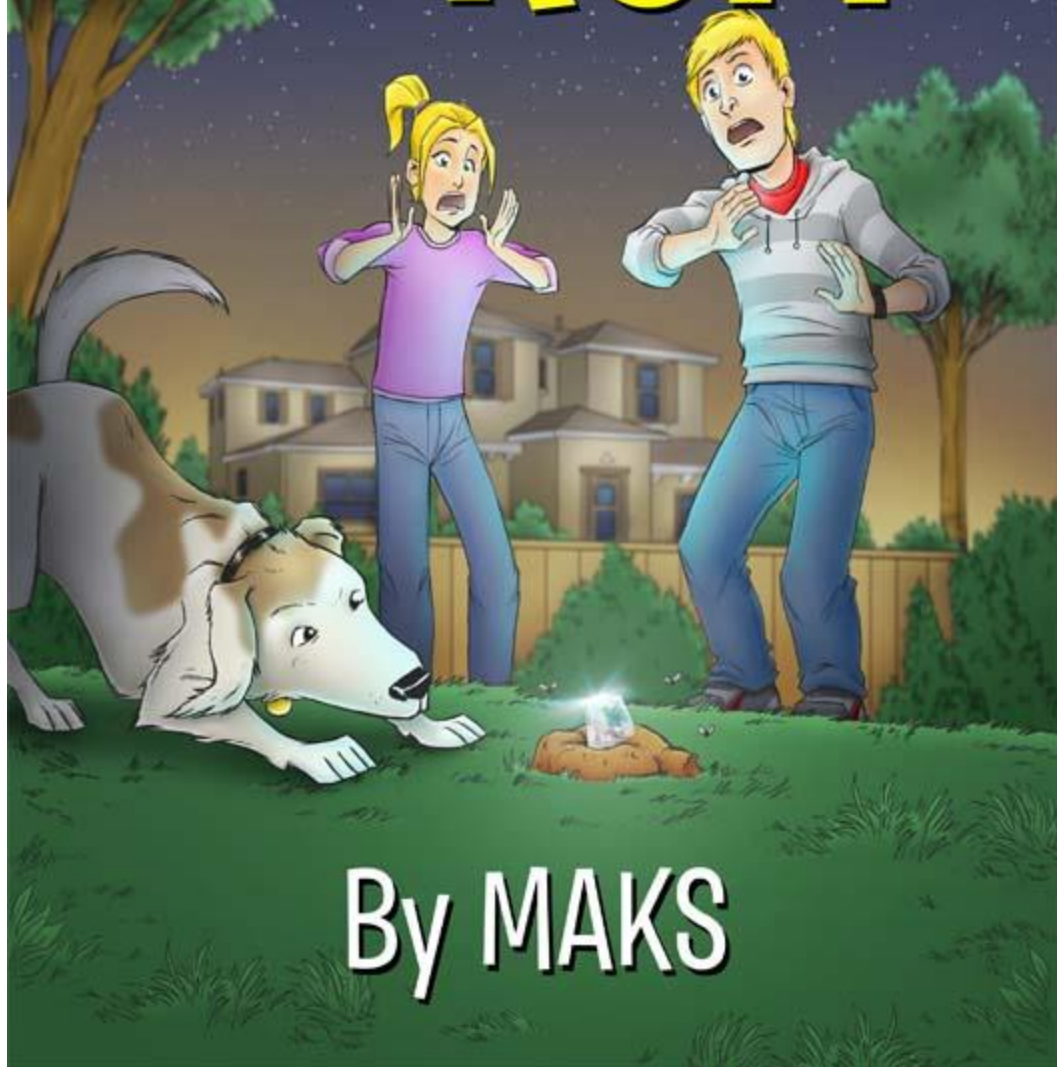


A Kids Opinions Count™ Book

Diamond in the RUFF



By MAKS

Diamond in the Ruff



Book One in the
Kids Opinions Count Series
Agent's of Change
Publishing's
Teen Fiction Series with a
Difference

Written by **MAKS**

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Chapter One



Scott Campbell burst through the back door, dropped his size 13s in the middle of the hallway, and ran into the kitchen to grab something to eat. His sister, Kim, was right behind him.

CRASH... BANG... THUMP...

“OOOOUCH! Scott, you idiot!” Kim yelled, as she tripped over Scott’s runners and stubbed her toe.

“Why don’t you look where you’re going, you spazz?” Scott shouted back at her from the kitchen.

“Mom told you not to leave your junk in the hallway,” Kim lectured loudly. “I’m telling. You’re in trouble.” She threw her gym bag into the hall closet and kicked Scott’s stuff out of the way.

Kim limped her way to the kitchen. She was ravenous. Suddenly, she stopped. Scott was bent over with his head buried in the fridge, searching for something to eat. Kim’s toe still stung, but a smile spread across her face.

As she snuck up behind her brother, Scott roared back at her. “If you tell her I left my gear there, I’ll tell her I saw you necking with Cal Pearson!”

Kim’s smile got even bigger as she leaned over her unsuspecting brother and shrieked right behind his head. “LIAR!”

Startled, Scott lunged forward and hit his head on the fridge shelf. “OOOOWW!” He whined like a baby.

“Payback,” Kim replied. “Gotcha, you jerk.”

“I’m telling Mom you pushed me.” Scott turned around to face her. He was holding his forehead and moaning.

Kim felt a little guilty. “Are you okay?” “Gotcha,” Scott laughed.

Kim was furious, but didn’t want her brother to know. She dialed it back and said, “You’re such a good fake.”

“You’re so right,” Scott replied. He closed the fridge door and complained. “There’s never anything good to eat around here.” The squabble was over. They were on to more important matters – food.

Scott and Kim Campbell attended Spring Valley School. Both were opinionated, independent and drove each other nuts. They were the best of friends and the worst of enemies. Scott and Kim both loved physical and intellectual challenges. You’d never see them compete in the Geek Olympics at school, but they were over-achievers on the

basketball court and anything else they set their minds to.

As Kim checked the cupboard above the sink, Scott gave up on the fridge and joined her. They both noticed and reached for the last Pop-Up Tart.

Scott was suddenly distracted when he spotted a piece of chocolate cake behind the breadbox. He promptly forgot about the Pop-Up Tart and grabbed the cake.

“Hey, give me some!” Kim begged.

“It’s mine,” Scott announced, as he stuffed it into his mouth. “Mmmm... Yummmm...” he teased.

“It’s not that good,” Kim declared.

“Mmmm... This is excellent.” Scott was diverted from his taunting when a speedboat blasted by the end of their dock.

The Campbell home was on a huge property, bordered on the north and south by a six-foot fence, and on the west by a beach. The yard backed onto Clear Water Bay, which was part of Center City Harbor. Naturally, the entire family were avid swimmers, wakeboarders, tubers and skiers. A boathouse was attached to a dock which extended thirty feet into the bay. When the kids were younger, the boathouse doubled as a playhouse. They rarely used it now. It was short of any technology, so there was no reason to be there.

“Look at that idiot!” Scott exclaimed. “He almost hit the dock.” Kim redirected her attention from her snack to the window, but was too late. “I don’t see anything.”

“He’s way down by Alex’s already. One of these days someone’s going to slam right into that dock and it’ll be lights-out for them.”

“People are stupid. Live with it,” Kim shrugged. She turned away from the window, walked to the fridge and pulled out a juice box. As she stabbed the box with the plastic straw, she wondered out loud, “Are you sure the idiot driver wasn’t Alex?”

“No way. He’s not that brainless,” Scott replied loyally.

Alex Black was Scott’s best friend. They’d known each other since pre-school. Alex was one of those kids who could be smart and dumb at the same time. He could figure out anything to do with technology, but when it came to real life, he was mostly a moron. Alex was infamous for acting first and not even bothering to think later. Scott, on the other hand, was conservative in comparison, just like Chris, his dad. Scott usually thought about consequences before he acted, unless he was being influenced by Alex – or was engaged in verbal battles with Kim.

“You shouldn’t talk about Alex like that. Do you want me to tell you what I think about your ugly friend Amy?”

“Shut your pie hole, Scott,” Kim replied. “Don’t you mean ‘cake hole’?”

Kim gave him the evil eye. Scott laughed. “Ooooh, the evil eye. Scaaaary.” Scott covered his eyes and turned his head. “MUST... LOOK... AWAY... ARGHHH...”

Kim decided not to respond. Disappointed, Scott turned his attention to the backyard where he spotted Max, their white Russian wolfhound. He wondered why Max was walking funny. A few seconds later, he knew the answer.

“Kim, something’s wrong with Max. It looks like he’s trying to take a dump but nothing’s coming out. I think he’s all bunged-up again.”

“The word is constipated,” Kim advised, as she moved back to the window to see

what he was talking about. “Maybe he ate something he shouldn’t have. He’ll force it out eventually.”

Scott wasn’t so sure. “Where’s Mom?” he asked. “She knows what to do.”

“She’s obviously not home from work yet. Duuuuh...”

Scott ignored Kim and decided to see if he could help Max. As he headed toward the patio door, he heard the garage door open, and then the sound of a vehicle door being slammed shut. Someone was definitely home.

SLAM...

That was the door from the garage into the house. BANG...

That sounded like something being dropped onto their mom’s desk in her home office.

“Mom must be home,” Kim declared. “Sounds like she’s mad.” Kim was right – Tommie was upset. “I swear, I’m going to make that Buck Huckster pay me what he owes me,” she muttered to herself. “MOM!” Scott shouted at the top of his lungs. He wanted her immediate attention.

“WHAT?” Tommie bellowed back. “Max looks sick,” Scott replied.

Tommie quickly switched gears from frustrated employee to over-protective mom. She rushed out of her office, down the hallway, and into the kitchen.

“Who’s sick? What are you kids talking about?”

Scott pointed out the patio door to the backyard. “Max. It looks like he’s having a hard time pooping. He needs help.” Tommie and Scott rushed into the backyard, leaving the patio door open. Kim watched the action from the kitchen.

“Oh man, I hope I don’t have to give him an enema again,” worried Tommie, as she and Scott reached Max. She could see Max had passed some waste. It had blood in it. Tommie called out, “Kim, get me the phone. I need to call the vet.” Kim grabbed the kitchen’s cordless phone and ran it out to Tommie, who immediately made the call.

RING... RING...

“Come on. Where are they?” RING...

“Answer the darn phone!” RING... RING...

“Dr. Chester’s office. Lisa speaking.” “Dr. Chester, please.”

“I’m sorry. He’s with a patient.”

“Lisa, it’s Tommie Campbell. Max has a lot of blood in his stool. I need to speak with Dr. Chester – right away.”

The vet assistant was familiar with Max’s waste disposal problems. “Bring Max in. I’ll make sure Dr. Chester is available to take a look at him.”

“I’ll be there in ten minutes,” Tommie said, as she handed the phone back to Kim.

Max was in pain and having difficulty walking.

“Scott, let’s get him loaded into the van,” Tommie ordered. “We’ll have to carry him. Kim, make sure there’s nothing in our way. We’ll bring him through the house.”

Scott and Tommie hoisted Max up into their arms, sharing the burden of his one hundred pounds. Max was more than three feet tall. His long legs and tail weren’t easy to keep in check. Kim walked in front, clearing the way through the patio door, the kitchen, down the hallway, and into the garage. She opened the sliding door of the van so Scott and Tommie could place Max inside. Scott secured Max into his doggie seat-belt.

As the kids belted in, Tommie started the engine, backed out of the garage, and goosed it down the driveway. Suddenly, she saw something out the corner of her eye.

“Oh, crud!” Tommie exclaimed, as she cranked the steering wheel to the left, swerving the back end of the van to the right. Thank goodness for seatbelts!

SCREEEECH...

She slammed on the brakes, narrowly missing their elderly neighbor, Mrs. McDuffy.

Tommie lowered the driver’s side window and called out, “Sorry, Mrs. McDuffy!”

Mrs. McDuffy just smiled and waved. She was used to her neighbors. They were always in a hurry.

Tommie felt the need to explain. “Max is sick and I have to get him to the vet – right away.”

“No need to explain. I hope he feels better soon.”

“Thanks,” Tommie replied. She raised the window and backed out onto the road.

Scott was upset. “Come on, Mom. Hurry up!”

“What do you want her to do – run people over?” Kim snapped. “It’s okay, Mom. You don’t have to drive like a maniac. We’re all worried, but I’d like to get there alive!”

“Would you two just keep it down and let me concentrate.” Max’s body began to shake. “AWOOOO...” he howled. Tommie stomped on the gas. She made it to the vet in less than five minutes – half the time it usually took.

Chapter Two



Dr. Chester and Lisa rushed into the parking lot to meet them. Max was quickly loaded onto a gurney. Tommie and the kids ran ahead to open the doors.

As Lisa pushed Max into the animal hospital, Dr. Chester walked alongside and began examining him. He gently touched Max's belly, feeling for anything unusual. Max stayed quiet but looked the doggie equivalent of miserable.

Dr. Chester instructed Lisa to take Max directly to X-ray. He then turned his attention to the Campbells. He could see they were worried. "Scott, Kim, Mrs. Campbell, please take a seat in the waiting room. This will only take a few minutes. Max will be as good as new before you know it. We'll get to the bottom of this," he promised, as he hurried into the X-ray room and closed the door.

Kim burst into nervous laughter. "Bottom of this – get it?" she said, as she plunked herself down on one of the waiting room chairs and began to shuffle her feet.

"Kim!" Scott exploded. "That's so ignorant!" He sat down across from her.

"Just trying to cheer you guys up," Kim retorted. "Besides, Dr. Chester said it first. I just repeated it."

Tommie rolled her eyes. "So, since we're in a vet's office, that would make you what? a parrot? a copy cat?"

"Mom, you and Scott have no sense of humor."

"She gave birth to you, didn't she?" Scott jibed. "You can't get much funnier than that."

Kim stuck her tongue out at him.

Tommie was pretty liberal when it came to her kids, but every now and then she felt the need to intervene. It was the adult thing to do. "Okay, you two. Can it."

The kids laughed. "Can it? You are funny, Mom," Kim said.

"AWOOOO..." Max's howl worked as a reality check. They sobered immediately and waited in silence.

Before long, Dr. Chester entered the waiting room. "Mrs. Campbell, Kim, Scott, please come with me," he said. They jumped to their feet and followed the vet. Once in Dr. Chester's office, they saw Max lying on a mat and wagging his tail, looking good as new.

"Just like I promised," Dr. Chester announced. "Max is fine." The three rushed over to hug their contented pet.

Dr. Chester walked to his desk and picked up a clear plastic baggie with something in it. He held it up to the light and explained, "Right after I took the X-ray, Max passed this

rock. This was causing the blockage and bleeding.” He handed the bag to Scott and said, “I thought you might want a souvenir.”

Tommie looked startled. Dr. Chester read her mind. “I rinsed it off.”

“Oh,” Tommie said, feeling embarrassed.

Scott took the bag and looked through the plastic at the rock. It was the size of an alley marble. “Wow. This is huge,” Scott declared.

“Let me see,” Kim said, as she snatched the bag from Scott and examined the rock. “Man, you’re right. Ouch, poor Max! That’s a weird rock. It looks like a crystal or something,” she said, as she handed the bag back to Scott.

“Are you sure he’ll be okay? Are there any more rocks inside him?” Scott asked.

“The X-ray is clear. Really, Max will be fine.”

“He’s never eaten rocks before,” Kim commented.

“You’ll want to make sure he doesn’t eat another one,” Dr. Chester replied. “And you’ll need to find out where this one came from. It must have gotten into his system within the last twelve hours. Can you retrace his whereabouts?”

Scott offered his analysis. “That’s easy. Mom fed Max this morning and he’s been outside in the backyard ever since. Before that, he was sleeping in the game room.”

“So, no visitors, no walks – nothing out of the ordinary?” Dr. Chester asked.

“No, nothing,” Kim said. “I’ll search the yard and see if there are any more crystals like this, but I doubt it.” She paused for a second and then frowned. “You don’t think it was in his dog food, do you?”

“Are you feeding Max the high-fiber formula Hoppy Pet Food I prescribed?” Kim nodded.

“Then I can’t see how,” replied Dr. Chester. “I understand the quality control on that food is excellent. And they use only the finest ingredients. Hoppy is quickly becoming the most popular pet food in the entire world. As a matter of fact, I just read in the Pet Food Quarterly, that it’s captured thirty percent of the \$50 billion pet food market. It’s an amazing success story. The company is going public next week and I plan to invest.” He seemed really pumped about Hoppy Pet Food.

Tommie looked guilty. “I have a confession to make,” she blurted out. “I didn’t just feed him the Hoppy Pet Food this morning. Since I only had one can left, I borrowed some dog food from our neighbor, Mr. Klein. I know I shouldn’t have, but I didn’t think a different brand would kill him.”

“Well, it almost did,” Scott announced.

“Just be grateful that Max is all right,” Dr. Chester declared. The family nodded in agreement. “And make sure you stick to his diet. Speaking of which, I think you should tell your neighbor about the crystal.”

“Mr. Klein gives me the creeps,” Kim commented. “Yeah, Mom. I think he’s strange,” Scott added.

Tommie was embarrassed by her kids’ comments. “He’s a very nice man and he’s the only close neighbor who owns dogs.”

“Those aren’t dogs – they’re people-eaters!” Scott exclaimed. “Scott’s right, Mom. Dobermans are really vicious,” Kim added. Dr. Chester interjected. “Actually, Dobermans make very good pets. They almost never eat their owners – only their neighbors.” Tommie chuckled. Scott and Kim were embarrassed now.

Max decided it was time to go home. He stood up and walked over to the door. “It

looks like he's trying to tell us something," Scott said. "Can we take him home now?"

"Sure, he'll be fine." Dr. Chester walked over to a shelf, reached up and pulled down a case of Hoppy Pet Food. He handed it to Scott and said, "Don't forget. Only feed him this."

Dr. Chester escorted the Campbells and Max to the van. This time, Max jumped into the van himself. They all got buckled in and were soon on their way home.

Chapter Three



Scott cuddled up with Max on the backseat. Kim sat in front with Tommie.

As Tommie pulled out of the parking lot and onto the street, she muttered to herself, “I guess I’ll have to tell Mr. Klein about the food.”

“He’s weird, Mom,” Scott said. “Don’t go over there. Just phone him.”

Tommie rolled her eyes and made a mental note to keep her thoughts to herself – then she spoke out loud. “No, I’ll drop by his house on the way home.”

“No way. I’m not going anywhere near that strange old man,” Kim said.

“Ditto for me, Mom. He freaks me out. I think he’s a Nazi,” Scott added.

“Where did you get that idea from?” Tommie asked.

“I watched a show on The Historical Channel last night. It said war criminals are hiding out all over the world. They were looking for a Nazi that looked just like Mr. Klein. They said you never know when you might run into one – it could even be your neighbor.”

“Scott, do you believe everything you see on TV?” “This was a documentary – those are all factual, Mom.” “They’re fact, mixed with a little bit of sensationalism, other- wise, no one would watch them,” Tommie explained. “What if Scott’s right, Mom?”

“You two have vivid imaginations. Just because the man might be from Germany, he’s old, he keeps to himself, he owns Dobermans, and according to some TV show – war criminals could be living next door to us – you think he’s a Nazi. Do you two know what Nazis are?”

“Sure. Hitler’s posse,” Scott replied.

“Hitler’s posse,” Tommie repeated. “Now that’s a new way of describing them.” She was annoyed at his flippant comment and glared at him through the rearview mirror. Scott saw Tommie’s evil eye. Unlike Kim’s, he took hers seriously. Scott decided to change the subject.

“Mom, we had a speaker in World Issues class today. The girls thought he was hot stuff, even Kim.”

“Shut-up, Scott,” Kim barked.

“So what was so special about the guy?” Tommie asked.

“He was really cool. He said he worked with the FBI to monitor Internet breaches in security and violations of the Privacy Act.” “Wow, that’s pretty heavy stuff,” Tommie replied. “What was he telling you kids?”

“He said that we need to know about Internet spies,” Scott explained. “He told us

about how spies develop search engines to watch for key words, and then they do a trace to the source of the query.”

“I don’t understand,” Tommie admitted. “Can you give me an example?”

Scott thought for a moment. “Okay, let’s say I type in ‘Extremo Cassette Hubs’ on Zoomogle search. If Extremo’s competitor had one of these spy systems, they’d know it was me that was interested in cassette hubs, and they’d send marketing information on their product to my email box.”

“So, net-marketers are going to be big pains, just like tele- marketers,” Tommie replied.

“That’s what it sounds like,” Kim agreed.

“Great. That certainly explains it,” Tommie said. “Explains what?” the kids asked in unison.

“I was looking at cars on the Internet last week, and from out of the blue, I got pop-ups and emails from luxury car dealers. I’ll bet they have this Internet spy capability.”

“Speaking of spies, maybe Mr. Klein is a spy,” Scott offered. Tommie was tired of the ‘Mr. Klein theories’. She decided to focus the kids on another topic. “So, guess what we’re having for supper tonight?”

The kids were never excited about Tommie’s cooking. “We have no idea, Mom,” Scott answered.

Tommie chuckled and watched for their response. “We’re having tuna surprise tonight.”

“NOOOO!” Scott and Kim both moaned.

“Does everything you cook have to be a surprise?” Kim asked. “And do you have to sneak healthy stuff into it? You put oatmeal and flaxseed in the bean surprise last night, didn’t you.”

“If you don’t like what I serve, why don’t you and Scott make dinner tonight? You can cook something you made in Home Economics.”

