he remained silent.

Alan and James said their goodbyes and left for another part of the mall. Meanwhile, Lucas turned to his sister, who was already calling for a cab.

The ride home was silent. They had just secured contracts that meant more money for them, yet the overwhelming feeling was one of defeat.

They had entered a project whose purpose wasn't clear, and they hadn't questioned anything about it, all for the sake of money.

They arrived home.

- Want to play some video games? I feel like playing that soccer game with cars – Laura asked.

Lucas smiled.

- Co-op or me versus you?
- I feel like playing cooperatively today – Laura replied cheerfully.

Lucas was about to turn on the console when both of their phones buzzed with notifications at the same time. They both picked up their phones to check.

- The signing bonus just hit my account – Lucas muttered.
- Mine too, just now – Laura confirmed.

Suddenly, anxiety crept in.

The money made everything feel real. Yet, at the same time, it erased the sting of defeat they had felt moments before.

Chapter 3

Laura

March 26th, 2024

Laura was restless. It had been two months since, at Alan's request, she had been working in that house that turned into an office, completing her 35-hour work week. In theory, it was supposed to be the headquarters of a new company in the making, but whenever she was there, no one else was, and she spent mornings and afternoons alone. Alan had told her that if she felt uncomfortable, she could work remotely, but she never felt at ease asking for that option.

Laura knew that Alan was in the process of creating and legalizing a company specifically for Project O.T.H.E.R., and that, officially, the company would be called Other Hill Connections. She knew this because Alan had Lucas running all over the place to deal with the bureaucratic processes and requirements that came with setting it up, alongside other miscellaneous tasks.

She still hadn't received any confirmation of what the project actually was, but judging by the requests Alan made of her, she was certain that it had to be a video game, or at the very least, something related. After all, he was asking for pixel-art characters, fictional locations, everything formatted in a way that suggested game design. And yet, she couldn't piece together a clear theory about what exactly the game was supposed to be, as Alan's requests consisted of wildly different things that didn't seem to have any logical connection.

Alan had asked for pixel-art illustrations of Greek gods, ninjas, English knights, fantasy land merchants, modern-day office workers, it was a chaotic mix. Laura could barely imagine how everything fit together. Some requests were character models in 2D, 3D, or isometric views, while others were simply standard illustrations, none of it made sense.

Trying to think outside the box, Laura considered that maybe these things weren't actually connected at all. Since Alan would be stopping by the office that day to check on the progress, she decided she would finally ask him directly what this project was about, and something even more intriguing to her... just who was he.

She had already searched for him on social media, but Alan was a complete ghost. There was absolutely nothing, not a single trace. To Laura, who was highly active online, this only meant one of two things: either someone was a total introvert, or they had something to hide.

As she pondered all this, Alan arrived at the office.

- Hi Laura!
- Hi, boss!
- Stop that, there's no need for such formalities. Just call me Alan, – he requested.
- Okay, Alan.
- Did you see the email I sent you yesterday?
- Yes, I already replied and attached the requested images.
- Thanks! I noticed you took longer than usual with last week's tasks. I don't mind if you use AI-generated sketches to speed up the process – he advised.
- Then why did you hire me if AI solves all your problems? – Laura responded, irritated.

Alan sighed.

- I think there's a misunderstanding here: I didn't just hire you for your artistic talent, but also for your critical eye. I know that even with AI assistance, your work will turn out amazing.

Laura calmed down at his words. She was sometimes astounded by how that same arrogant man could be incredibly kind and thoughtful in certain moments.

- Sorry, I was unnecessarily rude – she said sincerely.

Alan shook his head.

- I have a simple rule in the workplace: Argue as much as you want when we're alone, but never fight or embarrass me in public.

Laura shuddered at the statement.

- Of course! But honestly, it's becoming harder and harder to stay motivated when I have no idea what I'm working in. I know you said you couldn't tell us yet, but what if I try to guess? – she proposed.

Alan smiled, amused by her suggestion.

