

# Courtney

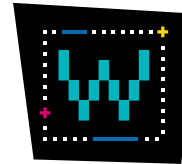
1986

## Changes the Game



## Game Over

⚡ CHAPTER 1 ⚡



*akawakawakawakawakawakawakawaka.* Nonstop electronic sounds pelted Courtney Moore's ears as she leaned into the PAC-MAN arcade game she was playing.

*Wakawakawakawakawakawakawakawaka.*

PAC-MAN munched through a string of tiny dots on-screen, heading for two bright red cherries in the middle of the glowing maze.

Courtney tucked a loose curl back into her scrunchie without letting up on the joystick. She'd been playing for nearly an hour. Her feet were sore and her eyes were starting to swim, but she couldn't take a break now, no way. If she cleared this round, she'd get to Level Nine in PAC-MAN for the first time *ever*.

"Watch out!" yelled Courtney's friend Kip Tomatsu beside her, pointing at INKY, the greenish-blue ghost that was heading right for PAC-MAN. Courtney slammed the joystick right and up, dodging INKY as she zipped through the game's maze, on the run.

Kip pushed his floppy hair out of his face, his eyes

glued to PAC-MAN's every move. "There's a POWER PELLETT on your right!" he shouted.

Courtney throttled right, seeing it—but as she did, BLINKY, the red ghost, came out of nowhere.

*Don't panic,* she told herself, swerving left to avoid BLINKY. *This always happens on Level Eight.*

"This always happens on Level Eight," Kip said.

"I know," Courtney replied, eyeing a large dot a few turns away on the maze. "I just need to get to that POWER PELLETT."

Kip nodded. He understood her strategy: Once she ate the POWER PELLETT, the ghosts would all turn dark blue, and then PAC-MAN could eat *them*, gobbling up points.

"You're almost done!" Kip whispered excitedly.

Courtney smiled, her eyes fixed on the screen. PAC-MAN was Courtney's favorite game, and Smiley's Arcade in the Orange Valley Mall was her favorite place to play. The games were brighter and louder here than on her TV at home, and being in a crowd of kids all trying to beat their high score felt exhilarating, like swimming in a crashing sea of flashing light and electronic sound effects.

"You're gonna get eaten!" Kip yelled, jolting Courtney out of her mini-trance. A trio of ghosts were almost on top of PAC-MAN.

Courtney yanked the joystick left, and PAC-MAN

munched down on the flashing POWER PELLETT. In a flash the ghosts turned dark blue, and Courtney changed direction so that PAC-MAN could crunch them up. As the ghosts disappeared, their point values flew up the screen, where they added to the game total.

"My highest score EVER!" Courtney whooped as the screen lit up with an electronic cascade of colors. Courtney high-fived Kip, pride surging through her. Neither of them had ever reached Level Nine before.

"Courtney!" someone called sharply.

Courtney knew who it was without looking. Sure enough, when she swiveled around, there was her step-sister, Tina, arms crossed and side ponytail bobbing impatiently.

"Time to go," Tina said, pointing at the giant digital clock by the arcade entrance.

"Five more minutes," Courtney pleaded. "I just beat my high score!"

"So?" Tina said, looking baffled.

Before Courtney could reply, PAC-MAN flashed, signaling the start of a new level.

Courtney whirled back to the screen. "Can't talk! Must play!" she yelped, rattling the joystick in a breakneck series of moves.

Tina put her hand on her hip. "We need to go, like,

now," she said. "We're meeting my dad at five thirty."

"One *second*," Courtney replied, switching PAC-MAN's direction. But before she could make her next move, Tina leaned in front of the game screen.

"What are you DOING?!" Courtney shouted.

Tina's dark eyes scrutinized Courtney's hair. "Is that my scrunchie?" She said accusingly, eyeing the bright pink band on top of Courtney's head.

"I couldn't find any of mine this morning," Courtney explained, dodging both Tina and two ghosts converging on PAC-MAN. "This one was in the bathroom."

Courtney kept her eyes glued to the screen. Tina was the Queen of Scrunchies. She had at least twenty organized neatly in rainbow order on her side of the dresser, and there were always a few more on the counter in their shared bathroom. Was it so wrong for Courtney to borrow one when Tina had so many?

"I just got that scrunchie for Christmas! Give it back!" Tina said, blocking the entire screen.

"Get out of the way!" Courtney shouted, but it was too late.

*Waaawaaawaaawaa*WACKWACK, the game wheezed, letting out the sad electronic music that sounded when PAC-MAN died.

PAC-MAN's yellow circle body split open like a banana

peel and disappeared after BLINKY gobbled him up. Courtney yowled in frustration as the words "GAME OVER" flashed on the screen.

"Uh-oh," Tina said, not sounding sad at all. "I guess now we can go."



"Hurry up," Tina called over her shoulder as she sashayed past stores along the mall's second level.

Courtney hustled up next to her. "I am hurrying," she said, looking at her watch. "It's only five twenty-two anyway. I definitely had time to beat that last level."

Courtney turned to look at Tina, but Tina wasn't beside her. Instead, her stepsister had stopped to window-shop at the Gap. As usual when Tina became interested in something, she conveniently forgot they were on a schedule.

Courtney swallowed her frustration. Officially, she and Tina were at the mall "together." What that really meant was that Courtney hung out at the arcade while Tina prowled the mall and drank soda at the food court with her friends.

It hadn't always been this way. When they first met, Courtney was five and Tina was nine and they liked doing stuff together. They rode bikes, traded stickers, and swam in the pool in Tina's backyard. Tina even played My Little Pony with Courtney. When Courtney's mom and

Tina's dad, Mike, got married, Courtney felt like she had a sister.

Things started to change when their little brother, Rafi, was born. Courtney moved into the room Tina had had since she was a baby, and Tina did not like sharing it. She complained that Courtney was messy, and she got irritated if Courtney left even one sock on Tina's side of the room. But sometimes, when one of her favorite songs came on the radio, Tina would start dancing and insist that Courtney join in. Courtney felt like there were two Tina's: an angry Tina and a fun Tina. Courtney never quite knew which one she was going to get.

"Come on!" Courtney called. But now Tina was talking to someone and ignoring Courtney. So Courtney headed for the escalator without her.

Courtney's stepdad's store, D'Amico's Electronics, was on the third level. When she reached the store, Courtney saw a large "After Christmas Sale" sign hanging in the front window. Mike was behind the counter chatting with a lanky young man in a store T-shirt when Courtney entered. A moment later, Tina came in with the girl she had been talking to outside the Gap.

"Kiddos!" Mike greeted them. "This is Ben, the new assistant manager," he said, gesturing at the young man. "Ben, these are my daughters, Tina and Courtney."

"Wait—this is your *sister*?" Tina's friend said as Mike went to help a customer. "I wouldn't have guessed—you look so different."

"We're not *real* sisters," Tina said. "Courtney's my *stepsister*."

Courtney blinked in surprise, her cheeks stinging with embarrassment. She looked away so that Tina wouldn't see how much the comment had hurt her feelings.

Mike came back to the counter. "Okay, kiddos," he said cheerfully. "Since you're still on Christmas break, I thought we could have movie night tonight. Check out what I picked up at the video store at lunch." He pulled two VHS tapes from behind the counter.

Courtney brightened. *The Goonies* was her favorite movie.

"Nerd flick," Tina muttered. Her friend laughed.

"I heard that," Mike said. "And I am not a nerd." He winked at Courtney. "For those of you with different tastes, how about . . ." he slowly revealed the second tape.

Tina smiled. "*Footloose!* Thanks, Dad."

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