“It’s called Practical Arts, Mother,” Scott replied.

“You don’t want Scott to cook, Mom. He almost burned down the school.”

Tommie shot another look in the rearview mirror. Scott caught it and quickly looked away. “Why haven’t I heard about this before?” she asked.

Kim was quick to expose Scott’s secret. “Scott did such a good job of explaining his stupidity to the teachers, they decided not to tell you.”

Tommie suspected that Kim was exaggerating. She knew if Kim had something on Scott, she’d be sure to take advantage. “I can’t believe you didn’t rat him out,” Tommie said. Then it dawned on her. “Ah! So, what was he blackmailing YOU with?”

Now Kim was on the defensive. “He doesn’t have anything on me, but he always threatens to tell you he’s seen me kissing some guy. Today, it was supposedly Cal Pearson. But I’m not kissing any guys – really, Mom.”

Tommie laughed. “Good try, Scott. Even I find that hard to believe about Kim.”

“You’re right. No guy in his right mind would kiss Kim.” Scott pulled away quickly as Kim swung a punch in his direction. “I guess I’ll have to dream up some other Scottstortion.”

“Ugh. Please spare us!” Kim and Tommie both groaned. “So, Scott, tell me about this fire,” Tommie probed.

“We were making cookies. I was heating up some butter on the stove and I accidentally spilled a bunch of oatmeal on the round thing.”

“You mean the element?”

“Yeah, Mom, the element. Anyway, the oatmeal flakes caught on fire really fast – but they burned out right away. No biggie.”

“What a waste of good oatmeal.”

Scott was quick to respond. “Mom, you shouldn’t make us eat that stuff. Oatmeal is dangerous! It’s flammable!”

“Inflammable,” Kim corrected her brother’s grammar. “We could combust!” Scott exclaimed.

“Yes, you could spontaneously combust. I love the logic, Kiddo,” Tommie chortled. “If you’re that worried, I would suggest you drink lots of water with tonight’s tuna surprise.”

“GROSS, Mom!” Scott said. “I think I’d rather eat Max’s dog food.”

Finally, Tommie pulled into their garage. As they got out of the van, Max nearly knocked everyone down in the process. He was glad to be home. Tommie opened the back hatch and took a can of dog food from the case that Dr. Chester had given her. “Scott, could you take the rest of this inside? I’m going to Mr. Klein’s.”

“Hope you make it back all right,” Scott said.

“I’ve had enough of this, Scott! You take the food over to Mr. Klein,” Tommie ordered, as she held out the can.

“No way!”

“Chicken?” Kim teased. “Cluck, cluck, cluck. Wait until I tell everyone what a fraidy-cat you are.”

“That’s enough, you two! Scott, do I have to go over and hold your hand while you ring the doorbell?”

Scott felt a little silly. “All right. I’ll go. But if I don’t come home in five minutes, call the cops.”

Tommie glared at Scott, as he took the can from her and marched off to confront his fears.

“I have to pick up some special ingredients for tonight’s dinner, Kim,” Tommie said, as she removed the case of dog food from the van. “Can you take this in? I’ll be right back.”

Kim took the case from Tommie and she and Max headed into the house. Kim went straight to the kitchen, put the dog food away, and grabbed a juice box from the fridge.

Max went downstairs to the game room for a snooze. He’d had a stressful day. Little did he know, there was more to come.

Chapter Four



Kim sucked the juice box dry and thought about the crystal. She went outside to search for others.

Meanwhile, Scott walked up his neighbor's driveway. "Man, even his house is freaky," he muttered. Mr. Klein lived in one of the first grand homes built in the county, but Scott and his friends thought it looked like a house from a horror movie – the kind that serial killers, evil spirits, or Nazis would live in.

Scott walked up to the front door. Summoning up all his nerve, he pushed the doorbell.

DIIIIING – DOOOONG – DIIIIING... Bark... Bark... Bark...

Shivers shot up and down Scott's spine. The Dobermans! He wanted to run home, but he couldn't move. He was frozen, like a statue.

Bark... BarK... BARK...

Scott could tell the dogs were getting closer. His grip on the can tightened – he could use it for protection if he had to. He waited for the door to open.

"Zetz'en zee zikh!" came a shout from behind the door. CREEEAK...

The barking stopped and the door opened. Mr. Klein stood before Scott. His dogs stood on either side of him.

"Scott Campbell. What a surprise. To what do I owe this visit?" Scott froze. He didn't even look at Mr. Klein. He just stared at the dogs.

Mr. Klein dismissed the Dobermans with a single hand movement. They retreated out of sight.

Scott felt a little less scared. "Mr. Klein, my mom asked me to come over."

"Are you in need of more dog food?"

"No, actually I'm here to tell you about your dog food, and to give you one of our cans in return," Scott answered. He held out the Hoppy Pet Food can.

As Mr. Klein reached toward the can, his sleeve rode up, revealing tattooed numbers on the inside of his forearm. Immediately, Scott associated the numbers with World War II.

'Oh, man,' Scott thought to himself, 'he was a prisoner of war, not a Nazi.'

Mr. Klein noticed Scott staring at his arm. He pushed the sleeve up even further and showed Scott the entire number. He rubbed his arm and proudly explained, "It was my number for the Senior Iron Man Competition. This ink is hard to wash off."

Scott's eyes lit up. "Senior Iron Man? You were in the Senior Iron Man? The one that was just in Hawaii?" Scott wasn't scared anymore.

“Yes, I go in it every year.” “Awesome.”

“I hear you and your sister are quite athletic,” Mr. Klein remarked.

“How do you know that?”

“Your mother and I chat. She’s been nice enough to collect my mail when I go on trips.”

“I didn’t know that,” Scott admitted.

Mr. Klein reached for the pet food again. He looked at the can, and instantly, the blood drained from his face. He pulled back his outstretched arm. “You keep that. I prefer Hot-Dog Dog Food for my Dobermans.” He paused for just a second. “Scott, I think…”

Scott suddenly remembered he needed to tell Mr. Klein about the crystal.

Scott interrupted Mr. Klein and blurted out, “I need to tell you that my dog ate a crystal today. We think it might have been in his dog food. Mom thinks it might have been in the can you gave her. We’re just telling you because we don’t want your dogs getting sick, too. We’re going to investigate and find out where it came from.”

“A crystal in the food?” Mr. Klein said, not sounding all that surprised. “Well, it’s good that you are trying to find where it came from. What do you know so far?”

Scott told Mr. Klein the story of Max and the mysterious crystal. When he was finished, Mr. Klein assured Scott that it was unlikely the crystal would have been in the Hot-Dog Dog Food. “I have used this pet food for years, and have never had any trouble with it. But tell your mom, Scott, that I strongly advise HER to change pet food brands.”

“But our vet told us we should only feed this brand to Max.” “Scott, tell your mom, I think she should find an alternative.” Scott realized Mr. Klein was serious. “Okay, I’ll tell her what you said.”

Mr. Klein got the response he wanted and then changed the subject. “I will be travelling again. Would it be possible for someone in your family to collect my mail?”

“Where are you going? Another competition?”

“No, I’m afraid it’s a business trip,” Mr. Klein answered. “What do you do, Mr. Klein?”

“I go where I am needed, Scott,” Mr. Klein replied. “I’m like a troubleshooter.”

“SWEET! Don’t worry, Mr. Klein, I’ll take care of your mail. Have a nice trip – wherever you’re going.”

“I will, Scott. And if there is ever anything I can do for you and your family, please let me know.” As Mr. Klein closed the door, he added, “Good luck solving the crystal mystery.”

Scott couldn’t wait to get home to tell Kim and Tommie about his conversation with Mr. Klein. When he entered the house, he called out, “Kim! Mom!” No answer. ‘Where is everyone?’ he wondered. Scott tried again. “MOM! KIM!” He still didn’t get a response, so he decided to go to his room and start on his own crystal research. Scott had a theory and wanted to check it out.

Scott took pictures of the crystal with his 3-D digital camera. It was a special beta that his dad got from a European supplier. For the hundredth time, Scott realized he was lucky to have a dad in the computer biz. High tech firms like Addictive Games, MogulChip and ReallySoft, were always sending beta products for the family to test out and review. Their house was jammed full of the latest and greatest.

Scott addressed an email to a well-known scientist at The Spaced Channel, and typed a note asking for his assistance in identifying the crystal. Scott explained that the crystal

had been found in Max's poop. He added that he knew there had been a meteorite shower recently and asked if the crystal could be a piece of meteorite. Scott attached the digital images to the email and pressed, Send.

While he waited for a reply, Scott clicked on the desktop icon for 'Angels of Doom'. He could barely keep his mind on the game. "Crud! I'm dead again!" he mumbled to himself, as CGI blood dripped down the monitor. All he could think about was the crystal and what the scientist from The Spaced Channel might tell him.

As Scott played crappy, Kim played with crap.

Chapter Five



After an exhaustive search, Kim had no luck finding any other crystals in their yard. She decided it was time to move on to her next research project.

Kim walked into the house and picked up Max's food dish. She placed a strainer in the kitchen sink and dumped the leftover dog food into it. Kim held the strainer under running water and mashed the food with a spoon while she looked for other pieces of crystal. She didn't find any.

Kim now turned her attention to the other end of Max's digestive system. Kim was about to do the unthinkable.

Armed with rubber kitchen gloves, a wooden spoon, the strainer and dishwashing detergent, Kim walked outside to a large plastic garbage can that was sitting by the garden hose at the side of their house. Kim then began searching the backyard for doggie doo. Whatever she found, she put into the garbage can. When she was finished, she added water to the can, stirred it up with the wooden spoon, and made a disgusting sludge. "Now, where can I pour this stuff out?" she asked herself. Kim looked around the yard. A grin spread across her face. "Oh, this is just too good," she giggled.

Kim dragged the garbage can over to Scott's BMX bike, that was propped against the house. She poured the sludge through the strainer. Kim was disappointed when she didn't find any crystals in the strainer, but still pleased with what she was doing – creating a sludge puddle beside the bike.

Kim squirted dishwashing detergent into the garbage can, poured in some water, and swooshed it around. She added the sudsy water to the puddle. Next, she rinsed the can out and put it back where she'd found it. She could be such a good girl... sometimes... Then she ran into the house and called to Scott.

"Scott! Are you home?" "What do you want?"

Kim chuckled to herself, then shouted back, "I think I know what happened!"

"What? With Max?" Scott was still on the computer in his upstairs bedroom.

"Yes, sort of !" she paused for effect. "When the guy stole your bike, he must have dropped the crystal."

Scott's BMX bike was his pride and joy. Kim knew he'd have to check this out. She thought it would be hilarious if Scott stepped in the cruddy water – perfect payback for being such a jerk about Cal Pearson.

"My bike!" Scott screamed, as he ran down the stairs and bolted by Kim into the backyard. Kim followed closely behind. She couldn't wait to see his reaction when he

stepped in the puddle.

Scott raced to the spot where he kept his bike. As he took the corner, he lost his footing in the stinky, sudsy water. Both legs flew out from under him. For a brief moment in time, he was stretched out, parallel with the ground. Then...

SPLAT...

Scott landed flat on his back – beside his bike – right in the middle of the puddle.

Kim was as surprised as Scott was – this was way better than she'd planned. She howled with laughter.

Scott was furious. He grabbed the garden hose, adjusted the spray nozzle to super-strong, and fired. Kim was a sitting duck.

"Scott! STOP!" Her screams just encouraged him to continue spraying. No matter where she went, there was no escape from the cold water. Each time she exposed herself from behind a tree or shrub, trying to make her way to the safety of the house, Scott fired. The sludge puddle was growing into a lake.

As Scott chased Kim around the yard, Tommie returned from the grocery store. She took her purchase to the kitchen and placed it into a bin in the fridge. Tommie could hear yelling in the back- yard, but chose to ignore it – until she heard Kim's pleas for mercy.

"I give up! Cut it out, Scott! Please!"

Tommie headed out the patio door – right into the path of Scott's water assault. Scott shouted, "Whooops!" at the same time Tommie screamed, "What the...?!"

All three of them were now drenched.

Kim waited for Tommie to react. 'Scott's dead meat,' she thought. She watched as Tommie marched toward Scott.

Tommie was fuming. "Scott! What do you think you're doing?" Scott threw down the hose and tried to beg his way out of trouble. "Mom, I can explain. Kim made me fall in that stinky puddle of water."

Tommie followed his gaze until she spied the apparent source of the trouble. As she took a step toward it, she lost her footing. It looked as if she was taking her first step onto an ice rink. Her arms and legs flailed desperately as she struggled to maintain her balance. Tommie failed – her feet slipped right out from under her.

PLOP...

Tommie hit the water, butt first.

Kim now had two unsuspecting victims.

It was then, that Tommie noticed something wasn't quite right. It wasn't only that she was sitting in water, but that the water had a particularly pungent odor. "What is that awful smell?"

"It's stinky water. I told you – Kim put it there. She made me fall in it. I was just paying her back."

Tommie could hear Kim chuckling. As she got up out of the water, Tommie grabbed the hose that lay on the ground between Scott and the puddle, then grabbed Scott by the arm. Scott knew that resistance was futile. Tommie pulled him around the corner and out of Kim's sight.

Kim was delighted that Scott was catching heck from Tommie. She decided to sneak over and listen in. Kim approached quietly and slowly so she wouldn't be detected.

"Okay, Scott," Tommie whispered, as she rinsed herself off with the hose. "It's time

we joined forces and went after Kim.”

“Oh, I got her pretty good already, Mom.”

“She deserves worse than that,” Tommie replied. As she explained her plan to Scott, Tommie hosed him off as well.

Kim was about thirty feet away when Tommie appeared from the side of the house and surprised her. “Kim! You and I need to have a little talk.”

“Where’s Scott, Mom?”

“Never mind your brother. Come here, Young Lady.”

Now, Kim realized that SHE was dead meat. “I don’t think so,

Mom. What do you want?”

“Come here right now, Kim, or there’ll be serious consequences.”

Kim tried to explain. “Mom, it wasn’t my fault.” “Kim, I asked you to come here.”

“Mom, I know you – you’ve got some plan. You’re going to get me in that water somehow. I’m not coming. Where’s Scott?”

Scott was busy following Tommie’s orders. He had entered the side door that led into the garage, grabbed an old ski-rope and cut through the house. He tiptoed through the patio door and, very quietly, snuck up behind Kim.

While this was happening, Chris arrived home from work. He walked into the kitchen, expecting a quiet family dinner, but found no one there. “Hello? Anybody home?” he called out. Then, he looked through the window to the backyard and spotted Scott with the ski-rope. He flung open the patio door. “Scott, what are you doing with that rope?” Chris shouted, just as Scott lassoed Kim.

“Dad! HELP ME!” Kim screamed. Chris watched in disbelief, as Scott ran the end of the rope over to Tommie. Scott and Tommie tugged at the rope. It tightened around Kim, like a lariat around a calf. Kim struggled desperately to get free.

Chris saw the two dragging Kim toward them. He ran outside to help her. Chris grabbed the rope ten feet in front of Kim, just as Tommie and Scott put all their power into a mighty heave.

SPLAT... SPLASH...

Scott and Tommie had pulled Chris and Kim into the mess. Victims three and four. The entire family was now wet and wild. Chris couldn’t wait for the explanation.

Chapter Six



“Does someone want to explain what’s going on?” Chris asked, as he pushed himself up from the disgusting puddle. He held his hand out to Kim and helped her up. They both shook off as much of the water as they could.

Tommie and Scott were in shock... and momentarily speech- less. “I’m waiting...” Chris said.

“First, let me rinse you two off,” Tommie ordered. She hosed Chris and Kim down.

“Enough! That water is freezing!” Chris exclaimed. “What the heck just happened here?”

Scott wanted to tell his side of the story first. “Dad, it all started when Kim made me fall into this water.”

“Dad, he fell in all by himself,” Kim explained. “You made me!”

“Did not!”

Chris shook his head and started to walk toward the patio door. “Oh no you don’t!” Tommie shouted. She wasn’t about to let the family traipse their wet and grungy bodies through the house. “We’re all stripping down in the laundry room first.”

“Scott didn’t have to,” Kim complained. She had already figured out that Scott must have snuck through the house, filthy clothes and all, in order to lasso her.

“Special circumstances,” Tommie countered. “Now, everyone to the laundry room.”

“Fine,” Chris said. “But I still want to know how come we all ended up in this mess. And why does this water smell so funky?”

“Let’s get cleaned up and then we’ll hear the full story,” Tommie insisted. The family made their way to the laundry room and stripped down to their underwear. They threw everything into the washing machine and headed to their bathrooms. Before long, they were squeaky clean and smelling ‘Zesty’.

They regrouped in the kitchen, hungry for supper. As they got things ready, Tommie filled Chris in on Max’s visit to the vet. Scott added his theories about the mysterious crystal and the recent meteor shower, and summarized the contents of his email to The Spaced Channel. When Scott was finished, Kim remained silent.

“I suspect there’s still more to the story, isn’t there, Kim?” Chris said, turning his attention to her. “Okay, spill it.”

Kim reluctantly told the family about her crystal research. She described how she had strained the leftover dog food, and how she had searched Max’s doodoos. Kim also tried to explain away Scott’s unfortunate accident as just that – an accident. No one believed

her.

“I hope this has taught you a lesson, Kim,” Tommie lectured. Kim looked a little clued-out. “What goes around, comes around,” Tommie explained, as she turned the oven on high and popped potatoes inside.

Chris could see that Kim felt bad and decided to change the subject. “All this talk about dog food is making me hungry.”

“See, Mom, you really are a bad cook,” Scott joked. “Dog food makes Dad think about supper.”

Kim grinned. “Now Dad’s in the doghouse.”

“So you think my cooking tastes like dog food do you, Chris? You know a statement like that is grounds for divorce.”

Chris played along. “I’ll take Kim and you can have Scott.” “And who gets Max?” queried Tommie. The kids thought they were serious.

“Mom! Dad was just kidding. He really loves your cooking. Don’t you, Dad?” Scott pleaded.

“Well,” Chris confirmed, “I suppose it is edible.”

“I slave over a hot stove, and you just don’t appreciate me,” Tommie whined.

“No, really, Mom. We all love your cooking. Bring on the tuna surprise,” Kim announced.

“It’s in the fridge. I just have to heat it up. Would you get it, Kim? It’s in the vegetable bin.”

Kim opened the fridge door and looked in the vegetable bin. “Hey, there are steaks in here!”

“Surprise! No tuna!”

“Way to go, Mom!”

“Chris, could you get the barbecue going, please?” Tommie said, as she kissed his cheek to show Scott and Kim that everything was okay. “Kids, it’ll be about thirty minutes before supper’s ready.” Chris went outside while Tommie assembled salad ingredients. Scott was just about to head back upstairs, when Chris called out,

“Hey, Scott. Let’s see that crystal.”

“Sure, Dad,” Scott said, as he changed direction and joined Chris. He pulled the baggie from his pocket and handed it to Chris. “Isn’t it cool, Dad?” Chris opened the bag and pulled out the crystal. As he examined it, Scott repeated his theory. “I think it’s part of a meteor.”

“It looks like quartz to me – the kind from good old Mother Earth,” Chris joked. “I’ll take it out to Danny’s geology lab at the university tomorrow. He’ll tell us what it is.” Danny was Chris’s best friend. He was a professional geologist, a part-time archeologist, and a history buff. Tommie often commented how Danny was a bit of a wing-nut – just like Scott’s best friend, Alex. Like Scott, Chris was the guy with both feet on the ground, and like Alex, Danny was always taking chances.

“Great, Dad! Then Danny can prove it’s from space.”

Kim had wandered outside and heard Scott’s comment. “Scott’s the one from outer space, not the rock. I’m sure the crystal was in Max’s food.”

“I agree with Kim,” Tommie announced, as she brought out the steaks. “I think the rock must have been in the can of Hot-Dog Dog Food I got from Mr. Klein.”

“Mr. Klein!” Scott exclaimed. “I almost forgot! He told me we shouldn’t be feeding

the Hoppy Pet Food to Max. He said we should use another brand.”

“When did he say that?” Chris asked.

“When I tried to give him the can of Max’s food,” Scott explained.

This made sense to Kim and Tommie, but Chris had no idea what Scott was talking about. Tommie saw the clued-out look on Chris’s face and explained, “I borrowed a can of dog food from Mr. Klein this morning.”

Scott hadn’t finished. “Mr. Klein is really cool. He was in the Senior Iron Man competition in Hawaii. He said to call him if we ever needed anything. And he’s going away again. I told him we’d get his mail.”

Tommie listened in disbelief. “What happened to your theory that he’s a Nazi?”

“That was Kim’s dumb theory. I always knew he was cool.” “You did not. You were the one that was scared of him!” Kim protested.

Chris had had enough and said, “Why don’t you kids go back to doing whatever you were doing before we started this conversation.” He quickly reconsidered. “On second thought, go back to doing whatever you were doing BEFORE the water fight. Your mom has some blanks to fill in for me.”

“Sure, Dad.” Scott grabbed the bag with the crystal and headed upstairs. Kim followed behind.

Tommie proceeded to explain how she’d run out of dog food that morning, which had led to the discussion she’d had with the kids about Mr. Klein. Finally everything made sense to Chris.

As Scott sat at his computer, TING...

... a message popped up on the screen.

“KIM! There’s a response to my query!” Scott shouted.

Chapter Seven



Kim heard Scott and ran to his room. She wanted to see his reaction when he found out that the crystal wasn't a meteorite. She sat down beside his computer. "So what does it say, space cadet?" Scott ignored her and read the response out loud.