- Alright, I like the idea. I'll give you five chances, if you guess correctly, I'll tell you.

Laura was surprised by the number of attempts.

- You think I won't get it, don't you? – she asked.
- I'm absolutely sure you won't – Alan replied confidently.

Laura felt like it was a challenge, which excited her.

- Since you technically own all the artwork I produce under the contract, are you selling it to game development companies? – she asked, starting the guessing game.
- No, way off. That was strike one. Try again.
- So you're not selling it, but are planning to use it in partnerships with other companies? – You got about 10% of it right. But you're still far from the truth.

Laura wondered what that 10% meant but kept going.

- You have a game development team, and you're making a multi-game project like 198X, where multiple games exist within a single title. Am I right?
- No. But I also can't say you're entirely wrong.
- You're creating something like Evoland, where a game showcases the evolution of gaming through the years?
- No, but that's an even better attempt than the last one. I'm impressed you know about 198X and Evoland, those are pretty niche indie games. Go ahead, one last try.

Laura was tired at this point and had basically given up, but she decided to take one last shot.

- You're writing a book of game ideas?
- That's one of the dumbest things I've ever heard, a book of ideas? You got tired of playing, didn't you? – Alan teased her.

Laura frowned.

- You're incredibly frustrating.
- And you're terrible at this guessing game – Alan retorted. – Why did you make such specific guesses? Why not just ask something broad like “Is it a book?” or “Is it a game?” You would've at least learned something instead of staying completely in the dark. You missed your chance.
- I didn't realize I could ask broader questions. But let's talk about you now. Who are you, anyway? You never mentioned what you do, where you're from. You aren't in social media and I know nothing about you.

Alan looked taken aback and remained silent for several seconds, seconds that felt like hours to Laura, until he finally spoke.

- You are Laura Samantha Wright, 24 years old, born on June 29, graduated in Arts from the University of British Columbia in Vancouver. You used to sell your artwork both in person and online. You've never had a serious relationship, you love salty foods but dislike sweets, enjoy gaming, photography, and social media.

Laura was shocked by how much he knew about her. Alan continued.

- All of that information I gathered in just five minutes on your Instagram. I know a lot about your life, yet you know nothing about me. I'm protected while you're exposed, and I assure you that with the way technology is these days, it's better to be protected.

Laura was still stunned.

- Are you sure it was only five minutes on my Instagram? I have some pretty great pictures there.

She immediately regretted saying that. It could easily be taken as flirting, especially with someone who already knew so much about her. But then again, she reasoned, if Alan had social media, she would just as easily know as much about him.

Alan smiled at her remark.

- Getting back on topic, you're right. It's unfair for me not to be honest about the project's purpose. So, I'll admit, yes, the first part of the project is indeed a game. But I ask for patience regarding the details.

Laura was surprised. Given what little she knew about Alan, the idea that everything was *just* for a game seemed... underwhelming. She suspected that this was only a small part of something much bigger. But at the same time, she felt relieved.

- Hey, if the first part of the project is a game, why not launch a crowdfunding campaign?
 - Laura suggested.
- That won't be necessary. Anyway, I have to go now. Have a good day, Laura!
- You're pretty full of yourself, aren't you? – she remarked before he left.

Alan was already turning his back when he heard her words. He stopped for a few seconds and then turned back to face her.

- How about a little wager? – he suggested.
- A bet? – Laura asked curiously.
- Yes. In the first week of this game's release, I predict it will sell 120,000 copies.

Laura was shocked by the claim. She had extensive knowledge of video game sales, as gaming was her favorite hobby. That number of sales for an indie game in just one week was typically reserved for only the most popular titles. Alan continued.

- If I don't reach that number in one week, I'll give you C\$10,000.00 dollars.
- Well, I don't have C\$10,000.00 to bet. What do you want if you win? – Laura asked.
- If I hit that sales target, you let me take you on a date.

Laura turned red as a chili pepper, which was extra visible against her pale skin and red hair. She muttered a quiet "What?" but then answered decisively.

- Okay, I accept this bet.