Your 3-D pictures provided excellent detail. It appears that this crystal could be a diamond. I suggest you have it checked out by a gemologist. Without further information, I have no way of determining if it came from a meteorite.

"A DIAMOND!" Scott shouted. He smirked at Kim. "Max is one special Wolfhound! Dog food goes in and diamonds come out

– just like the goose that laid the golden eggs!"

"He's the doggie with the diamond doodoos," Kim laughed. A second email appeared on the screen.

Where did you get the diamond? Is it a new mine? Are you going public with this? How can I get in on the ground floor?

"Unbelievable! The Internet spies have found us!" Kim exclaimed.

"How weird is that?" Scott replied. "We just get a lecture on this and, bang, we're victims."

TING...TING...TING...TING...

Scott's email was going bonkers. It seemed the whole world knew about their 'diamond'.

The kids were excited and couldn't wait to tell their parents. Kim rushed to the top of the staircase and shouted down toward the kitchen. "MOM, DAD! Come here! You've got to see this. The Internet spies have intercepted Scott's emails and now they're going nuts on him." Kim headed back to Scott's computer.

Chris and Tommie abandoned their cooking duties to join the kids in Scott's room. "So, what's going on here?" Chris asked, as he looked at Scott's monitor.

"Everyone and their dog is trying to get in on our diamond action," Scott explained.

"Diamond? What diamond?" Tommie asked.

Scott pulled out the plastic baggie and waved it in the air. "The scientist from The Spaced Channel says this is a diamond!"

"And now everyone wants a piece of the diamond action," Kim added.

"There is no diamond action," Tommie replied.

"I know that and you know that, but they don't. Look at this email," Scott said. He pointed to his monitor. "This guy wants to invest in our mine."

"What mine?" Chris quizzed. "There is no mine. There are no diamonds. These

people are nuts.”

“Look, Chris,” Tommie said, as she pointed to the latest email. “Fleecemans & Sisters Investment House wants to underwrite our IPO.”

Chris shook his head in disbelief but went with the flow. “Personally, I’d prefer to use Smut & Blarney Investments.”

“What’s an IPO?” Kim asked.

“An Initial Public Offering,” Chris answered.

“Okay, I give. What’s an Initial Public Offering?” Scott asked. “I’ll field this one, Chris,” Tommie offered.

“Be my guest.”

“This is a little complicated, so pay attention. As an example, let’s say we do have a diamond mine and our family owns it all. And let’s say we don’t have enough money to pay for all the mining equipment that we’ll need to get the diamonds out of the ground.” Scott thought he had an answer. “Just borrow the money from a bank.”

“Easier said than done,” Chris laughed. “Banks only lend lots of money to people who already have lots of money.”

“Okay, so if you can’t get the money from a bank, then what do you do?”

Tommie continued. “We would sell a portion of the mine to other people. That way, we could raise the money to buy the mining equipment and get the diamonds out of the ground.”

“But wouldn’t we have to share our profits with them if they own some of the mine?” Kim asked.

“Yes, we would give up part of our ownership, some of the profits and total control, but at least we would have the money to actually get the diamonds out of the ground. Do you get it?”

Scott wasn’t sure. “So we may own this diamond mine, but maybe we don’t have the money we need to get the diamonds out. To get the money, we sell shares in our mine to the public, but then we have to share the profits with the shareholders?”

“Exactly,” Tommie said. “And the first time we sell the stock to the public is called the Initial Public Offering, or IPO. The people who sell the IPO shares to the public are called the underwriters. That’s what companies like Fleecemans & Sisters and Smut & Blarney do.”

“So companies go public to raise money?” Scott questioned. “Yes, but also to share risk – and possibly to improve their image. Another reason they go public is to solicit help in lobbying for changes to laws and things.”

Kim was really confused now. “What are you talking about?” “Okay, if one family owns a mine and the government won’t let them build a road to get to it, then it’s only one family against the government.”

“Oh, I get it. If a company is public and there’s tons of shareholders, all the shareholders can put pressure on the government.” “Right, and that’s just one of many reasons why companies go public.”

“So, why do you think this guy – ” Scott said, pointing to the email on the monitor, “ – wants to know if he can get in on the ground floor?”

“Because start-up stock prices, especially the IPO selling price, are usually low. As people buy and sell the stock, it pushes the price up.”

“So, the first guys in usually get the best deal.” “Right.”

Kim remembered the conversation with Max's vet. "So that's why Dr. Chester was so excited about Hoppy Pet Food going public – he wants to get in on the IPO and make a lot of money."

"That's very likely," Tommie replied.

"What's this about Dr. Chester?" Chris asked.

"Just another detail I forgot to fill you in on," Tommie admitted. "Not important."

Other outrageous emails caught the family's attention. "Are we in the market for a luxury SUV?" Scott asked.

"How about an estate in Palm Beach?" Kim inquired. "I don't think so," Chris replied.

Scott continued to read the offers. "What about a trip around the world? Or maybe an NBA franchise? How about a new credit card – look, this one has a \$100,000 limit. I'll bet that's bigger than yours, Dad."

Tommie was starting to feel uncomfortable with the aggressive sales pitches. "Okay, that's enough. You need to broadcast an email back to these people. Tell them there's no new diamond mine. And do it right now – before this thing gets out of control."

RING... RING... RING... It was Scott's cell phone. "Hello?" Scott answered.

"Scott Campbell, you're the lucky winner of an all-expense-paid trip to the Bahamas," the voice said.

"I am?"

"Yes, you've been chosen at random to qualify for a fabulous vacation valued at \$15,000. All you need to do is log on to our web site and, for a small fee of \$2,000, you will win a \$15,000 vacation."

"Who is it?" Tommie asked.

"I've won a \$15,000 vacation!" Scott yelled enthusiastically. "All I have to do is send \$2,000 –"

"Good grief!" Tommie cut him off. "Hang up right now. It's a darn telemarketing scam."

"Kim, where's your phone?" Chris asked. "Here. Why?" She pulled it out of her pocket. RING... RING...

Kim looked at the number. "Who is it?" Chris asked.

"I don't know," Kim said. "The number's blocked."

"It's another telemarketer," Tommie exclaimed. "They always block their numbers so you can't call them back to hassle them."

"You two – turn off your phones!" Chris directed.

Scott and Kim did as they were told. Scott put his phone in his charger and Kim hurried to her room to do the same. She returned to Scott's room just in time to hear her dad's cell phone ring. He unclipped it from his belt and answered, "Hello, Chris here."

A male voice spoke. "Mr. Campbell, my name is George Newman. I'm the business editor of the Power Street Journal. I assume you're familiar with our paper?"

Chris thought highly of the Power Street Journal and quickly answered, "Yes, I am."

"Mr. Campbell, my sources tell me that you are the geologist responsible for finding a new diamond mine. Congratulations! We want exclusive rights to your story. Our subscribers need to read about it first, in the Power Street Journal."

"There is no mine and there is no story."

"Mr. Campbell, ours is a reputable newspaper, and we want your story before the rags

get hold of it.”

“I just told you, Mr. Newman, there is no story. We don’t have a diamond mine.”

“But, Mr. Campbell, we’d be prepared to pay you for the story.” Chris was shocked by the editor’s total disinterest in the truth.

He hung up the phone and turned it off.

Suddenly, the home phone rang. Tommie picked up Scott’s extension. It was The National Inquisitor.

“I understand that you have a special Russian Wolfhound that eats pet food and then excretes diamonds in his feces,” exclaimed a rather pushy woman. “We’ll offer you \$250,000 for the exclusive rights to this story. We’ll need pictures of the dog taking a dump. Have you got any?”

“No, no and NO! Don’t call here again,” Tommie barked, as she slammed down the phone. “Those Inquisitor reporters are so unbelievably crass.”

RING... RING...

“Don’t answer that,” Tommie ordered. “Let the answering machine get it. It’s probably another nutcase reporter. Those guys really burn...”

BEEEP – BEEEP – BEEEP – BEEEP – BEEEP...

It was the warning that sounded before the fire alarm went off. “The fire alarm is going to go off!” Chris shouted. “Everyone out of the house!”

The family bolted from Scott’s room. As they reached the top of the staircase, they could see smoke billowing from the patio. “False alarm. It’s only the steaks,” Chris announced, as he rushed downstairs to shut off the alarm. He didn’t want the fire department showing up unnecessarily.

Tommie was close on his heels. “See if you can save the steaks. I’ll check on the spuds,” she ordered.

They were both too late. Dinner was burnt to a crisp. The kids watched from the top of the stairs, as Chris put out the barbecue fire, and Tommie tossed the charred potatoes into the garbage.

The house reeked of smoke.

“We need some fresh air,” Tommie said, as she opened the windows in the kitchen.

“I guess we’re going out for supper!” Scott shouted from the top of the stairs.

Chris was starved. “How about Pop’s Restaurant?” “Great idea, Chris,” Tommie approved.

The kids cheered and rushed downstairs. The family headed to the garage and jumped into Tommie’s van. As soon as Chris started the engine, the family was surprised at what they heard on the ALLNEWSradio station.

Chapter Eight



Reporter: A new diamond deposit was discovered today. Sources report it is located somewhere in North America. The gem quality is high. Gerhard LeHops, owner of LeHops Diamonds, the company that owns and controls much of the global diamond industry, is en route to North America, likely to acquire the new mine.

For news you can count on, tune in to ALLNEWSradio at nine o'clock, when we'll interview Mr. Scott Campbell of Center City, the geologist who discovered the diamond deposit.

"I don't believe this. The media has gone crazy," Tommie declared.

"Hey, they called me a geologist!" Scott said. "As if," Kim scoffed.

"This LeHops guy is going to buy us out. We'll be rich!" Scott announced.

Tommie and Chris rolled their eyes. "Slow down, Scott," Chris directed. "Stop acting as stupid as the media."

"Hey, I'm just repeating what the radio said."

Chris turned his attention back to the road and the issue at hand. "How are we going to nip this in the bud? When I denied the story to the Power Street Journal, they didn't even listen."

"If anyone asks us anything, just don't answer," Tommie recommended.

Chris agreed. "We'll give that a try."

"You know the old saying, 'fifteen minutes of fame' – let's hope the fifteen minutes is over by the time we get to Pop's."

"Let's try for fifteen minutes of peace and quiet," Chris suggested. He put a compilation CD into the compact disc player. It had punk rock for Tommie and Scott, easy listening for Kim, and death metal for himself. Other than Scott trying to stop Tommie from singing, the remainder of the drive was relatively quiet.

The fifteen minutes passed. They arrived at Pop's Restaurant, got out of the van, and headed inside.

The place was buzzing. People were talking about the Campbells' diamond mine. The family overheard someone exclaim, "Bigger and richer than King Solomon's Mine – and right here in Center City!"

"So much for the fifteen minute theory," Tommie announced. "Mr. and Mrs. Campbell, so nice to see you again," Mrs.

Popinopolous said. She picked up four menus and led them to a table. "Please, select anything you want from our menu. If there's something you'd like that's not there, let me know, and we will make it especially for you."

“I can’t believe this!” Chris commented quietly to Tommie, as Mrs. Popinopolous left to seat other patrons. “It’s only been an hour since Scott posted that darn email.”

“Hey, if they want to treat us special, let them,” Scott said. “Who’s it going to hurt?”

“You’re forgetting, we don’t own a diamond mine,” Tommie countered. “Therefore, we don’t deserve this attention.”

“Why not?” Scott asked. He was soaking it all in.

“Because we don’t have diamonds,” Kim reasoned. “What the heck is so big about diamonds anyway? Would people act this way if we discovered a cure for cancer?”

“Quiet, Kim,” Tommie said, “before you know it, they’ll think we did that, too.”

The family scanned their menus. Suddenly, they heard a commotion and looked up. A camera crew was hauling equipment toward their table

“It’s a Broadcast National News camera crew – and they’re headed this way!” Scott exclaimed. “How’d they know we were here?”

“Poop!” Kim said.

“Hey, that’s what got us into this mess,” Scott laughed. “Maybe we should get out of here,” Tommie said.

“Okay – and quiet! No one say a thing,” Chris warned. The Campbells stood up to leave.

The BNN reporter and his crew surrounded their table. The Campbells were trapped.

“Roll it!” The BNN reporter said, as he faced the camera. “I’m here at Pop’s restaurant in Center City where I’m speaking with Mr. Scott Campbell, founder of the richest diamond mine ever discovered in North America. Mr. Campbell, could you tell us where this mine is?” he asked, as he shoved the microphone in Chris’s face.

Chris and the family turned their backs to the camera and the reporter. They tried their best to ignore him, but to no avail.

“Mr. Campbell is giving me the silent treatment, which can only mean the reports are true.” The reporter was determined to get a story, even if he had to make it up. “We understand, Mr. Gerhard LeHops, will be purchasing your mine later this evening. How much has he offered you?” Without waiting for a reply, the reporter added, “Word on the street is \$50 million.”

The Campbells were stunned by this statement, but remained silent.

“So, you’re not denying this purchase price. How does it feel to be rich?”

Kim thought their silence was adding to their problems, not getting rid of them. “Dad, maybe we should deny that we have a mine. This is probably the best chance we’ll ever have.”

The reporter tapped Chris on the back, trying to get his attention. Chris decided to take Kim’s advice. He swung around, faced the reporter and said, “First of all, my name is CHRIS Campbell. Second of all, we don’t own a diamond mine.”

“So, you’ve already sold your mine to Mr. LeHops.” Chris looked at Kim. “This isn’t working.”

The reporter continued, asking, “Do you think the \$50 million was a fair price?”

Chris wanted desperately to finish this once and for all. He took a deep breath to calm himself, and stated, “We have not spoken to LeHops. We do not own a diamond mine. We have not received \$50 million. We simply found a piece of crystal in our dog’s excrement. End of story.”

“Good one, Dad. End of Story. Get it? End? Rear end?” Scott joked. He thought he

was being clever.

“Scott, shut-up,” Kim ordered.

The reporter didn’t believe Chris. “That’s the most creative attempt at a cover-up I’ve ever heard.” Chris’s cheeks turned red. Tommie could see he was frustrated.

The reporter pushed the microphone back into his face. Chris looked straight at the camera lens and bellowed, “For the LAST time – there is no diamond mine!”

“Then have you found an alluvial deposit?” the reporter asked. Chris totally lost it. “NO! Let me make it easier for you to understand!” He paused for a second and then surprised the heck out of everyone.

“There really are no diamonds, Sir. We certainly are not millionaires. We did not find them anywhere.

We wish you would get out of our hair! We did not find them in the ground.

We did not find them lying around. They did not fall out of the sky.

I did not find one in my pie.

We did not find them anywhere! Why is it you don’t seem to care?

...Why aren’t you people listening?”

Everyone within earshot, burst out laughing. Kim and Scott were embarrassed by Chris’s immature display.

“Hey, BNN! Leave them alone!” one of the restaurant patrons yelled.

“Yeah, they don’t like pink eggs and ham, and they don’t like YOU!” someone else shouted.

One joke led to another. The entire place was mimicking Dr. Zeus – badly.

“Hey buddy, maybe they’re making them in their basement. Mix a little of this, a little of that, add heat and pressure, and – poof ! Diamonds!” joked a person at the next table.

“This is ridiculous,” Tommie exclaimed. “We need to get out of here. At least at home we can lock the doors and keep the media out.”

The family began to push their way through the camera crew.

A loud deep voice shouted, “You’re not going anywhere!” All heads turned toward the voice. “They are!”

It was Mr. Popinopolous, the owner of the restaurant. He approached the reporter. “I think you’ve got as much as you’re going to get out of Mr. Campbell. Why don’t you and your crew, follow me to the bar? I’ll treat the whole lot of you to pizza and beer.”

The reporter knew that Popinopolous was right, and besides, he’d already accomplished what he was sent there to do. “Sure, we’d love to take you up on your offer,” he replied.

“Michael!” Popinopolous shouted to one of his waiters. “Come and escort these fine gentlemen to a table in the bar.”

As the reporter and his crew left the dining room, Popinopolous turned his attention to the Campbells.

Chapter Nine



“Please, folks, I have a private room in the back. Allow me to escort you. I promise you there will be no media, no questions and no interruptions. I will personally take care of you. You are my guests tonight. Dinner is on the house,” Mr. Popinopolous said, and then smiled broadly.

“Thank you, Mr. Popinopolous,” Chris replied. “But that’s not necessary. This wasn’t your fault.”

“The media attention is good for my business – but bad for your dinner. I will take care of your bill. It is my pleasure.”

“Thank you for your generosity and concern,” Tommie responded.

“He’s treating us like royalty,” Scott whispered to Kim. “He probably thinks we’re rich now.”

The Campbell family followed Mr. Popinopolous into the private room.

Scott grinned. “I could get used to this.”

“You WOULD like all the attention,” Kim retorted. Scott was soaking it all in. People were pointing at him and smiling.

Kim looked at Scott. She wondered what all the hubbub was about. Then she began to smile. She whispered something to Scott.

“What? Speak up, Kim. What are you mumbling about?”

‘He’s acting so stupid – to heck with telling him,’ she thought. On the way to the private room, they passed by a large steel door with a small fogged-up window. The kids couldn’t help but sneak a peak. Popinopolous didn’t notice. Scott thought he saw cow and pig carcasses hanging on hooks. He also thought he saw something else. He kept quiet and didn’t say a word until Mr. Popinopolous left the room after seating them. The second the door closed, Scott exploded, saying, “Did you see that dead body hanging in the meat locker?”

Tommie rolled her eyes and shook her head. “Oh, for crying out loud, Scott. I’m making an appointment tomorrow for you to see a shrink. Meteors, diamonds, dead body in the meat locker – what next?” She normally encouraged his creativity, but sometimes it was all she could do to keep from gagging him.

Kim was unusually quiet. She’d had every opportunity to add to her mother’s sarcasm, but didn’t. Scott turned to her. “Kim, you saw it too, didn’t you? I know you did. ADMIT IT.”

“I’m not admitting anything. You’re crazy. You probably just saw someone’s blue

jacket and red hat hanging on a hook and thought it was a body.”

“Blue jacket and red hat – that’s EXACTLY what I saw!” exclaimed Scott. “That’s what the dead body was wearing. So you saw it, too. We have to call the cops!”

“If I hear one more word about diamonds or dead bodies, you’re both grounded for life,” Tommie snapped.

The kids kept quiet. Chris broke the silence. “Scott, do your fly up!”

“Didn’t you wonder why people were pointing at you and laughing?” Kim teased.

“Didn’t anyone notice this before?” Scott whined.

“Notice what? There’s nothing there to notice,” Kim said with a giggle.

“Fun-ny! You should talk. You with your padded training bras.” “Mom!”

“I think I’d prefer talking about the diamonds than having to listen to any more of this,” Tommie stated.

“Agreed,” Chris replied. “We need to find out what the crystal really is and where it came from.”

“It’s a diamond!” Scott insisted.

“And we know this because you sent a couple of pictures to some space scientist who said so,” Chris replied sarcastically.

“Why would he lie?” Scott asked.

Chris shrugged. “But what did he base his opinion on? It’s hard to believe he could tell it was a diamond from a picture sent over the Internet. We really need to get this crystal examined. Once we know what it is and have proof, then we can call off the dogs.”

“Funny, Chris. You know, I think every joke or pun I’ve heard this afternoon has had something to do with dogs or poop,” Tommie said.

Chris ignored Tommie’s comment. He turned to his daughter, “Kim, what are your thoughts on how to solve the mystery of where this crystal came from?”

“My plan is to check out the two dog food manufacturers,” Kim replied. “I’m going to ask them if there’s been any other complaints about crystals in their food. Maybe they’ll have to issue a major recall or something, like car manufacturers do.”

Tommie was impressed with Kim’s sensible approach. “Good idea Kim, but do you think you need to check out the Hoppy brand? It’s probably good enough to just contact the company that makes the food that Mr. Klein gave us.”

“No, Mom. I plan to be thorough. I’ll contact both companies.” “Yes, you’re probably right, Kim. You should check out both,” Tommie admitted.

Kim smiled with pride. “Dad, can I borrow your cell? I want Amy to come over tonight and help me.”

“If she’s coming over, then Alex gets to come over, too,” Scott insisted.

“I don’t want that idiot over,” Kim barked. “He’s such a dumb jerk.”

Scott defended his friend. “He’s not dumb. He’s just... different.” “Right,” Kim replied. “He’s SPECIAL.”

“Hey, watch who you’re calling special. He’s my best friend!”

It was time again for Tommie to intervene. “Now, kids. I really wish you’d stop this bickering. I know darn well, Kim, that you actually like Alex. And Scott, you like Amy.” Tommie could be evil at times.

“MOM!” they both shouted.

“I think you both might be on to something,” Chris declared. “When you get hold of

Alex and Amy, ask if I can speak to their dads. Maybe they can help us straighten out this mess.” Their friends’ fathers were both involved in the media – Alex’s dad was editor of the Center City Communicator newspaper and Amy’s dad was head of Center City TV.

Chris unclipped his cell phone and handed it to Kim. “Call Amy. When you’re finished, Scott can call Alex.”

Kim took the phone and placed the call.

RING... RING... RING... RING... CLICK...

“You have reached 555...”

Kim hung up the phone. “Rats, there’s no answer! Where could she be?”

“My turn.” Scott put out his hand to take the phone. Kim held it out of Scott’s reach.

“No way. If Amy’s not coming over, then neither can Alex,” she declared.

Tommie was annoyed with Kim’s logic. “Kim, give the phone to your brother.”

Kim slowly passed the phone to Scott. He grabbed it from her and placed the call. Kim crossed her fingers and hoped that Alex wasn’t home.

RING... RING... RING...

“Good evening. This is the Black residence. Mrs. Riverez speaking.”

“Hi, Mrs. Riverez. This is Scott. Is Alex home?”

“I’m sorry, Scott. Alex is at the Jets game with his family. Would you like to leave him a message?”

“No, thank you. I’ll send him an email. Good-bye, Mrs. Riverez.”

“Well, is he coming over or what?” Kim asked. “No, something really weird is going on.”

“What?”

“He’s out with his family. They went to the Jets game.” “What’s so strange about that?” Tommie asked.

“Well, Alex is always complaining he never sees his dad because he’s always busy at the newspaper,” Scott explained. “This would have been a really big deal, you know, to spend time with his dad, and he never told me.” Scott handed the phone back to Chris.

“Well, maybe it was a last minute thing,” Chris replied. “It must have been.”

“It looks like you two are on your own tonight,” Chris observed. “And it looks like we won’t get to tell our story to people who’ll really listen.”

Just then, the door opened and in walked Mr. Popinopolous, carrying a huge basket of buns. He set it down and four hands reached out to grab a roll.

Mr. Popinopolous laughed. “I think I have a hungry group here. May I take your order?”

All four of them said, “I’ll have...”

“One at a time,” Tommie instructed. “I’ll start. I’d like the pepper steak with garlic mashed potatoes and a side Greek salad, please.”

The rest of the family placed their orders.

On his way out of the room, Mr. Popinopolous stated, “It does seem uncomfortably warm in here. I’ll adjust the temperature.” He walked over to a control panel on the wall and pressed some keys on the keypad. When he was finished, he exited and closed the door behind him.

“That was weird. We never said it was hot in here,” Kim declared.

Chapter Ten



Chris had been thinking the same thing.

“Really, Dad. What was he doing over there?” Kim asked. Tommie answered, “Just what he said – adjusting the temperature.” She pointed her finger at the kids. “You two can find a mystery in anything. It was very nice of him to let us use this room.”

“Does anyone notice that this room doesn’t look like the rest of the restaurant?” Kim observed.

“Now that you mention it, it looks like the kind of room where people have high stakes poker games,” Chris said.

“How would you know?” Tommie asked. “Or do drug deals in,” Scott suggested. “How would you know?”

“Or run an organized crime family from,” Kim speculated. “How would – oh, never mind.”

Scott lowered his voice. “Maybe the place is bugged. Maybe he was turning on a spy cam.” Scott got up and walked over to the control panel. “It doesn’t say climate control or anything on this. For all we know, it could be for surveillance or something.”

“Oh, let’s hope so,” Tommie said sarcastically. “We just called the guy a gambling, drug-dealing crime lord. That should make him pretty happy with us.”

Scott returned to his seat. “Think about it,” he whispered. “Maybe he put us here so he could learn all about our diamond mine. Maybe he plans to steal it from us.”

“For the last time – we don’t have a diamond mine,” Tommie replied firmly. “Now, quiet! All I want to hear is the sound of chewing.”

As they munched on bread rolls, all eyes, including Tommie’s, scanned the room for evidence of hidden cameras and listening devices.

Before long, the door to the room flung open and in walked Mr. Popinopolous and a waitress. They were carrying the family’s dinner order. Mr. Popinopolous was scowling. They dropped off the food and left without a word.

Now Tommie was a little suspicious. “He’s a bit off, wouldn’t you say?”

“Maybe he’s just busy,” Chris suggested.

“Maybe he’s ticked-off because the news people bothered his customers,” Kim said.

“I think he’s mad because he’s been listening in on our conversation and heard Mom say we don’t have a diamond mine,” Scott whispered. “Let’s pretend we do and see if his attitude changes.”

“Excellent plan, Scott,” Chris replied boisterously. “You sit here and talk to yourself about our diamond mine. See if you can get us free cheesecake while you’re at it. I know

how you love cheesecake, Scott.”

In a voice that could be heard in the next county, Scott took over the stage. “Dad, do you think the LeHops offer was good enough? Should we accept it?”

They all shook their heads in disbelief, but for fun, played their diamond mogul roles throughout the entire dinner. If Mr. Popinopolous was listening, he was certainly getting an earful. With the exception of Scott, the Campbells were ninety-nine percent sure that he wasn't, until Popinopolous opened the door. He was smiling – and carrying a huge cheesecake. The Campbells shot glances at each other.

“Enjoy!” he said, as he set the cake down on the table. “My treat. The entire dinner is my treat.” Then he left the room and closed the door.

The Campbells were stunned. “This is no coincidence. He must have been listening. Let's get out of here,” Tommie said, as she rose from her chair.

“I agree,” replied Chris. The rest of the family stood up.

“I don't want to owe this guy anything,” Chris whispered to Tommie. They pooled their cash – about \$100 – and left it on the table.

“Okay, we're history.”

“I sure hope not, Mom,” Kim commented.

The family hurried out of the restaurant to their van.

On the drive home, the conversation frantically jumped from diamonds, to doo-doo, to Dr. Zeus. They soon pulled into their driveway.

BLINK... BLINK...

Kim saw lights flashing on and off in their house. “Mom! Dad! Did you see that?”

“See what?” Tommie asked.

“I saw it, too,” Scott declared.

“Saw what?” Chris asked this time.

“Lights blinking on and off in our house.”

“Popinopolous has broken into our house to steal the diamond!” Scott screamed.

SCREEEECH...

Chris slammed on the brakes. The van stopped in the middle of the driveway.

“Don't worry, Dad,” Scott said. “The dummies don't know I have it right here in my pocket.”

Chris wasn't sure there was anyone in the house, but with all the craziness going on tonight, he didn't want to tempt fate. He'd wait in the driveway and see if there was any indication of intruders.

BLINK... BLINK... The lights flashed again.

“LOOK!” they all exclaimed at the same time.

“Why isn't our house alarm going off?” Scott asked.

“Probably because no one bothered to turn it on,” Tommie said. She gave Chris an accusatory look.

Chris ignored her. “I'll call 911. We'll let the police handle this.” He acted cool and calm, as he pulled out his cell phone and made the call.

“911 emergency services. How may I help you?”

“This is Chris Campbell. I think someone has broken into my house. I live at 414 Apple Creek Road.”

“Are you in the house now?” asked the emergency service operator.

“No. We're parked in the driveway, but we can see our lights going on and off in the

house.”

“Remain in your car. I’ll dispatch an officer.”

Chris could hear the operator. “Car 54, a possible 834 in progress. Proceed to 414 Apple Creek Road. Stealth approach recommended. Possible break and enter.”

The operator turned her attention back to Chris. “Mr. Campbell, an officer should be there any minute. The cruiser car will be coming in without lights or a siren. If your status changes in the meantime, please inform us. Ask for operator 26,” she said and hung up.

Chris looked at his cell phone. “I can’t believe this! This has got to be the strangest day we’ve ever had.”

And it was about to get more bizarre.

Chapter Eleven



The Campbells waited in their van for the police. BLINK... BLINK... BLINK... BLINK...

The lights continued to flick on and off in different rooms in the house.

“These guys aren’t afraid of getting caught. They’re checking out every room,” Chris said.

“Hey, Kim,” nudged Scott, “I’ll bet they’re going through your underwear drawer. Maybe they’re reading your diary.”

Kim glared at Scott. She needed a comeback. “I wonder if they found the skid marks in your Moe Boxers.”

“Dad, are you going to let her get away with that?” “You started it, Kid. Now live with the consequences.” Suddenly they were engulfed by white light. Shivers ran up and down their spines. The light got brighter.

“The cops!” exclaimed Scott. “It’s about time!”

In a matter of seconds, there was a police officer standing beside the driver’s side window. He turned off his flashlight.

“Oh, thank goodness! It’s Chuck Nash,” Tommie said. All the Campbells knew Detective Nash. His son went to Spring Valley School with Kim and Scott. Ryan was a year younger and played on Scott’s basketball team. Chris lowered his side window.

Nash leaned on the van door and spoke through the open window. “When I heard your address over the radio, I called in and told them I’d take it.”

BLINK... BLINK...

Chris pointed to the house and explained, “You can see why we called. It looks like someone is in our house.”

BLINK... BLINK...

“Yes, I saw that.” Nash stepped back from the van and pulled out his radio. “I’m going to call for backup. Chris, move your van down the street. I don’t want your family put in danger. We don’t know what we’re dealing with.”

“Yes. That’s a good idea,” Chris replied. Suddenly, the family heard a familiar bark.

“Oh, my gosh! Max!” Tommie shouted. “I can’t believe we forgot about him.”

BARK... BARK... BARK...

The sounds were coming from the backyard.

“Max is outside! Maybe they’re after him!” Scott yelled. He threw open the door, leapt out of the van, and headed for the six-foot fence alongside the garage. Jumping the fence would be the quickest way to get to the backyard and Max.

BARK... BARK... BARK...

“SCOTT! Get back here!” Chris yelled, as he flew out of the van and ran after Scott.

Scott was intent on getting to Max. He jumped over the low hedge in front of the fence, then easily vaulted the fence.

Chris wasn't as quick or agile as his son. Instead of clearing the hedge, he tripped over it. Lying face down on the shrubbery, struggling to get up, he continued to call out, “Scott! Get back here!”

BARK... BARK... BARK...

Max was barking so loudly that Scott didn't hear Chris. It wouldn't have mattered if he did.

Scott landed on the other side of the fence and then crept to the corner of the house. He smelled a familiar disgusting stench and remembered the puddle. He peeked into the backyard. Max was being chased by a man wearing a red hat and a blue jacket.

‘The body from the restaurant!’ Scott thought. ‘This has got to be one of Popinopolous’s men. I was right! He’s trying to steal our diamond – and our dog. I need a plan to save Max.’ Scott’s mind raced, as he thought about how he could distract the man and make his escape with Max.

Chris extricated himself from the hedge and was now trying to scale the fence. He reached for the top and pulled himself up. He was about to throw one leg over the fence, when something grabbed his other leg and pulled. Chris fell backward and into the hedge again. This time he landed bum first. He looked up. “Nash!

Why'd you do that?”

“What do you think you're doing?” Nash asked angrily. “Get back in the van. I'll go after Scott.”

“No way! He's my son!”

“We're just wasting time. Get back to the van – and that's an order.”

Chris reluctantly followed Nash's orders and rejoined Tommie and Kim in the safety of their van. The three watched the detective struggle to haul his oversized body up and over the fence. Then they heard, “YEEEOOWW!” and saw him fly over it like Superman.

“How'd he do that?” Kim asked in awe.

“He's a cop. He's trained to do that,” Tommie explained. Chris felt inadequate.

Nash landed on his behind on the other side. BARK... BARK... BARK...

He stood up and rubbed his sore butt. He hated wasps, but the pain and surprise at getting stung, had conveniently propelled him up and over the fence. However, now he had to focus his attention on his next move.

In the darkness, he could see Scott crouching at the side of the house. He started toward him. “Scott!” he whispered loudly.

BARK... BARK... BARK...

Scott didn't hear him. He was busy putting his plan into action. Scott jumped out from his hiding place and stood in plain view. He waved his arms and shouted, “Hey stupid! I'm over here!”

The man stopped in his tracks. He turned to see who was yelling. He spotted Scott at the side of the house.

Scott shouted again. “We called the cops! You're dead meat! Leave my dog alone or

I'll..."

The man's attention focused on Scott. He started to run toward him. "Or you'll what, Kid?"

Nash couldn't believe his eyes. Scott had made himself a target. The man bolted toward Scott and pushed him out of the way.

"STOP! Police!" Nash shouted. But it was too late.

SPLAT...

The puddle had claimed its fifth victim.

Chapter Twelve



“What the!?” the man bellowed, as he pushed himself up out of the sludge. Max took a flying leap, landed on top of him, and shoved him back in.

“Get him, Max!” Scott shouted out.

The man struggled to get Max off his back. “Get this mutt off me!”

Scott watched the antics, while Nash made his move.

The intruder knew he didn’t have much time. He arched his back as high and as hard as he could and flipped Max off. Max ran over to Scott. Together they watched the man free himself from the mess. Nash stood in front of the fence, between the intruder and his freedom. The man ran directly toward him.

Nash threw himself at the man, trying to tackle him. The man’s clothes were drenched in the sudsy slimy water and he slipped through Nash’s arms. Nash crashed to the ground as the intruder launched himself into the air, grabbed the top of the fence, and hurled himself over it.

“Are you okay, Detective Nash?” Scott asked, as he and Max ran over.

Nash struggled to push himself up off the ground. “I’ll survive. But I hurt my ankle and there’s no way I can make it over the fence now.”

“I’ll go after him!” Scott exclaimed, as he headed toward the fence.

“Scott! That’s what got us into this mess. Stay back here with me where it’s safe. I’ve got no idea what’s happening on the other side.” Nash grabbed his radio and made a call. “Dispatch, where’s my backup?”

“Officer Dandy is on his way,” Dispatch replied. “ETA is one minute. You can reach him on frequency nine.”

Nash contacted Dandy and explained the situation. “As soon as you get here, Dandy, tell the Campbells that Scott and Max are okay. Let them know I’m checking the house to make sure there’s no one else in it.”

“Ten Four, Detective Nash,” Dandy replied.

“Scott, stay out here with Max while I look inside the house. I’ll call you when it’s safe to come in.”

“Sure thing,” Scott replied. Scott took Max out to the dock and sat down.

At the same time Nash was calling Dispatch; Chris, Tommie and Kim heard their garage door open. As they looked toward it, they saw a man running from the side fence to the driveway.

VAROOOOM... SQUEEEEEAL... A car sped out of the garage.

“Dad! The car’s coming right at us!” Kim screamed. “And so is that man!” Tommie yelled. SCREEEECH...

The car slammed on its brakes and stopped inches away from the Campbells’ front bumper.

“Get in!” a voice shouted from the car. The side door flew open and the running man jumped in. The driver gunned the engine, swerved the car to miss the Campbells, and sped out of the driveway like a racecar driver.

The Campbells watched helplessly. They wondered what had become of Scott, Nash and Max.

“I’m going back there,” Chris declared.

“I’m going with you,” Tommie said. “Kim, you stay in the van.” “NO WAY!” she shouted.

They all jumped out of the van. IRRRRK...

A cruiser car braked hard, stopping inches away from Chris. The Campbells converged on the officer, as he got out of the vehicle.

“My son is in danger!” Chris exclaimed.

“Calm down, Mr. Campbell. I’m Officer Dandy. Detective Nash told me your son and dog are safe. Nash is checking your house for intruders. We’re to remain here until Nash gives us the all clear.”

The Campbells stood with Dandy in the driveway, anxiously waiting to hear from Nash. It was the longest three minutes of their lives.

Nash finished his check of the house. The intruders were gone, but there was plenty of evidence that they had been there – the house was a mess. Nash walked over to the kitchen patio door. His ankle was feeling better, but he limped slightly. Nash called out to Scott, saying, “You two can come in now.”

Scott and Max ran through the patio door into the kitchen. “Wow, this place is a mess!” Scott exclaimed. “Wait until Mom sees this. She’ll kill those guys – if she ever gets her hands on them.”

Nash chuckled to himself and said, “We’ll go out through the front door and let them know it’s safe to come in.”

“Aren’t you going to check for fingerprints and things first?” Scott asked.

“Scott, the likelihood of finding out who did this is pretty slim.” “CSI could find them!” Scott declared.

Nash shook his head. “This isn’t Vegas, it’s Center City. We don’t have those kinds of resources. The only way to catch these guys is in the act, or when they hawk something they steal. Now, I think your mom and dad would like to know you’re okay.”

Scott opened the front door. Nash called out, “There’s no one in the house!”

Kim, Chris and Tommie ran up to Scott and Max. They had a big family hug. Max had had enough excitement for the night. He retreated to the game room.

“Scott, we were so worried! You shouldn’t have...” Tommie started to scold him, but changed her mind. “Oh, never mind. I’m just glad you’re all right.”

The celebration was short-lived. Nash pulled out a pad of paper and pencil. He began to fire questions at them. “Did you see the license number? Did you notice what kind of car it was? Did you see the driver?”

“Blue. It was blue. A luxury car. Something imported,” Chris replied. “And there were two men in the car. The guy who jumped the fence and the driver.”

“Blue. Right. I almost forgot,” Scott declared. “Detective Nash, one guy works for Popinopolous.”

“Pardon?” Nash replied.

“Mom, didn’t you see the guy with the red hat and blue jacket?”

“It was dark. I couldn’t see what he was wearing,” Tommie admitted.

“Me neither,” Kim added.

“Dad, what about you? You must have seen him,” Scott asserted. “Sorry, Son.”

“What’s this all about?” Nash insisted.

“I saw the same jacket and hat at Pop’s Restaurant tonight,” Scott explained.

Nash wrote something on his notepad. Scott was pleased he took him seriously.

“Anything else? Did anyone notice anything else?” Nash asked. “The license plate said G-R-E-E-D-Y,” Kim added.

“Excellent. This is great information.” Nash pulled out his radio and called in his report. “Dispatch, this is Car 54. Detective Nash here. Put an all-points bulletin out on a new model luxury sedan, blue, license plate Golf-Romeo-Echo-Echo-Delta-Yankee. There are two males in the car, one wearing a blue jacket and red hat. The charge is break, enter and resisting arrest. We don’t know if anything was stolen.”

Nash turned to Dandy and gave him an order. “Dandy, go inside with the Campbells and stay with them while they check through the house.”

Just as they got to the door, they heard a report over Nash’s radio. “Car 54, come in. This is Dispatch.” They all stopped in their tracks.

“Nash here.”

“Nash, we have a positive identification on the car. It belongs to Dimitre Popinopolous. He called forty minutes ago and reported it stolen. Your partial plate description helped.”

“See, Detective Nash,” Kim called out. “It was Popinopolous. He kept us at the restaurant so his goons could break into our house.”

“Yeah, and the red hat and blue jacket guy works for Pop!” Scott shouted.

“But why would Popinopolous want to break into your house?” Nash asked.

“To steal our diamond, of course,” replied Kim. Nash looked surprised. “What diamond?”

“You must be the only human being on this planet who doesn’t know about our diamond mine,” Tommie answered. “Really? You own a diamond mine?”

“It’s a long story,” Chris responded.

“I think I should hear it,” Nash said. “Let’s go inside. Chris, fill me in on this diamond mine. Dandy, help Tommie and the kids check to see if anything was stolen.”

The group walked through the front door. Scott knew what to expect. Chris, Tommie and Kim were stunned. Their house was a mess.

Chapter Thirteen



RING... RING... RING...

“Look at this place!” Tommie exclaimed. “The whole house looks worse than your room, Scott!”

“I told Nash you’d be mad,” Scott replied. RING... RING... RING...

“If I ever get my hands on those guys...” “I told Nash you’d say that, too!”

Tommie was venting. She was furious. RING... RING... RING...

“Enough already,” Tommie said. “We’re unplugging the phones. Kids, unplug the phones in your rooms and then help me make sure nothing valuable has been taken.”

“Define valuable,” Scott requested.

“Just see if anything is missing,” she replied, with a hint of impatience.

It took Kim and Scott the same amount of time to search upstairs as it took Tommie to check the entire downstairs. It looked like everything was still there.

“Mom, those guys made a big mess, but I don’t think they took anything. Do you think Scott was right, that they were looking for the diamond?”

“I don’t know, Kim. I do know that next time we leave the house, no matter how rushed we are, we’ll turn on the alarm.”

After reporting their findings to Dandy, there was little more they could do. “I’m going to get back to my dog food research,” Kim said. She retreated to her bedroom and turned on her computer. While she waited for it to boot-up and go through the extensive virus scan, she straightened up her room.

Scott and Max went to Scott’s bedroom. They felt the need to veg out and relax. There was a basketball game on the tube. Unlike Kim, Scott had no intention of cleaning up. Besides, his room didn’t look much worse than usual.

Downstairs, Chris was explaining to Detective Nash how the media reports of a new diamond mine had come about, starting with Max’s strange poop earlier in the day. Nash was amused by the story but worried about the potential fallout. He hoped that there was no connection between this robbery attempt and the diamond. “Chris, I don’t want to alarm you, but we got word from Interpol that LeHops is in Center City.”

“Do you think he’s coming here?” Chris asked.

“I don’t know. I do know that Interpol thinks he’s meeting with The Ring Master.” “The who?”

“That’s the police code name given to the money launderer for the region’s organized crime syndicate. We’ve been trying to identify this guy for over a year.”

Chris's stomach started doing back-flips. "The MOB? This whole thing might be connected to the MOB?"

"They call themselves the Men Of Business. And I didn't say there was a connection. I think you're jumping to conclusions and making connections where they probably don't exist."

"Probably don't exist?"

"Look, I'll keep you and your family under surveillance until LeHops has left the country. I'm certain the Men Of Business have nothing to do with your break-in. It was just too amateurish."

"Are you sure LeHops isn't The Ring Master? I mean, think about it – ring – diamond – get the connection?"

"I'm not at liberty to say. We're investigating a lot of people." "Don't say anything to Tommie about this. She's upset enough,"

Chris asked.

"No problem."

Chris and Nash joined Tommie and Dandy in the family room. Chris looked distracted.

"Chris, are you okay?" Tommie asked.

"Sure. I guess it just hit me – what if we had been at home? Someone could have been hurt. And that stunt Scott pulled..."

Nash interrupted. "Hang on, Chris. Try not to be mad at Scott for reacting the way he did. Just be thankful everyone is all right."

Tommie also tried to make her husband feel better. "And Chris, it doesn't look like anything was taken or wrecked."

"Good," Nash said. "Over the next few days, you might notice something's missing. That often happens. Just give me a call."

"Will do," Chris promised.

As Nash headed toward the door, he stopped and spoke to Tommie. "Just as a precaution, I'm assigning Officer Dandy to watch you and your home tonight. He'll be parked in your drive- way."

A smile of relief appeared on Tommie's face. "Thanks." Then she turned to Dandy. "We'll all feel a lot better with you here." Dandy nodded, acknowledging her comment.

"I'm also going to have a couple of police boats assigned to make sure no one can access you from the water."

"I hadn't thought of that!" Tommie said, looking worried again. "We'll let you know if we hear anything about your intruders,"

Nash promised.

Tommie followed Nash and Dandy to the front door. "Thanks very much Detective Nash and Officer Dandy." Closing the door, Tommie turned around, surveyed the mess, and sighed. Then she turned her attention to cleaning up. She didn't want any reminders of the break-in.

"Chris, you start with the family room. I'll take the kitchen. I'd like to get this place shipshape before we go to bed."

Chris started straightening up the family room. Keeping busy would help to keep his mind off what Nash had told him. He had to admit that he felt better knowing his family

was under police protection.

"I'm surprised the kids don't seem to be bothered by what happened here this evening," Tommie said.

Chris was still focused on the conversation with Nash. Tommie's comment brought him back to the moment. "I read an article recently that said that it wasn't unusual for home invasion victims to react like the kids have, especially when nothing is stolen or destroyed," he explained, as he picked up cushions that were scattered on the floor. "It seemed pretty farfetched, but now we seem to be experiencing it first-hand."

"Kids are pretty resilient," Tommie acknowledged.

"Yeah, not much phases them," Chris added. "Wish I could say the same for me."

Tommie smiled. "Let's see how they react to this!" She shouted in the direction of the staircase. "Scott! Kim! Clean up your rooms!"

"The Dallas game's on tonight," Scott bellowed back at her. "I'll clean up tomorrow."

"Resilient and resistant," Chris laughed.

"Scott, you can clean and watch at the same time. No excuses. Get at it!"

Kim ran out of her bedroom to the top of the staircase. "I cleaned up already!" she announced. "I'm going to start work on my dog food research."

"Let us know what you find," Tommie responded. She and Chris continued tidying up.

Back in her room, Kim's first action item was to look for the Hot-Dog site. She typed in, Hot-Dog Dog Food. Up popped a site that talked about animal health, described the different ingredients in their products, explained their quality assurance program, and even advertised their participation in dog show competitions. It was everything she expected it to be. She scrolled down the menu and clicked on the Contact Us key. Up popped an email connection. She began to type.

Our dog Max ate a tin of your dog food today. He got very sick. We found a large crystal in his stool. We think it was in the dog food. We wanted to let you know about it because you may have other tins with the same problem. Sincerely, Kim.

She pushed the Send button.

Kim then began her search for the Hoppy web site. Even though she tried every word combination she could think of, and all the search engines available to her, she couldn't find the site.

Kim was stumped. As she sat in front of her computer, trying to figure out another approach...

TING...

... a response came back to her first email.

Dear Kim. Thank you for your email. We have very high quality standards and we are confident we would have detected such a large foreign object. We have not received any similar complaints. We would like to forward you a month's supply of Hot-Dog Pet Food for your dog, Max.

Sincerely, Hot-Dog Pet Food Customer Service Department.

Kim was excited with the quick response and ran down the stairs to tell her parents. She found Tommie in the kitchen. "Hey, Mom. I already got a reply from Hot-Dog. They

claim it wasn't their can. They said they'd like to send us a month's supply of their dog food. What would we do with it? Dr. Chester said that Max can't eat it."

Tommie was impressed with Hot-Dog's customer service. She thought for a moment and then suggested, "We could donate it to the local pet shelter, Kim."

"Great idea, Mom."

"Did you get a reply from Hoppy Pet Food?"

"No, I haven't sent a query yet. I can't find their web site. I've tried everything."

Tommie walked over to the cupboard and pulled out a tin of Max's food. "Let's see if they have an address or web site or 1- 800 on their label." Tommie looked carefully. "Nothing. That's strange. I never noticed that before. I can't believe there isn't any info about the company on here."

It was halftime at the game and Scott's mind drifted back to the diamond.

'How can I prove to Mom and Dad that it really is a diamond?' he wondered. While thinking about it, he decided to get a glass of chocolate milk.

"That's it!" Scott exclaimed.

Chapter Fourteen



Scott ran downstairs and burst into the kitchen. “Hey, Mom!” He was too excited to see he was interrupting Kim and Tommie’s conversation. “Got any glass around here I can cut? I want to prove this really is a diamond.”

“Don’t be silly,” Tommie answered. “I don’t want you to break one of my glasses.”

“But if it is a diamond, we can afford to buy a new glass,” Scott reasoned.

Tommie was reconsidering his request when Scott fired another question at her. “Mom, got any diamonds I can compare this one to?”

“No, I don’t own any,” Tommie answered.

“You don’t own any diamonds?” Scott replied. He noticed Chris cleaning in the family room. “Dad, you’re cheap!”

Chris shot a glance at Scott, but didn’t acknowledge the question. Tommie decided to explain. “Actually, I’m not that fussy about diamonds.”

“I thought you were supposed to get a diamond when you got engaged,” Kim said.

Tommie shrugged. “Most people do, but I never saw the point of it. It’s just not important to me.”

“You should see the rocks Mrs. Montgomery wears. They’re huge,” Kim declared.

Tommie carefully chose her words. “Amy’s mom and I have different tastes.”

“Dad’s too cheap. That’s really it, isn’t it.” Scott looked over at Chris, expecting a reaction this time. He was disappointed again.

Tommie realized that she wasn’t going to get any help from Chris. “Frankly, I’m the cheap one. I just can’t bring myself to spend all that money on a little piece of rock,” she explained. “Besides, it’s not as if having a diamond equates to having a good marriage. I know lots of women with terrific diamonds and terrible husbands.”

“How come most girls want diamonds then?” Scott asked. “LeHops and Hollywood have managed to convince everyone it’s the best way to ‘show you care,’” Tommie explained. “So now, most women want them and most men figure they have to buy them.”

Scott was still trying hard to get a rise out of Chris. “If Dad really loved you, he’d ‘say it with diamonds’.”

“According to LeHops,” Tommie replied. “But you kids don’t believe that marketing hooley, do you?”

“Diamonds are a girl’s best friend, Mom,” Kim said. “I’m worth it! And they are forever.” Now Kim was being sarcastic. “And what about those ads – ‘Diamonds will show you care for a million years.’”

Tommie snorted. "Excuse me, but I don't know of anyone who lives for a million years."

Chris couldn't resist. "Some poor suckers will end up paying them off for a million years."

Kim looked toward her dad. "You can hear us. I knew you were ignoring us! So – really, Dad – why didn't you buy Mom a diamond?"

"Didn't you hear what your mom said? It's just not important to us. If other people want to invest in them, that's their prerogative."

"Huh?" Scott said.

"That's their choice," Chris clarified.

"And not only that," Tommie added, "you wouldn't believe the atrocities that occur in some parts of the world, just to mine and sell diamonds."

Kim was curious. "So, other than making people spend huge amounts of money on diamonds, what are these other atrocities you're talking about, Mom?"

'Oh-oh,' Scott thought, 'Mom's on a mission. Kim had better shut-up.'

It was too late. "Maybe you two should do some research and find out for yourselves," Tommie suggested.

Scott noticed the clock on the stove. "Sorry, Mom. The second half of the game is gonna start any minute. Gotta go." He headed for the stairs.

Kim, however, was in Sherlock Holmes mode. "I'll do some research and let you know what I find out, Mom."

Not to be outdone, Scott stopped in his tracks and called back toward the kitchen. "Me, too."

"What about the game?" Chris asked.

"I can watch and work at the same time. Dallas is killing L.A. anyway," Scott declared.

Chris looked surprised.

"You know – the Clippers," Scott replied. He proceeded upstairs. Kim and Scott went to their bedrooms and settled in front of their computers. Operating best on sensory overload, with music blaring, TVs on and computers fired up, they each began to surf the Internet, looking for anything they could find on diamonds. "Great job getting rid of them," Chris said to Tommie. "Now, let's take a break and enjoy some peace and quiet. How about some herbal tea?"

"Well, if you're making it..." "Sure."

DING-DONG... DING-DONG... DING-DONG... The doorbell rang incessantly.

"Who could that be?" Tommie asked.

DING-DONG... DING-DONG... DING-DONG...

Chris and Tommie rushed to the door. "It must be Dandy or Nash," Chris said, as he flung open the door.

To the surprise of Tommie and Chris, a tall, older, gray-haired man in a dark blue suit, entered the house and planted himself firmly in the foyer.

"Good evening," he said. "My name is Wilhelm Van Den Krauss."

"Yes, Mr. Van Den Krauss. What can we do for you?" Chris asked. He glanced outside. He couldn't spot Officer Dandy or his vehicle. Chris closed the door and directed a bewildered look at Tommie.

Mr. Van Den Krauss announced, "I represent LeHops Diamonds."
Chris and Tommie's hearts began to pound.

Chapter Fifteen



“I am here to procure your diamond mine,” Van Den Krauss declared.

“There is no diamond mine, Sir. I’m sorry you’ve wasted your time,” Chris said.

“I have traveled a great distance and I will not leave until we have concluded the transaction.”

“Mr. Van Den Krauss, I’m sorry for this misunderstanding, but I must ask you to leave my home,” Chris said with as much diplomacy as he could muster. He was concerned that if LeHops was MOB’d up, Van Den Krauss could be dangerous.

The burly old man didn’t budge. “Perhaps I did not make myself clear, Mr. Campbell. It would not be in your best interest to retain ownership of your mine.”

Chris wasn’t sure how to react. Obviously the guy wasn’t going anywhere. Chris was worried, if he acted as nervous as he felt, it might tip off Van Den Krauss that he knew about the possible MOB connection. He decided to play it as cool as he possibly could and asked, “And why is that?”

“Because you will have difficulty finding a market for your diamonds,” Van Den Krauss answered.

“You’re saying that I won’t be able to sell my diamonds?”

“I simply said that you will have difficulty finding a market. Just to enlighten you, the only market available to you will be in the most corrupt of cities. You will be forced to deal with a most dangerous and criminal element of society.”

‘LeHops IS in business with the MOB,’ Chris thought. He couldn’t let on he knew and continued to act naive. “You’re saying that if I don’t sell you my mine, I’ll be forced to go to the black market to sell my diamonds?”

“No, there is no black market. But, let me tell you, you would be better off if there was a black market. It would be safer for you.” The old man became more intimidating by the second.

Tommie had heard enough. “Chris, call Officer Dandy right now. Let him handle this.”

Chris opened the door and again looked for Dandy. There was still no sign of him. “He’s not out there.”

“What? He has to be!” Tommie exclaimed.

“The officer was called away on more important matters,” Van Den Krauss said matter-of-factly.

Tommie grabbed Chris’s cell phone from his belt and started to dial 911. Before she could hit the last key, Van Den Krauss seized the phone from her hand. He removed the

battery, put it in his pocket and handed the phone back to Tommie.

“I don’t want any interruptions. We have business to take care of and the police have nothing to do with it.”

The Campbells were shocked by the man’s nerve. Tommie stormed down the hall and into her office. Chris and Van Den Krauss watched her disappear.

Van Den Krauss spoke, “What I was telling you was that you would be forced to deal with an element of society that global law enforcement agencies fear. Do you think you and your family are up to the challenge? Look how your wife runs from me, like a frightened rabbit.”

“This sounds like extortion to me!” Chris countered.

“No, it is simply a statement of fact,” Van Den Krauss replied calmly. “If you don’t sell me your diamond mine, you will have no place to market your diamonds.”

“Unless I want to risk getting killed. Is that what you’re telling me?”

“If that is how you wish to interpret the advice I have given you, that is your prerogative,” replied the dispassionate Van Den Krauss.

“If you don’t leave right now, I’ll throw you out!” Chris declared.

“Right, leave or he’ll throw you out!” Tommie shouted, as she returned to the foyer. Chris was surprised by her boldness. He noticed her right hand was buried, out of sight, in her pant pocket. “I’m not going to ask you again. Leave my house – right now!” Chris exclaimed.

Van Den Krauss wouldn’t budge and replied, “Perhaps I didn’t make myself clear.”

Tommie thought it was time to take action. She knew she was doing something stupid, but didn’t know what else to do. Collecting all her nerve, she blurted out, “I have a gun!” She pulled a pistol from her pocket, pointed it right at Van Den Krauss and demanded, “Now, leave our home!”

“You are quite amusing, Mrs. Campbell,” Van Den Krauss declared.

“I’ll use it – if I have to!” Tommie exclaimed.

Chris needed to diffuse the situation, immediately. He grabbed the pistol from Tommie’s hand and put it in his pocket.

Van Den Krauss laughed. “I should call the police and have you arrested for threatening me – with a starter’s pistol!”

The kids were upstairs, oblivious to what was happening at the front door. They were making good progress on their diamond research. They had both found considerable information on the diamond industry overall. However, they were not having much success determining where their diamond came from. Kim had found nothing to dispell Scott’s claim that the crystal had come from outer space. She firmly believed that it had been in Max’s food, but was still having trouble locating the site for Hoppy Pet Food. Meanwhile, Scott was digging even deeper for the information he needed to prove his meteorite theory.

RING... RING... A cell phone rang.

Van Den Krauss answered, “Yes, Sir. ...No, Sir. ...They are being unreasonable and obstinate. ...No, Sir, that will not be necessary. ...I advise against it.” Van Den Krauss looked worried. A few seconds passed.

DING-DONG... DING-DONG...

"It's probably the police," Chris confidently declared.

Van Den Krauss snorted. "The police? I don't think so." He opened the door and in walked a second man. He was short, bald and about the same age as Van Den Krauss.

"I am Gerhard LeHops. I am here to purchase your diamond mine."

Tommie and Chris's jaws dropped. Chris quickly recovered and gathered up his courage. "We already told your partner," Chris insisted, "we're not selling – despite the fact that he threatened us." "I apologize for Mr. Van Den Krauss," LeHops said. "He has been an acquisitions negotiator for my family's business for many years. His methods are old fashioned, but effective."

"Not this time," Chris replied. "We have nothing to sell. Please leave."

"Oh, don't be so modest, Mr. Campbell. The entire world knows you have made a new discovery. I saw the photos of the diamond myself. Your son took very good pictures – and he was thoughtful enough to put a ruler beside the diamond to demonstrate its size. My people monitor Internet and media activity all over the world. They could not help but bring this new mine to my attention. Do you think I am foolish enough to come all the way here, for nothing?"

"You're not listening!" Chris exploded. "And I must insist that you leave."

"The naïveté of these people is very amusing, isn't it, Van Den Krauss."

"Yes, it is, Mr. LeHops. Can you believe they threatened me with a starter's pistol?" The two men smirked.

Chris was desperate. "Why aren't you listening?! My dog crapped a rock out. That doesn't mean we have a mine."

LeHops and Van Den Krauss were not phased in the least. "This is not a game, Mr. Campbell." LeHops pulled a pen and paper from his pocket. "You need to understand one thing. My company controls most of the global supply of diamonds. We neither believe in, nor support, competition. We will acquire your mine and you will be pleased with our price. Now," he said, as he wrote on a piece of paper and passed it to Chris, "this figure is fair."

Chris looked down at the paper. "Fifty million dollars!" he exclaimed. "Wait a minute, that's the figure the BNN reporter mentioned."

"I am the only buyer. It is a fair offer."

Chris was frantic. 'I can't sell him something that doesn't exist,' he thought. 'If he IS connected to organized crime, he might have my family whacked.'

"Mr. LeHops, we need time to think this over."

"You have twenty-four hours," LeHops replied. "I will return tomorrow evening to finalize the acquisition." He reached into his pocket and pulled out an envelope. He pressed it into Tommie's hand. "Here is a down payment."

Tommie tried to give the envelope back, but LeHops refused to take it. She put the envelope in her pocket. She was afraid to open it.

Van Den Krauss retrieved the cell phone battery from his pocket and handed it to Chris. "We are simply men of business, not thieves," he declared.

Van Den Krauss and LeHops exited the Campbells' home, leaving the door ajar.

Chapter Sixteen



“Thank goodness they’re gone!” Tommie exclaimed. She watched through the open door as the men stepped into a huge black limousine, which then disappeared into the night. “What happened to our police protection? I can’t see Dandy anywhere.”

“That’s a very good question,” Chris replied, as he closed the door. For a moment, Chris wondered if Kraus admitted they were part of the MOB, or simply men of business, as he put it. Given what Nash had said earlier, Chris quickly concluded they were MOB’d up and became even more worried about what had just transpired. He decided to keep it to himself – he didn’t want Tommie to totally freak-out. She was frightened enough as it was. Chris acted cool.

They remained standing in the foyer. “I’m calling Nash,” Chris announced. He put the battery back in his cell phone and dialed Nash’s number. He let it ring ten times... but no one answered.

“Now, what?” Tommie asked.

“Well, let’s begin with this!” Chris said, as he pulled the starter’s pistol out of his pocket. He flashed it in front of Tommie. “What on earth did you think you were going to do with this? Start a race?”

Suddenly, light streamed through the front windows. They both rushed over to see the source. Tommie spoke first. “It’s a police car pulling into our driveway.” They watched as the car stopped and the driver’s door opened. Officer Dandy emerged. “It’s Dandy! He’s coming to the house.” Chris and Tommie headed for their front door.

Chris pocketed the pistol and yanked open the door. “Officer Dandy, where were you?” Dandy was surprised by his reception. “I’m sorry. I was only gone a few minutes. I got called away on an emergency. It ended up being a false alarm.” Dandy noticed the

Campbells were stressed. “You seem upset. Did something happen while I was gone?”

“YES!” Tommie exclaimed. She and Chris gave Dandy an account of Van Den Krauss’s visit.

“Well,” Dandy said, “I wish he really HAD threatened you.” “Huh?” Tommie was taken aback. “He intimidated us. Isn’t that enough?”

“No, we can’t arrest someone for being intimidating.”

“LeHops was here, too!” Tommie added, hoping to get some action now.

Dandy didn’t seem surprised. “We were aware that his plane landed at Center City Airport but he eluded our surveillance people,” he confessed.

This came as a complete surprise to Tommie. “You tracked LeHops? Why?”

Chris didn't want Tommie worrying any more than she already was. He decided to cut short Dandy's explanation. "He's rich and famous. The police track rich and famous people," he said lamely. "Right, Officer Dandy? Nash told me all about how you do that – how you have a ring of cops that are masters at tracking these kinds of people."

Dandy got the message to keep quiet – despite Chris's convoluted communication. "I need to let Detective Nash know what you've told me. Is there anything you can add, Mr. Campbell? Did you learn anything else?"

Chris knew he was referring to anything he might have learned about the MOB or The Ring Master connection. "No, nothing more than what we told you. They never specifically referred to anyone else."

Dandy was disappointed. He had hoped that LeHops might have let something slip about the real reason he was in Center City. "I'll be out here all night," Dandy said. "Don't worry, I won't let anything distract me again. Just to let you know, Nash has ordered extra officers." Dandy opened up the door and looked out. He spotted unmarked vehicles parked on the street. "They're in position already."

Chris was pleased. "I'll never complain about our city taxes being high again." He was trying his best to lighten up the situation, for Tommie's sake.

Dandy chuckled and left the house. Chris closed the door behind him.

"I'm glad Dandy is back, but we forgot to tell him about this envelope," Tommie said, as she pulled it out of her pocket.

"Are you going to open it?" Chris asked. "I'm afraid to."

"I'll do it," Chris said. He took the envelope from Tommie and opened it. He stared at the contents.

"What is it?" Tommie asked.

"It's a cashier's check for five million dollars."

Tommie didn't believe him. She grabbed the envelope from Chris and looked inside. "Holy smoke!"

"No kidding," Chris added. "Now, what do we do? LeHops is dead serious."

Tommie glared at him. "Why did you have to say that?" "Say what?"

"DEAD serious."

"Sorry, I didn't mean anything by it," Chris said. "The big question is, how are we going to convince him the diamonds don't exist?"

Chris and Tommie thought for a moment. "I'm going to call Danny. Maybe he can do a quick analysis on the crystal and see what it really is," Chris reasoned. He pulled out his cell phone. The battery light was flashing. "It's almost dead," he remarked, before he realized what he said.

This time Tommie laughed. They walked toward the kitchen phone. "Somehow we've convinced ourselves it's a diamond. Let's HOPE it's not."

"Good one," Chris chuckled. "Huh?" Tommie replied.

"Hope. I get it. Hope Diamond. Funny."

Although Tommie hadn't planned the pun, she took credit for it. "I thought you'd like that one."

Chris smiled at her, plugged in the phone, and dialed Danny's number. After a couple of rings, his friend answered. "City Morgue. What stiff do you want to speak to?"

"Don't you ever get tired of that one?" Chris asked.

"Hey, Chris. I thought you were a telemarketer. It gets rid of them pretty fast," Danny

laughed.

“So you’ve told me,” Chris remarked.

“Where have you been?” Danny asked. “I’ve been trying to call you.”

“Surely you’ve heard about our diamond?” “Yes. What’s that all about?”

“It’s all a bunch of media hype. We have this crystal and some- how everyone and their dog, thinks it’s a diamond. Can you help us?” “Have you tried to cut glass with it? It’s not a test that’s a hundred percent accurate, but it’s a start.”

“No, we haven’t,” Chris replied. He turned to Tommie. “Danny wants us to try cutting glass with it.”

Tommie rolled her eyes. “Do you mean that’s all we have to do to prove whether it’s a diamond or not? If we’d done that when Scott suggested it, maybe we could have gotten rid of Van Den Krauss and LeHops for good.”

“Assuming it isn’t a diamond,” Chris added.

Danny could hear their conversation. “Do you want me to take a look at it?”

Chris turned his attention back to Danny. “Would you mind? I’m pretty sure it’s not a diamond, but we need to somehow prove to the media and to this LeHops character that it isn’t, so that they’ll back off. Can you look at the crystal tonight?”

“Sure, bring it over to my place. I’ll check it out here.”

“See you in a few,” Chris said. He hung up the phone and headed to Scott’s room. “I’m going to Danny’s.”

RING... RING...

Tommie knew better, but she picked up anyway. “NO! I don’t want...” she replied. Before she even finished the sentence, she decided to unplug the phone. “And it’s going to stay unplugged until this madness is over!” Tommie said.

Sounds were blasting from multiple sources in Scott’s bedroom. “How can he listen to all that noise?” Chris asked aloud. He pushed open Scott’s door and shouted, “Scott, can I have the crystal, please?” Scott was sitting at his PC, staring at the monitor. Chris walked over to his son and tapped him on the shoulder.

Scott jumped up from his chair and spun around. “Dad! You scared the bejeebers out of me!”

“Give me the crystal,” Chris shouted again. “And turn this noise down! You’ll go deaf.”

Scott reached into his pocket and pulled out the plastic bag. He handed it to Chris.

Chris took the bag and headed for the door. Scott followed him. “Where’re you going?”

“I’m taking it to Danny’s. He’s going to look at it.” “Why? It’s a diamond. We know that already.”

“We don’t know for sure. It’s important that we get this whole business straightened out.”

“Can I come, too?”

“Scott, it’s a school night. Plus, if you go, Kim will want to go – and I’ll catch major heck from your mom. We’ve had enough excitement for one night.”

“Okay. Okay,” Scott replied. He headed back into his room. He didn’t want Chris getting into trouble with Tommie, again.

Kim was unaware of the conversation in the hallway. Her music was as loud as

Scott's. She was still doing diamond research and trying to locate information on Hoppy Pet Food.

Chris headed to the garage. As he passed by Tommie's office, he put the starter's pistol back into the drawer where it was kept. He continued on into the garage, got in his van, and pushed the garage door opener.

Before the door could fully open, a crowd of crazed people surged toward him. Dandy noticed the commotion and shouted, "Close the door!"

"I've got business to take care of," Chris hollered back.

Dandy shook his head and watched helplessly as Chris's van was surrounded.

Chapter Seventeen



“Mr. Campbell, can I interest you in a new luxury SUV!”

“Mr. Campbell! Did you get our email about the real estate opportunity in the Hamptons?” Media hounds and salespeople were everywhere.

A reporter shouted out, “Mr. Campbell, can I get an exclusive?” Chris powered up the windows and locked the van doors. He started the engine and revved it loudly. He meant business. The crowd parted like the Red Sea as Chris gunned it down the drive- way. Chris made his getaway, leaving Dandy to deal with the fallout.

About ten minutes later, Chris pulled up and parked in Danny’s driveway. Danny was sitting on his front steps, eating an ice-cream cone.

“I’m celebrating!” Danny exclaimed. He held up the cone like it was a glass of champagne.

“How come you’re celebrating outside – and all by yourself ?” “Mary won’t let me eat this inside,” Danny admitted. “I might drip on the carpet.”

Chris chuckled. “So, did you finally get that position as faculty head?”

“Better than that. I got a ton of grant money for a research project. I’ll tell you all about it later. First, let’s have a look at that crystal.”

Chris handed Danny the baggie and followed him into the house.

“Mary, Chris is here,” Danny yelled to his wife. Mary was out of sight but not out of earshot. “He brought his crystal. I’ll be in my study.”

Mary shouted back. “You don’t have that cone with you, do you?”

Danny handed the cone to Chris. “Nope. I don’t have it.” He proceeded to his office.

Chris stood in the entranceway, holding the cone and wondering what to do with it. Mary appeared from nowhere. “Oh, I can’t believe that husband of mine! Sometimes he’s worse than a little kid. Give me that cone, Chris.” Chris handed it to her. Mary walked to the kitchen and threw it into the garbage.

“So, Chris, what’s this I hear about a diamond mine?” she asked when she returned.

“Sorry to disappoint you, Mary. We don’t have a diamond mine, just a crystal that the dog pooped out.” Chris told Mary most of the story. Mary knew there had to be a logical explanation, but she didn’t expect that it would include dog poop, an email, The Spaced Channel and BNN.

“This is definitely a diamond, Chris!” Danny called out from his study. “It’s blue and that’s very rare. Its uncut value is more than a million – cut, you’d probably be looking at four to six.”

Chris and Mary were both shocked. “Four to six diamonds or four to six million dollars?” Chris asked, as they headed toward the study.

“Four to six million dollars. That’s my best guess. It looks like you’ve hit the jackpot! By the way, what’s this stuff on it?”

Chris walked over and looked at the crystal. “I wasn’t kidding when I said Max ate the diamond. We think it was in his dog food.” “That explains the animal feces, but it doesn’t explain this other material.”

“What are you talking about?” Chris asked.

“There are minute elements of another mammal’s remains on this diamond. I’d say it could be human or something from the cetacean order.”

“Like a dolphin or a whale?” Chris asked. He didn’t really believe what he’d just heard.

“Yeah. I’ve scraped some of it off. I’ll drive out to the lab right now and do an analysis.”

“It’s probably just dog food ingredients, like cow and horse by-products,” Mary suggested.

“No, this is definitely cetacean.”

“Mary, I think Danny’s yanking our chains,” Chris said.

Danny dropped the crystal back into the bag. He handed the bag to Chris and started to walk out of the office toward the front door. Mary and Chris followed.

“You’re serious,” Mary said. “You ARE going out tonight.” “Sure. I said I was, didn’t I?” Danny replied. He kissed Mary and opened the door. As he exited the house, he turned around and said, “Aw’ll be baaawk.”

Chris looked at Mary. He was as surprised as she was. Chris shrugged his shoulders, headed outside, and said, “See you, Mary.”

“Bye, Chris. Bye, Arnie,” Mary replied and closed the door. Danny walked Chris to his van. “I’ll call you as soon as I know something.”

“Danny, you didn’t tell me about the project.”

“I’ll fill you in another time,” Danny said. He waved bye to Chris and headed to his vehicle.

On the drive home, Chris’s imagination was running wild as he thought about what kinds of cetaceans could be in the dog food. Chris decided not to tell Tommie and the kids what Danny had discovered.

The kids had finished their diamond research and were heading down for a snack. They hip-checked each other in the hallway.

MMMM... CLUNK...

“That’s the garage door!” Kim exclaimed. “Dad’s home,” Scott announced.

“Where was he?” Kim asked, as they rushed downstairs. Chris, who had narrowly escaped from the crowd outside his house, was now mobbed inside by his own kids.

“Where were you?”

“Did Danny say it was a real diamond? Did it come from a meteorite?” Scott asked. He couldn’t wait to be proven right. “How much is it worth?”

Tommie had been busy straightening up her office. She met up with the three of them and they walked together to the kitchen. “So, what did you find out?”

“How come I’m the only one who doesn’t know what’s going on?” Kim asked.

“You’re always out to lunch,” Scott teased.

“To answer your question, Kim, I went to Danny’s. He took a look at the crystal.”

“What did he say?”

They sat down at the kitchen table. Tommie asked Chris, again, “So, what did you find out?”

“Danny said the crystal is a rare blue diamond. It looks like the guy from The Spaced Channel was correct.”

“Great,” Tommie said sarcastically. “Just what I wasn’t hoping for, and NO, I’m not making a pun now.” It was obvious Tommie wasn’t happy with the news.

“Are you nuts, Mom? We’re rich!” Scott exclaimed.

Tommie poured them all a glass of milk and put a bag of chocolate cookies on the table. The kids grabbed for the cookies and milk.

“Now we can afford the double-stuffed chocolate cookies!” Scott declared.

“Dad said it was a rare blue diamond, so we can probably afford triple-stuffed,” Kim added.

“So, how much do you kids think this diamond is worth?” Chris asked.

“I’d say at least a couple of thousand,” Scott proposed.

Chris winked at Tommie. They were somewhat relieved that the kids really had no idea of its value.

“With all the trouble this diamond has caused us this evening, I’ve got half a mind to chuck it in the garbage and be rid of it for good,” Tommie commented.

“If you did that, it would prove you had half a mind,” Scott remarked.

“You kids have no idea what’s going on,” Tommie let slip, out of frustration.

“What?” They both looked at each other, then back at Tommie. “Tell us!” Kim demanded.

Tommie had a policy of telling the kids almost everything. Chris wasn’t so open. He changed the subject. “Now that we’re certain it’s a diamond, I’m curious to hear what you kids found out.”

Kim fell for it. She was dying to share her discoveries.

Chapter Eighteen



Sounding like she was presenting a report at school, Kim began by saying, “South Africa is the main source of diamonds in the world. Diamonds are also mined in India, Siberia, Brazil, Borneo, the Ural Mountains, Canada, the U.S. and Australia. Diamonds come in different colors, like yellow, brown, blue, green and even red. A diamond becomes colored if there was some other mineral with it when it was formed. The white diamond, which is actually clear, is the one most often used in jewelry...”

“Borr-ing...” Scott declared. “Didn’t you find out any good stuff?”

“Shut your trap!” Kim barked. “I’m not finished!” “Keep it civilized,” Tommie ordered.

“You are finished,” Scott interrupted. “Listen to this, Mom. Hitler protected LeHops during the war so LeHops could keep supplying the Nazis with the industrial diamonds they needed to manufacture their war machines.”

“I heard that LeHops sold diamonds to Hitler and the Allied

Forces,” Tommie replied. “They profited big-time from the war.” Scott started again, before Kim could get a word in. He adopted his sister’s presentation style. “Diamonds are made of carbon and are formed deep inside the earth by extreme pressure and heat,” he narrated. “Diamonds are brought to the surface in volcano magma and end up in cooled lava pipes. These pipes can be miles deep and are very dangerous to mine. Some countries and companies don’t have safe mining practices and many diamond miners are killed in mining accidents. Diamonds sometimes get washed away from these pipes by water and end up in riverbeds and other alluvial-deposits.”

“Alluvial!” Kim said, correcting his pronunciation. “It means...”

“I know what it means, I just didn’t know how to pronounce it. It means they were washed away by rivers, so you find them in riverbeds.”

“So much for your space theory,” Kim teased.

“Hey, I was saving the best for last,” Scott retorted. “Diamonds have been found in meteorites. HAH! So, what do you have to say about that?”

“All hail Scott the know-it-all.”

Tommie jumped in to stop any further outbursts. “Kim, did you find out anything else about Hoppy Pet Food, or LeHops?”

“Actually, I couldn’t find anything,” Kim admitted. “It’s freaky – neither Hoppy or LeHops have a web site.”

“Nothing?” Chris asked. “You couldn’t find anything on either one of them? That’s unbelievable.”

“I know. There was a bunch of links that looked like they’d take me to a LeHops site, but when I clicked on them, a message popped up saying the site couldn’t be found. I even checked our encyclopedias. There was no mention of LeHops. What do you think that means?”

“For once in my life, I’m stumped,” Tommie admitted.

Scott looked like he was ready to explode. “LeHops kills whales to separate diamonds from rocks and dirt and stuff!” he blurted out.

All three of them looked at Scott as if he was nuts. “What are you talking about?” Kim demanded.

“I’ll tell you. It’ll blow you away.”

“Okay, we’re all ears,” Chris said. “Or should I say, blow holes.” “Dad, this is serious. So, like I said before, diamonds are formed inside the earth. Once they’re mined, they have to be separated from the other rocks and dirt that are mixed in with them. The difference between diamonds and the other stuff is that the diamonds naturally have a greasy coating. Now, here’s the deal. The mined mix is spread out on a vibrating table that is covered with really thick grease, and then water is poured on top. The greasy coating on the diamonds repels the water but makes the diamonds stick to the grease on the table. So everything but the diamonds are washed away with the water.”

“Talk about boring. What does that have to do with killing whales?” Kim challenged.

Diamond in the Ruff 77

“I’m getting to that,” Scott barked. “Here’s another fact – diamonds that are found in riverbeds don’t have that natural greasy coating.”

Kim thought she’d demonstrate that Scott didn’t know every- thing. “So then, how do you separate riverbed diamonds out from the rest of the junk?” She didn’t expect an answer.

Scott was quick to reply. “LeHops discovered that if he washed all the river gravel and dirt that the diamonds were mixed in, with sperm whale oil, the whale oil coated only the diamonds and gave them back their natural water-repellent surface. Then, he was able to use the same grease-separation process to harvest them.” Scott looked around the table. “Can you imagine how many whales are killed so that LeHops can harvest diamonds?”

“Does this happen everywhere in the world?” Kim asked.

“No, of course not. Just in LeHops mines in places where there are no human or animal rights,” Scott declared.

“Do they really use whale oil?” Kim inquired. “Isn’t it against the law to hunt whales? Aren’t whales an endangered species? Aren’t they protected by governments?”

Chris wasn’t entirely surprised by this information. Things were starting to make sense. The bad news was, maybe it was whale material that Danny had found on the crystal. The good news was, he was pretty certain now that it wasn’t human remains. He decided to call Danny. “I need to call Danny,” Chris said abruptly. He plugged the house phone back in and placed the call.

“Danny, it’s Chris. Have you found anything out?”

“You bet!” Danny declared. He proceeded to fill Chris in.

“You confirmed what I suspected,” Chris said. “I’ll tell the family.”

Chris hung up the phone and Tommie quickly reached over and unplugged it... again.

“Well, what did he say?” Scott asked.

“He says there’s whale remains on the diamond.”

“I guess this must be an alluvial diamond if it’s got whale oil on it,” Tommie suggested.

“LeHops Diamond Company must own Hoppy Pet Food! It all makes sense now! That means the dog food might be made out of whale meat!” Kim exclaimed. “Hey, they can’t do that! That’s ille- gal!”

The family was about to react to Kim’s not-so-outrageous statement when...

DING-DONG...

“Who could that be at this hour?” Chris asked. He got up and walked to the door. This time he looked through the peephole before opening it.

Chapter Nineteen



“It’s Detective Nash,” Chris announced, as he opened the door. “Come in.”

Tommie and the kids joined Chris and Nash in the foyer.

“I have some questions I need to ask you that wouldn’t be appropriate for the kids to hear,” Detective Nash said quietly to Chris. “Dandy filled me in on your ‘visitors’ tonight.”

“Up to bed, you two,” Chris directed.

Scott thought he heard the word, visitors. “Visitors?” he repeated. “We had visitors?”

“What about the whales?” Kim insisted.

“Upstairs. We’ll save the whales another day,” Chris replied. He ignored Scott’s question.

“But, Mom! Dad!” “BED! NOW!”

The kids knew it was useless to argue and headed upstairs. As soon as Scott and Kim were out of sight, Nash motioned Chris and Tommie to step outside the house. Then he dropped the bomb. “When we go back in, put on your television and turn the volume up high. Your house may be bugged.”

“Bugged?” Tommie exclaimed.

Nash and Chris gave her the ‘shush’ sign. They headed back into the house to the family room. Chris turned on LoudMusicTV. “That should drown out our conversations,” he said.

Tommie and Chris sat down on the couch. Nash remained standing.

Someone was trying to listen in on Nash and the Campbells’ conversation. “What is this? What is this noise?” asked an old man. “It’s a singer named Tiffany Cheers,” replied a young man.

“I cannot hear what they are saying. What is it he did again? I want them to shut this off. We cannot hear a word they are speaking.”

“We can’t do anything about it, Gramps. They have their radio or television volume turned up.”

“What did I tell you about calling me Gramps. I am the Supreme Leader. You will show me respect and call me – Supreme Leader!” ordered the old man.

“Sure. Whatever.”

Tiffany’s song ended and was followed immediately by a rapper. “Man, these aren’t just oldies, they’re moldies,” the grandson declared.

“And who is this?”

“That’s a rapper called Eminem.”

“Oh, I love those candies,” replied the old man. “Not M&M – Eminem,” explained the grandson.

The old man laughed. “I have a joke for you.” He grabbed a piece of paper and wrote down what appeared to be random letters. “Here, read this,” he ordered the grandson.

“I thought you were spying on these people.”

“This is not working. They must know we are listening!” exclaimed the old man. “This is a waste of time. Turn off the listening device!”

The grandson was happy to comply. “I’ve got work to do. I’m going home.”

The old man insisted the grandson read the joke.

“Okay. I give up. I’ll read it.” He grabbed the piece of paper and read,

“A B C D Pups

M N O Pups O S A R Pups C M P N?”

“What the H E double hockey sticks is this?” the grandson barked.

“You’re as dense as your father,” the old man bellowed.

“I’m outta here,” the grandson replied. He grabbed his red jacket and blue cap and headed for the door. He mumbled to himself as he walked. “A B C D pups... M N O pups... O S A... Ohh, I get it... Oh yes they are pups... See them peeing? Very funny, Gramps.”

“There’s hope for you yet,” the old man shouted, as the grandson closed the door.

Scott was determined he wasn’t going to be kept in the dark. He was also determined not to get caught. He quickly typed an instant message.

TING...

Kim looked at the pop-up message indicator. ‘What the heck does Scott want?’ she wondered, as she read it.

Kim, meet me in the hallway. Keep out of sight.

TING...

Scott read her reply.

Belly crawl. See you in one.

The two kids hit the floor and crawled on their bellies to the top of the staircase. The first thing they noticed was the loud music.

“Now what?” whispered Scott. “Yuck! They’re listening to LoudMusicTV. It’s playing their old fogey stuff from the last millennium.”

“I know. How come they’re listening to this stuff with Detective Nash here? Unless... hey, I bet they don’t want us to hear what they’re saying! It must be really important.”

“It’s working. I can’t hear a word,” Scott complained. He peeked through the staircase. “Kim! What’s Nash doing?”

Detective Nash was walking around the family room, aiming a small electronic gadget at various objects in the room. Eventually, he paused beside the fireplace and pointed toward the screen. He put on some latex gloves, reached behind the screen, removed something, and put it in a plastic bag. “I think the room is clean now,” Nash said. “But let’s continue to keep the conversation quiet and the music loud.”

Chris and Tommie nodded. They worried about what Nash had to say.

“Chris, Tommie, I have some very disturbing news for you.” CREEEAK...

Chris thought he heard the upstairs floor creak.

Scott and Kim didn't see Chris put his finger to his lips. “Shhhh,” he whispered, as he quietly walked toward the staircase.

Suddenly, Chris bellowed, “Hey, you two! You'd better not be at the top of the stairs, listening in!”

The kids jumped up and scooted back to Scott's bedroom. This time, Chris not only heard the floor creak, but also the thumps of the kids' footsteps. “Those two,” he mumbled.

Nash walked over to the staircase and looked up toward the kids' bedrooms. He wanted to make sure they weren't sneaking back out.

Scott was devising a plan. “We need to get into Mom's office without them knowing. I think if we put our ears to the wall, we'll be able to hear what's going on in the family room.”

“Which escape from Alcatraz plan should we use?” Kim asked. Scott had it all worked out. “The garage – roof – lattice – side garage door plan.”

“That should do it,” Kim agreed. They'd successfully done this before. “The garage door had better be unlocked.”

“I think it is. I'm sure I was the last one through it this afternoon, and I didn't lock it.”

“Perfect.”

Scott quietly slid open his bedroom window that overlooked the garage roof. They heard voices coming from their front yard.

“What's happening out there?” Kim asked Scott. Their own music and TVs had been cranked up so loud that they hadn't heard the noise outside. A horde of people were standing on the sidewalk. Barrier tape and three burly policemen were preventing the crowd from coming onto the Campbell property.

“Those must be the visitors that Nash mentioned. This is going to be trickier than I thought,” Scott said. “We can't let the cops see us. They'll rat us out to Mom and Dad.”

“No problem,” Kim assured Scott. “We can do it. We just have to keep low and quiet. Turn out your light so no one will see us.”

Scott turned out his bedroom light and together they escaped out the window into the darkness. The easy part was crawling across the roof to the lattice. The lattice was another matter. Tommie had planted grapevines and it was difficult to get up and down without wrecking the plants. To date, Tommie hadn't noticed anything out of the ordinary.

The kids carefully shimmied down the lattice and tiptoed to the garage door. Their hearts pounded. Would the door be unlocked? Scott reached for the knob. It turned! The door creaked open. They quietly snuck into the garage, then into the house through the back door. They crept through the laundry room, out across the hallway, and into Tommie's office. So far, the plan had been executed flawlessly.

They crouched down and placed their ears against the wall that divided Tommie's office from the family room. They hoped they hadn't missed much.

Chapter Twenty



With the kids out of sight, Nash was confident that they were also out of earshot. He began to explain. “We think the people who broke into your home tonight and planted this listening device work for Popinopolous. But, so far we only have circumstantial evidence. We don’t know if Popinopolous himself was involved. He could have been set up.”

“Why would anyone do that?”

“To throw us off the track of the real criminals.”

“So, why do you think the people who broke into our house work for Popinopolous?” Tommie asked. “Was it because they used his car – and wore a blue jacket and red hat – exactly like the kids saw in the restaurant?”

“That, and we found his car with the keys in the ignition – so it wasn’t hot-wired. When we checked with Popinopolous, he had his set of car keys with him, but his spare set was missing from his office.”

“So, maybe he lent them to the guys that broke in here.”

Nash shook his head. “Think about it for a minute. Why would he use his own car in a break and enter?”

“Good point,” Chris commented. “So, what do you need to ask us?”

“We got a tip that a car went off a pier tonight. Divers confirmed it was Popinopolous’s car.”

“The one that was here earlier?” Chris asked. “But what’s that got to do with us?”

“There’s more. We found a blue jacket and red hat inside.” Tommie and Chris were stunned.

“There’s still more, I’m afraid.”

Tommie was anxious. “What? Was there a body in the car?” “Yes. How did you know?” Nash was surprised by her question.

“I didn’t! I... I...” Tommie stuttered.

“Calm down, Tommie,” Chris said. “Who was it?” “We don’t know. That’s why I’m here.”

“What’s it got to do with us?” Chris asked, again. Now, he was nervous.

Nash pulled a picture out of his pocket and held it up. “Do you recognize this man?”

Tommie exclaimed, “That’s Mr. Van Den Krauss! The guy I told Dandy about. I pulled a guh...”

“You pulled a guh? What’s a guh?” Nash asked. When neither of them answered, Nash proposed, “Could this guh... be a gun?”

The kids gasped. They couldn't believe what they had just heard.

"Does he think Mom shot someone?"

"Kim, be quiet! I can't hear what Nash is saying."

"You failed to inform Dandy of this, didn't you," Detective Nash said accusingly.

"It was just so foolish. I was embarrassed," Tommie admitted. Chris got up from his chair and left the room.

thumP... thuMP... THUMP...

Chris's footsteps were getting louder. "Dad's coming! Hide!" Scott ordered. They scurried under Tommie's desk.

CLICK...

The lights went on. The kids huddled close together. Chris walked over to the desk and opened a drawer.

Suddenly, Kim realized she had felt safer with the lights off. Her jaw dropped. She pointed to the bottom of the drawer that her dad had opened. Scott's eyes bulged. Sitting on a web a few inches from Kim's head, was the biggest spider the two had ever seen.

Kim held her breath. She wanted to scream – and so did Scott. Chris took something from the drawer, closed it, and walked out of the office.

CLICK...

Blackness again. The kids scrambled out from under the desk. "Man, that thing was huge!" Scott whispered.

"No kidding. It was scary. I thought I was going to freak."

"I didn't say I was scared, I just said it was huge," Scott said, now that the spider was a safe distance away.

"You're full of it. You were just as afraid as me. Actually, you were probably more afraid. You're..."

Scott had already crept back to the wall and had his ear up to it again, but all he could hear was Kim rambling. "Shut-up, Kim. I've got more important things to do than listen to you."

Kim realized she was being stupid. She shut-up, joined Scott on the floor, and leaned up against the wall to listen.

Chris returned to the family room. He walked up to Nash and handed him the starter's pistol.

Nash smiled. "If you had told me where you were going, I could have saved you the trip," he explained. "The guy wasn't shot. It looks like a massive heart attack killed him." Tommie and Chris were relieved. "So, this Van Den Krauss person was here with LeHops tonight," Nash confirmed.

"LeHops was here?" Kim squeaked. "The diamond mogul?" "Shuuuush," Scott warned, as he elbowed her. "Just listen!" TWANG... AAAAH... BAAABY... BANG...

The 'Hour of Power' began on LoudMusicTV – death metal. "Great. I don't think we'll be able to hear much now," Scott whispered.

"We have to try."

The kids did their best, but only bits and pieces of the conversation were audible over the noise from the TV.

“Did LeHops come to town just to buy our diamonds?” Tommie asked.

“You might as well tell her,” Chris said. “Tell me what?”

“Guys like LeHops are tracked continuously by Interpol, the CIA, FBI, The Company. We suspect he was here to meet with the Men Of Business and The Ring Master of the organized crime syndicate. Since you only discovered your diamond this evening, you’re probably not the primary reason.”

“The Mob! Organized crime?” Tommie nervously blurted out.

“Diamonds are common money laundering currency in their business,” Nash explained.

Tommie looked panic-stricken. She turned to Chris with an accusatory glance and shrieked, “Part of their money laundering! You knew this? Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I didn’t want you to worry more than you already were,” Chris admitted.

“Well, I’m worried big-time now.”

Nash tried to put her mind at ease. “Now that we know what we’re dealing with, we’ll have you and your family under constant surveillance. You’ll be fine.”

“Like we were tonight?” Tommie asked sarcastically.

“That won’t happen again,” Nash promised her. “You know we’ve already upped the manpower. We’ve got three officers out front and two boats out back. Now, I’ve got to get back to the precinct. I’ve got lots of work to do, not to mention trying to deal with the media. This diamond mine story has got them behaving like idiots. I don’t think any of them have the story straight.” Nash got up and walked toward the foyer.

“No need to tell us about it,” Chris said. He and Tommie escorted Nash to the door. They made sure to lock the door behind him.

“I’m exhausted, but my head is spinning,” Tommie complained. “Let’s turn off this music,” Chris suggested. “I’ll make some chamomile tea. That should calm our nerves.”

Tommie walked over to the TV and shut it off. The kids were pleased. Now they’d be able to hear everything... except Tommie and Chris decided to move further away from the office, to the kitchen. The kids were back to hearing snippets of their conversation.

Chris filled the kettle with water and plugged it in. He placed a tea bag in the teapot and pulled two mugs from the cupboard. Tommie settled into her chair at the table. “Better make mine a double,” she half-heartily joked.

“There’s nothing we can do, except sit and wait for the police to take care of this.”

“Do you really think Center City Police can handle this sort of thing? You heard Nash. He can’t even get the media to cooperate.”

“What choice do we have?” Chris asked.

“I guess you’re right. At least we’ve got police protection until this whole thing is over.”

“I think we need to take a page from the kids. I’ll bet they’re upstairs sleeping like babies. It looks like they’ve put this whole thing out of their minds. We need to do the same.”

“You’re right. I have important meetings tomorrow morning with my attorney and then with Buck Huckster,” Tommie said, rubbing her forehead. “Has that water boiled yet?”

“Watched pot and all that,” Chris grinned. Tommie took a deep breath and let it out slowly. HISSSS... the kettle screamed. “Finally,” Tommie said.

Chris poured the water into the teapot. They sat quietly, waiting for the tea to steep.

“Perfect,” Scott said. “Nash is gone and they’re busy in the kitchen. Time to sneak back upstairs.” As they began to retrace their steps, Scott asked his sister, “Did you hear what they said? Something about a master, laundry, the FBI, currency and some company. I didn’t get much else.”

“Me neither. I hardly heard anything after he mentioned LeHops – except it sounds like Mom and Dad don’t think the police can handle this.”

As their parents drank their tea, the kids returned to Alcatraz. They made it out of the house, undetected. Now all they had to do was scale the lattice, crawl back over the garage roof, and climb in through the window.

Scott made it safely inside. Kim was squeezing through the window when...

RRRRIP...

Her T-shirt snagged on the casing. BANG...

The window slammed shut behind her. THUDDDD...

The window hit Kim’s butt and knocked her to the ground. “OOOOCH!” Kim howled, as she banged her knee on the floor.

“Kim, get up! Quick!” Scott pleaded. “Mom and Dad probably heard that.” He ran over and turned his bedroom light on.

Scott was right. Chris and Tommie had heard the thump. “What was that?” Tommie asked.

“It sounded like it came from Scott’s room. We’d better check it out.”

“Scott!” Chris shouted, as he and Tommie ran upstairs. “What was that noise?”

“NOTHING!” Scott yelled back. “It’s nothing. I just closed my window.”

“Please, don’t come in,” Kim pleaded.

It was too late – Chris and Tommie flung open the door. Kim and Scott were huddled around the PC. Kim was hiding the tear in her T-shirt.

“What’s going on here? I thought you two were in bed,” Tommie said. She looked around the room. It was still a mess.

“What was that noise?” Chris asked again. Kim was quick to answer. “Scott farted.”

“I didn’t fart – Kim did,” Scott declared. “I opened the window to air the place out. It accidentally slammed shut when I closed it.” At first, Tommie and Chris were suspicious about the fart part, but with the addition of the window slamming, their kids’ story seemed plausible.

“Kim, I’d say it was time for bed,” Tommie said.

“Scott and I are just talking about some stuff. I’ll go to bed soon,” Kim promised.

“Okay, but make it sooner rather than later. It’s already way past your bedtime.” Tommie was about to head to her room when she decided to fill the kids in. “Just to let you know, the police have our house under surveillance. It’s for our protection. There are officers out front and also out back on the water, so there’s no need to worry about anything.”

“We’re not worried,” Scott said.

It appeared the kids were handling the situation better than the adults. “What did we say about them? Resistant, resilient – and now, rotten,” Chris said.

“Hey, are you guys making fun of us?” Scott asked.

Chris looked at Tommie and winked. “Who, us? Never!” Chris declared, doing his best to keep a straight face.

“Goodnight, kids,” Tommie said. She and Chris closed the door behind them. Tommie went straight to her bedroom. Chris walked downstairs to turn out lights. By the time he made it back upstairs, Tommie was already asleep. As soon as Chris’s head hit the pillow, so was he.

Scott and Kim, however, were not.

The two were curious about Nash’s media comments. Scott checked his email and the Internet news. Kim switched Scott’s television from sports to news. The kids absorbed the information – and misinformation. They noticed a few common themes. According to the news reports, the Campbells had been visited by LeHops. Secondly, a man named Van Den Krauss was dead and had been dumped off a pier that evening. Now the media reports were suggesting that these two events were connected.

“They’re making it sound like we’re involved in this guy’s death,” Scott remarked. “This is bad.”

And it was about to get worse, as BNN reported.

Chapter Twenty-One



Reporter: BNN now has irrefutable proof that the body found at the Center City Pier tonight was that of Wilhelm Van Den Krauss, long-time associate of Mr. Gerhard LeHops, of the LeHops Diamond Company. Police have interrogated Tommie and Chris Campbell of Center City about the murder. They are the only suspects at this time.

“Holy cow!” Scott declared. “Do you think we should tell Mom and Dad?”

“We know Mom and Dad didn’t murder anyone,” Kim remarked, “and Detective Nash knows they didn’t.”

“Just like we know there’s no diamond mine!” Scott exclaimed. “We need to take action.”

“That’s the police department’s job,” Kim insisted.

“Mom and Dad didn’t sound convinced that the police could handle this. Remember what they said?”

Kim did remember. “You’re right. And remember what Nash said? He can’t even get the media to cooperate.”

“So, we need to do something.”

“What are the options? What can we do that the cops can’t?” Scott thought for a moment. “The police are going to do things by the book. They have no choice – but we do.” “What do you have in mind?” Kim asked.

Scott had a blank look on his face. “I haven’t figured that out yet.” “Well, between the two of us, we should be able to come up with a plan.”

“Let’s think for a minute,” Scott suggested. “What got us into this mess?”

“Poop, a rock, an email, the Internet and the media.”

“And how did we try to get out of this mess?” Scott asked. “With the truth.”

“And did that work?” “No.”

“So what keeps us in this mess?”

Kim didn’t need to think long to answer his question. “Let’s see – greed, the media, misinformation and stupidity. And don’t forget LeHoops,” Kim giggled. “I mean LeHops.”

“No, I think you’re on to something, Kim,” Scott said encouragingly. “Coach says the best defense is a good offense.”

“Hoops? You mean basketball is the key?”

“I say we take it to LeHoop and LeMedia!” Scott exclaimed. They both chuckled. They made a great team when they had a common purpose.

“Good one, Scott. What’s the game plan?” “We need to make sure the truth comes

out.” “Which truth is that?”

“The most important truth – that Mom and Dad didn’t murder anyone.”

“And what do we do about LeHops and the diamonds and the whales?” Kim asked. “Should we tackle those truths, too?”

“Of course. But we have to make sure Mom and Dad are off the hook. That’s our priority.”

Kim definitely agreed. “So, how are we going to get the media to believe what we say is the truth?”

“We need to contact Amy and Alex, like Dad suggested,” Scott said. “Too bad we can’t.”

“Why not?”

“Duuuuh... because Mom and Dad have all the phones unplugged – remember?”

“Duuuuh... so plug yours back in, or turn on your cell.”

Scott was embarrassed that Kim had to point out the obvious to him. He plugged in his phone and called Alex.

RING... RING... RING... CLICK... “Good evening. This is the Black residence.” “Mrs. Riverez. It’s Scott, again. Is Alex home?”

“No, Scott, I don’t know where they are. They should have been home an hour ago.” Then she changed her tone. “It’s very late, Scott. You shouldn’t be phoning at this hour.”

“I know. I’m sorry, but it’s really important. Can you get Alex to call me?” Kim rapidly shook her head. Scott looked at her quizzically, and then realized that the phone would be unplugged as soon as he and Kim were done trying to contact their friends.

“It’s okay. Don’t bother. Thanks, Mrs. Riverez. Good-bye.” Scott hung up and handed the phone to Kim. “Hurry-up and call Amy!”

Kim placed the call.

RING... RING... RING... CLICK... “You have reached...”

Kim hung up and quickly unplugged the phone. “She’s not home either. What gives? Where is everyone tonight?”

“I guess our only option is to message them. I’ll start with Alex.” Scott typed while Kim watched the monitor. Within minutes, he had finished his message. “There,” he said. “That should do it.”

“I hope he reads it,” Kim added. “Copy it to Amy.” Scott typed in Amy’s address and pressed Send.

“What if they don’t check their messages when they get home?” Kim asked. “Maybe we should have a backup plan.”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know. We need to think,” Kim replied.

Scott and Kim sat quietly for a moment. Suddenly, Scott slapped his head. “It’s so obvious, Kim!” he declared. “The Internet launched these lies. Let’s use it to OUR advantage this time.”

“Now you’re talking, Scott. If we can’t reach Amy and Alex’s dads and get them to report the truth about Mom and Dad, we’ll just use the Internet.”

“And we can broadcast the truth about the diamonds and whales and LeHops,” Scott added. “Okay, Kim, what are you thinking?” Scott didn’t wait for Kim to answer.

“How about outrageous, yet vague. We’ll let the media fill in the blanks.”

“Excellent!” Kim exclaimed enthusiastically. “We give them a little bit of

information, and then they'll run with it. Just like they did with your email to The Spaced Channel. We'll help them do it again, only this time LeHops is the subject, not us, and not our diamond."

"Yeah, and that way we're not responsible," Scott figured.

"Sounds like a kick-butt plan. So, what will we say and who will we tell?"

"I think we should send it to The Spaced Channel," Scott reasoned. "The Internet spies will take it from there. Let's tell them we have some information about our diamond we need confirmed and questions we need answered. That should hook them like fish."

"Now, we just have to bait the hook with an email," Kim said.

"Here, let me." She moved to the keyboard and started typing.

To: The Spaced Channel

From: ScottandKimCampbell@UniversalThinkers.com

Subject: Thanks for the help with identifying the diamond.

Now we need your help to expose a global conspiracy. Please confirm the following information and answer the questions.

"That should grab their attention!" Kim exclaimed.

Scott was impressed. "Good work, Kim. Let me at the keyboard. I have an idea." He moved into position and started typing as he talked aloud.

We think there is a global conspiracy but we are afraid to tell anyone about it. We were HOPing that if we gave you some of the information, and you can confirm it, and if you can answer some of our questions, you could figure out the conspiracy for yourself and expose it. We don't want Le 'baseball field' guy coming after us...if you know what we mean. We really HOPE you can read between Le lines. We're afraid that if you don't figure it out, we'll be in d-e-e-e-e-e-p trouble.

"Okay, Scott. I got the 'diamond' and the 'Le' references. They should be able to figure out we're talking about LeHops."

"I couldn't think of a basketball connection, or I'd have used it." Kim wondered about the last sentence Scott had typed. "But what's the d-e-e-e-e-e-p thing?" "There are six E's in deep – get it?"

"Six? Hmmm... As in six feet under? I get it now – we'll be dead. I hope that's not too subtle for them. What next?"

Scott was on a roll. "How about these for sound bites?"

LeHops Diamond Company

Is Hitler dead? Africa.

Hoppy Pet Food.

Did Jimmy Hoffa go underground? Who killed Van Den Krauss?

IPO.

Many die in mining mishaps. Children suffer in poor countries.

Endangered species alert – Whales slaughtered for their oil. Special oil used to give diamonds back their shine.

New pet food uses unique sources of protein. Center City diamond find. Is it a hoax?

Kim couldn't contain her excitement. "Cool, Scott! This should keep LeMedia and LeHops hopping."

"Got anything to add?" Scott asked.

"No. I think this is perfect. Send it like it is."

"Okay," Scott said, as he pushed Send. "Bombs away!"

Chapter Twenty-Two



“Now, we have to wait for the fireworks to begin,” Kim laughed. “What should we do in the meantime?”

“Let’s set up my stuff, so we can monitor a bunch of channels at the same time,” Scott suggested.

“Another good idea, Scott. You’re full of them tonight,” Kim admitted. “. . .and farts, too.” She just had to sneak that one in.

Scott and Kim identified all of the electronic equipment in his room that could receive and display a television signal. They then arranged them to face Scott’s bed. They turned all of them on and activated any split screen capability. With seven different news channels on at the same time, Scott and Kim sat down on the bed and waited for the reports.

“This might take awhile,” Kim commented. “Let’s watch Law and Order.”

“No, Deep Space Nine is on,” Scott insisted. Kim knew that arguing with Scott about this was pointless. Besides, she liked the old reruns, too. They tuned in to Deep Space Nine on The Spaced Channel while they waited.

Within thirty minutes, the major news channels were covering the stories – or at least the news channels’ versions. Scott and Kim watched in amazement as the reports appeared, each one more sensational and outrageous than the last. It seemed that as soon as one report finished, another popped up on a different screen.

Reporter: Hitler’s suicide was a hoax. Our sources tell us that Hitler was smuggled out of Germany to South Africa by diamond mogul Gerhard LeHops. Adolph Hitler and his offspring have been running the global mining operations of LeHops from their palatial sanctuary in Kimberley, South Africa. This report was brought to you by Diamonds R Us, your diamond store and pawn shop.

“That’s not bad, huh?” Scott boasted.

“Not bad at all. But it needs to be ‘badder’,” Kim replied. “Let’s see what The Wild Channel has to say.”

Reporter: Thousands of children die each year in unsafe diamond mines under the uncaring watch of Adolph Hitler. Our sources also tell us that LeHops has been slaughtering whales for their oil and using the dead children and whales for protein in their Hoppy Pet Food.

This newsbreak has been brought to you by Purrfection Cosmetics, who test all of their products on defenseless animals and children – just so you don't have to.

“I love the way they tied in the whale oil with the pet food,” Kim commented. “And all we did was plant a seed.”

Scott was very happy. “I'll bet this story gets everyone ticked-off at LeHops!”

“The whale part's true,” Kim declared. “But using children for dog food? I didn't expect that one.”

Scott continued to scan the screens. “Great! InquisitorTV's picked up the story. This one should be way out there.”

Reporter: We now have proof that pet food is being made from endangered species. Hoppy Pet Food, the world's fastest growing pet food manufacturer, is using whales, giraffes, elephants, gorillas, humans, puppies and kittens in their pet food. How will this news affect the sale of their stock when the company goes public next week? Did they violate IPO reporting requirements by not divulging they were feeding kittens and puppies – to kittens and puppies?

This newsbreak has been sponsored by The Furrie Factory, specializing in those hard-to-get exotic animal pelts.

“Kittens and puppies? That didn't come from us!” Scott exclaimed.

“Face it, Scott. Most people just don't care about the dying kids or the real endangered species. But what could be more despicable than killing innocent kittens and puppies! I think this story will do the most harm to LeHops and Hoppy.”

“I think you're right.”

“Do you think Dr. Chester will want to invest in the company when he finds out they kill endangered species?”

“I don't know. People invest in lots of companies that needlessly kill lots of things,” Scott responded.

Kim pointed at another screen – as yet another story broke. “Look at this. Herald has jumped on the bandwagon. Let's see what kind of exposé she's going to do.”

Reporter: Hitler and Jimmy Hoffa – what do they have in common? I'll tell you and the rest of the world next Saturday at nine o'clock on N&BS. Tune in. You won't want to miss this one. This exclusive revelation will be brought to you by the good people at Don's Pizzeria and Vice Emporium. They've got a daily special offer you can't refuse.

“This is just stupid!” Kim declared.

Before Scott could reply, InvestmentTV had a special report from Abigail Lector of Fleecemans & Sisters' Investment House.

Lector: My investment IPO pick of the week is Hoppy Pet Food. I recommend that you invest heavily in this stock. It will only go up and up. The pet food industry is growing at a rate of ten percent per year and Hoppy has been capturing almost all of this growth. I have been assured by Gerhard LeHops himself that they do not use kittens and

puppies in their pet food and that their IPO prospectus is as truthful as any other company's. He promises big things from Hoppy Pet Food.

"I was right! LeHops does own Hoppy," Kim announced.

"She didn't even mention the whales. She's trying to cover it up!" Scott declared.

"Look, Scott. Even ALLSPORTSTV is getting into the act."

Reporter: A former Olympic Gold Medalist in the javelin throw was murdered yesterday. Wilhelm Van Den Krauss was South Africa's only gold medal javelin thrower. He honed his skills on whaling vessels in the forties when whaling was legal. ALLSPORTSTV sends its regrets to the Van Den Krauss family and to the javelin community. Too bad they don't whale like they used to.

"Good grief, Scott. This is disgusting. Where do people get these demented ideas?"

"Hey, we needed outrageous."

"But no one has said that Mom and Dad didn't kill Van Den Krauss!"

"That's got to get out eventually."

"See if Alex and Amy got our messages," Kim suggested.

Scott walked over to his PC and checked. "I've got an acknowledgement from Alex and that's all. It's just his auto reply. I sure hope he's going to be able to help."

"Anything from Amy?" Kim asked. "Nothing – she's probably in bed."

"Do you think we should let them know about LeHops selling the Hoppy stock?"

"Why?"

"I think it's a big part of the story – and we need to make the case to save the whales," Kim explained.

"InquisitorTV almost got it right," Scott commented. "Yeah, but no one believes anything they say."

"Okay, go ahead. Message Amy whatever you want. And forward it to Alex, too."

Kim got on the computer and wrote a new message to Amy. This one had to do with LeHops, whales, Hoppy Pet Food and the IPO. When she was finished, she sat back down on the bed and midnight. The kids were exhausted and fell asleep on Scott's bed.

Meanwhile, the media lineup was still playing out the drama – and there was more to come.

Chapter Twenty-Three



When Amy Montgomery arrived home, she went directly to her bedroom to check her computer for messages. “Dad! The Campbells are in some kind of mess!” she shouted down the hallway.

“I know, Amy.”

“And there’s diamonds in their pet food – and something to do with an IOP, whatever that is.”

“You mean IPO?” Richard Montgomery asked, as he headed to her room.

“Right, IPO.”

“How did you find out?” “Kim sent me a message.”

“Oh, good grief. The kids – I never thought of that,” Richard admitted. He was now standing beside Amy.

“How did you know, Dad?”

“My people have been trying to contact them all night. I even have reporters at their house, but we can’t get through the police barricade,” Richard explained. “What did she say in her message?” “She’s been trying to contact me. She wants you to help get her family out of trouble.” As Richard pulled up a chair beside her, Amy continued, saying, “Dad, she also wants you to blow the whistle on Hoppy Pet Food. She says they use whale meat! Here, read it.”

By the time he finished reading the messages, Richard looked like the cat that swallowed the canary. “It all makes sense now,” he said.

“What does?” Amy asked.

“The media’s got it all wrong,” Richard exclaimed. “Amy, I’m going to print these messages and take them down to the police station. I need to get confirmation of this story. We’re going to break this one... little old Center City TV.”

“Can I come?” Amy begged. She had aspirations of becoming a famous investigative reporter.

“No, it’s way too late.” Richard saw the look of disappointment on Amy’s face. “Listen, why don’t you message Kim back. Maybe she can get through to her parents – and maybe I can get an exclusive interview through the kids. That’ll be the best help you can give me.” “Okay, Dad,” Amy replied. She quickly typed and sent a message to Kim. Little did she know that Scott and Kim were fast asleep. And, with the noise of several TV stations playing in the background, they couldn’t hear the ‘tinging’ of the message indicator.

As Amy and her dad waited for a reply, Alex and his father were doing the same. Joel Black was on over-drive after he read the messages from the Campbell kids on Alex's computer. When Alex's reply to Scott also went unanswered, Joel knew he had no time to lose.

While the Campbell family slept – and before Richard and Joel could set the record straight – the world reacted to the crazy news.

BZZZZ... BZZZZ... BZZZZ...

The sound of alarms bellowed from the three bedrooms in the Campbell household. It was 6:30 a.m. and time for the family to rise and shine. In Chris and Tommie's room, the radio came on. In Scott's room, the TVs, PC and laptop were still on.

The family was shocked by what they heard.

Reporter: WeCareTV is proud to report that the global boycott of diamonds initiated by our news network late last night, is already taking its toll on the LeHops Diamond Company. The European market has been open for five hours and not a single retail sale of any diamond has taken place. Reminiscent of what happened when the Endrun scandal broke, the LeHops fortune is quickly dwindling. But there is a bright side to the closing of their diamond mines. Many of the laborers will no longer have to work in such unsafe conditions. So while they may be unemployed now, at least they'll be safe – that is, if they don't starve to death.

"I didn't think about that," Kim admitted.

"About what?" Scott asked.

"About the fact that the people working in the dangerous mines were at least getting paid enough to eat. Where are they going to find jobs, now?"

"That's not our problem," Scott replied.

"Maybe it should be," Kim countered. "Every action has a reaction – and we initiated a lot of action last night."

"Well, what can we do about it?" Scott asked rhetorically. "Hold on, there's more."

Reporter: WeCareTV is sponsoring a telethon to raise awareness of the plight of the unemployed diamond miners. Bellizabeth Saylor and Dwayne Newtron will appear on behalf of poor diamond miners. We expect millions of dollars will be raised.

"There you go, Kim. Hollywood and Vegas are already making it their cause. I bet they'll be wearing little diamond-studded ribbons at the next world's biggest celebrity 'We-Love-Ourselves' awards show. They'll take care of the problem."

Tommie and Chris had turned on their television and were channel-surfing. They had also seen the WeCareTV report on the diamond boycott and were pleased. But they weren't sure what to think about the next report that caught their attention.

Reporter: PetBizzTV is proud to announce that we will be advising veterinarians and pet owners around the world to stop buying Hoppy Pet Food. There will be no puppy or kitten meat in any pet food that we advertise on our network.

“That was a strange report. I wonder what that was all about?” Tommie commented.

“I have no idea,” Chris admitted. “Let’s see if The Wild Channel is reporting the same thing.” Chris changed the channel just in time to hear...

Reporter: The Wild Channel is proud to announce a new addition to next season’s schedule. The Hoffa and Hitler Hour will be a one-hour variety show. It will follow the Babs Wannamoney specials on Friday nights.

“Chris, are you sure this isn’t The Funny Channel?” Tommie asked.

“No, believe it or not, this is real news.”

As they got ready for work, Chris randomly switched channels to see what other news was worth watching.

It was the report on Center City TV that caught the entire family’s attention.

Montgomery: Good morning, Center City. I am Richard Montgomery, owner of Center City TV. You may have heard from various news agencies around the world, that the Campbell family of Center City discovered a diamond mine yesterday. Our network, in cooperation with The Center City Communicator, has learned from the Center City Police, that this was a false report. There is also no truth to the rumors that the Campbells are connected to the death of Mr. Wilhelm Van Den Krauss of LeHops Diamond Company.

Reliable sources have told CCTV that these deceptions were leaked to the media by Mr. Gerhard LeHops, owner of the LeHops Diamond Company.

We have learned that Mr. LeHops started Hoppy Pet Food company as a way to secretly dispose of whale by-products left over from a process he developed to extract diamonds from mined ore.

In actual fact, what the Campbells discovered yesterday, was a diamond that had passed through the LeHops pet food manufacturing plant and was deposited in a can of Hoppy Pet Food.

Even more startling, our researchers have discovered that the Broadcast News Network was recently purchased by Gerhard LeHops. This explains the misleading reports filed by that network.

Our researchers confirm that these reports were fabricated to set up a false trail to prevent the public from making the connection between diamonds, whales and his pet food company, until after Hoppy goes public next week.

Once millions of shareholders owned stock in Hoppy Pet Food, LeHops then planned to lobby governments, and the World Endangered Species Organization, to remove whales from the endangered species list, thereby making his whale-killing business legitimate.

We at CCTV are recommending that no one purchase stock in the Hoppy Pet Food Company and, it goes without saying, we are urging the public not to purchase any products manufactured by Hoppy Pet Food.

“Did you hear that?” Kim exclaimed. “Alex and Amy to the rescue!”

“Kim, I don’t remember you putting all that in your email. Do you think it’s true?”

“It makes sense to me!” Kim replied.

The national media organizations were furious about being scooped by Center City TV. They reacted quickly.

Reporter: C&BS regrets that we must report a retraction to one of our news stories. While we remain convinced that there is a connection between the death of Wilhelm Van Den Krauss and his visit to the Campbell family of Center City, there is no physical evidence supporting our theory that someone in the Campbell family is guilty of murder.

We have been told by Center City Police that Mr. Van Den Krauss died of natural causes. However, we have also been told by unnamed sources, that the Campbells have close ties to certain officers on that police force. We are not sure if a cover-up is being perpetrated.

As far as claims by Center City TV, that there is whale meat in Hoppy Pet Food, we will be sending our hard-hitting investigative reporter, Vance Rathernot, to follow-up on that information. C&BS will be reporting to you as soon as that story is available.

“What the heck happened while we were asleep?” Chris asked Tommie.

Chapter Twenty-Four



Tommie gasped. “Oh my gosh! The kids! I hope they haven’t seen this. They’ll be upset. We’ve been accused of murder!”

“Calm down,” Chris said. “You know we didn’t do anything. Detective Nash knows, and apparently now the media knows. I’d say that’s a good thing.”

“They’re implying that Nash is covering up for us,” Tommie added.

“Well, you know that’s not true.”

Tommie took three deep breaths and regained her composure. “If I didn’t know better, I’d say I was still sleeping and this was just a bad dream.”

“If I didn’t know better, I’d say the kids were involved.” Tommie raised an eyebrow as she turned to face Chris. “You’re right! This whole thing is nutzie-cookoo. Where else would the media get these mental ideas?”

“Let’s call Nash and see what’s really going on,” Chris suggested. Tommie plugged in the phone. Before she could dial out... RING... RING... RING...

“Rats,” Tommie said. “I gotta get rid of this call first.” She answered the phone. “Hello? ...Oh, Detective Nash. I was just about to call you. ...Yes, thank you Detective Nash. ...He is?”

...Oh, that’s wonderful. ...Do you think we’re safe now? ...Yes, we will, for sure. ...Thank you.”

“That was coincidental,” Chris commented. “What’d he say?” “He said his officers followed LeHops out to the airport. He thinks there’s too much on LeHops’s plate now to be worried about us. Nash figures that after the CCTV report this morning, all the crazy media reports have been put to rest – and that finally the world knows we don’t have a diamond mine, or a diamond-pooing dog, and we had nothing to do with Van Den Krauss’s death.”

“We should wake the kids and tell them it’s all over,” Chris said. Together, they went down the hall and peeked into Kim’s room. She wasn’t there. Tommie shut off her buzzing alarm. They headed to Scott’s room. The two kids were sitting on the bed, watching the smorgasbord of media. The televisions were loud and the kids didn’t realize their parents were there.

“We did it!” Kim exclaimed. “We blew the whistle on LeHops! We stopped LeMadness! We don’t have a diamond mine, and Mom and Dad are off the hook for murder. Scott walked over to their bedroom window and looked out to the street below. “There’s no one out there. We’re yesterday’s news.”

Kim stepped over beside him. “Looks that way. We need to call Amy and Alex and

thank them.”

Tommie interjected, “Amy and Alex? What did they have to do with this?”

Scott and Kim turned toward Tommie’s voice. “Mom, Dad – we didn’t know you were there,” Scott said.

“So what’s this about thanking Amy and Alex?” Chris asked. Before Kim and Scott answered, another story broke. “Wait, there’s more!” Kim declared.

Reporter: Now, with a live feed from the Green Harmony vessel in Center City Harbor, we have Center City TV reporter, Alan Lasowich’s interview with Green Harmony’s chief scientist, Dr. Albert Klein.

The Campbell family gasped. “Look! It’s Mr. Klein! He’s with Green Harmony! I’ll bet he knew all about the whale pet food!” Scott shouted.

CLICK-click-Click-CLICK... Click-CLICK-click...

Lasowich: This is Alan Lasowich reporting live from the deck of the Green Harmony vessel in Center City Harbor. What we are seeing is a pod of sperm whales that have entered the harbor. This extraordinary event has surprised local marine biologists.

Click-click-CLICK... Click-CLICK-click-Click-Click...

Lasowich: What’s that noise? Can we get rid of it? Klein: I’m afraid not. It’s the whales.

Lasowich: Well, as we said, I’m here with Green Harmony’s Chief Scientist, Dr. Albert Klein, who has been monitoring the whales. Dr. Klein, why do you think these whales came into our harbor?

Klein: I suspect the whales have taken it upon themselves to thank the people of Center City for exposing LeHops.

Lasowich: Are you saying that these whales know what happened and are actually speaking?

Klein: Yes! Many scientists around the world acknowledge that the Cetacean order has superior intelligence and that they do communicate.

Lasowich: And what message would they be communicating today?

Klein: If I may, I’ll speak on behalf of the whales and Green Harmony. Together, we would like to thank some very special young people who aided us in our joint task of bringing the plight of the sperm whale to the attention of the world. Thank you, Scott and Kim Campbell, for exposing the madness of the LeHops diamond and pet food companies.

“He’s talking about us!” Scott exclaimed. “How did he know it was us?” Kim asked.

“What are you two talking about?” Tommie interjected.

“It looks like you were right, Kim. Hoppy and LeHops are connected,” Chris said.

Klein: We applaud your efforts. Keep up the good work.

Continue to make your opinions count.

Lasowich: Dr. Klein, since Green Harmony knew about the plight of the whales and how LeHops was using whale oil and whale meat in their diamond and pet food industries, why didn't you tell the world?

Klein: Alan, we raise issues with the world every day. Many people don't listen to us. They think we have our own agenda and they distrust us as much as they distrust politicians. We hoped that the truth would come out on its own, without being associated with a particular environmental, political or industrial concern – and it did. What could be more effective than the truth as it's seen by our youth? I hope this is only the beginning and that kids everywhere make their opinions count.

Now, if you wouldn't mind filming these glorious creatures for your broadcast, I think they would like to say thank you to everyone who was involved in helping to save their species.

The cameraman focused on the whales. The microphone picked up and broadcast their chattering.

CLICK-CLICK... CLICK-CLICK-click... CLICK. Klein: That's whale-speak for thank you.

As if on cue, the whales jumped into the air and waved their flippers before diving back into the water. When they re-surfaced, they slapped their tails on the water. The camera filmed them heading toward the mouth of the harbor, then focused back on the reporter.

Lasowich: Well, if I hadn't seen it for myself, I'd think this was some kind of computer-generated image. We've just witnessed the whales thanking the kids on behalf of their species. Keep up the good work, kids. Like Dr. Klein said, continue to make your opinions count.

This is Alan Lasowich, reporting live from the Green Harmony Vessel in Center City Harbor.

"It's over!" Kim yelled. "The diamond industry is a mess, the whales are safe, and we're off the hook for murder!"

"So, Klein is a famous environmentalist. Who'd have thought?" Tommie teased.

"What'll we do now for excitement?" Scott asked.

"How about some oatmeal pancakes?" Tommie replied. "Oatmeal? Gross, Mom," Scott mumbled. He and Kim reluctantly followed Chris and Tommie to the kitchen.

Tommie began to prepare the pancakes. "Now, are you two going to tell us what you and your buddies, Amy and Alex, had to do with this?" she asked.

DING-DONG...

Chapter Twenty-Five



“Saved by the bell,” Tommie laughed. “Chris, would you get that?”

Chris went to the door and looked through the peephole.

“It’s Detective Nash and Richard Montgomery,” Chris said, as he opened the door. He soon realized there was more than met the eye. “...And Joel Black, Amy and Alex are here as well! Hey, everyone! Come in!”

The group crowded into the foyer. Detective Nash spoke first. “Chris, I hope you don’t mind us dropping by. I thought you’d like to speak with the people who helped us diffuse the media situation by reporting the accurate news stories.”

Scott and Kim ran to the foyer. They gave their friends high-fives.

Chris looked surprised. “Let’s take a seat in the family room.” Tommie joined them as the group made themselves comfortable.

“We saw you on TV this morning, Richard,” Tommie declared. “But how did you know?”

Richard and Joel looked toward the kids. It didn’t take long for Tommie to figure it out. “No way,” Tommie said. “You’re kidding.” Detective Nash spoke. “Yes, it was the kids. They took matters into their own hands. I have to say, in this case, I’m glad they did.”

“So, who wants to start?” Chris asked.

The kids couldn’t wait to blurt out their explanations. As Chris and Tommie listened, they were impressed with their creativity.

“I would never have thought to contact you and Joel through your kids,” Tommie said to Richard. “Although I seem to remember Chris suggesting it at some point.”

Richard laughed. “We didn’t think outside the box either. When your phone line was busy, and my reporters couldn’t get through the police protection last night, I ran out of ideas. If it wasn’t for your kids messaging ours, we couldn’t have reported the whole truth because we never would have known what it was.”

Amy excitedly blurted out, “I told my dad, that next time he gets stuck, he should ask me for my opinion. We kids know a lot more than adults give us credit for.”

“Right, Amy,” Kim agreed.

“So, what are you going to do with the diamond? I hear it’s worth a few million!” Alex asked excitedly.

Kim and Scott were stunned. “Scott and I thought it was worth a couple of thousand,” Kim admitted.

“The cat’s out of the bag now,” Chris said to Tommie.

“You knew it was worth more?” Scott said, glaring at Tommie. “How come you didn’t tell us?”

“We didn’t want you wasting time thinking about all the ways you could spend the money if we sold it,” Chris admitted.

It was too late. Scott was already in dreamland.

Nash had a few details to add that weren’t part of the news reports. “We now know who broke into your home last night and why nothing was stolen.” All eyes looked his way. “The break-in last night was staged.”

“What do you mean?”

“LeHops hired people to break into your home to make it look like someone was after the diamond. It was all part of his plan to make the diamond the target of the news reports rather than the other illegal schemes that he was into,” Nash explained. “As it turns out, there were no real criminals involved, just a couple of guys who wanted to make an easy buck.”

“Amateurs?” Chris asked. “Totally,” Nash replied.

“So, was Popinopolous involved?” Scott had to ask. “Not directly.”

Scott was disappointed. He wanted to be able to say, ‘I told you so’.

“Two employees from Pop’s were approached by Van Den Krauss to steal Pop’s car and make it look like a burglary in progress.”

“Why?” Kim asked. “I think I know.”

“Okay, what’s your theory, Scott?” Nash asked.

“I think it was also part of LeHops’s plan to make people think we really had a diamond mine and to throw people off the scent of the pet food conspiracy.”

“What conspiracy?”

“The conspiracy that the underwriters, LeHops and BNN were all in on – to cover up the fact that he kills whales.”

“Excellent deduction, Scott. You’re bang-on!” Nash declared. Scott swelled with pride.

“How did you catch the bad guys?” Alex asked.

“Actually, the stories on the news scared the heck out of them. They didn’t want to get tagged with Van Den Krauss’s murder, so they turned themselves in,” Nash admitted. “But there’s still one mystery we haven’t solved.”

“What’s that?” Chris asked.

“Who planted the listening device,” Nash answered. “Listening device?” the kids all replied at the same time.

“It had to be the same guys!” Alex declared. He didn’t know what he was talking about, but that never stopped him before.

Nash was quick to reply. “No, it wasn’t them. When we interrogated them at the station about it, they didn’t have a clue what we were talking about.”

The Campbells were disappointed. They thought all their questions had been answered.

“What about Van Den Krauss?” Tommie asked. “How did he end up in the harbor?”

Nash answered, “Apparently, the burglars met up LeHops and Van Den Krauss at the pier, to get their payment. Van Den Krauss collapsed and died right there on the spot. The burglars panicked, grabbed the money, and ran. They don’t know how Van Den Krauss

got into Popinopolous's car, or how the car got into the water. We suspect that LeHops and his driver must have done it."

"Holy smoke!" Scott said.

"So, Pop was innocent all along!" Kim declared. "And Scott thought he was the criminal master mind."

Joel looked concerned. "The what?" "The Ring Master," Tommie let slip out.

Chris saved the day, or so he thought. "The master diamond ring maker."

Now, everyone was confused and Nash wanted it to stay that way. He didn't think it was necessary for the entire world to know that he was on assignment pursuing a criminal mastermind and money launderer known only as, The Ring Master. He interjected, saying, "I think it's time to go. I'll bet the Campbells would like to get ready for work – and school."

The four kids moaned in unison. Everyone said their good-byes.

"See you at school," Scott said to Alex, as they walked to the front door.

Suddenly, Alex pulled Scott aside and whispered in his ear. "I got some really important news to tell you." "Tell me now!" Scott replied.

"I can't. Too many people. I'll call you."

The Campbells waved, as the Blacks and the Montgomerys drove off.

Nash was the last to leave. "I called off the police protection. But if anything suspicious happens, let me know right away."

"You'll be the first to know," Tommie called out. She closed the door after him.

Chris turned to Tommie and the kids and stated, "There's one more thing we have to do."

"What's that?" Tommie asked.

Chris walked into the kitchen, opened a drawer, and pulled out an envelope. "Decide what to do with this cashier's check."

"The what?" Kim asked.

"LeHops gave us a check for \$5 million for our diamond mine," Chris explained.

"We're rich!" Scott screamed. "I want the new 3-Cubed game player... and a mega HDTV... and a new boat – with twin 150s... and..."

"Hold your horses, Scott," Tommie ordered. "We can't cash it. We didn't actually sell him anything."

"Did he write us a check or not?" Kim asked.

"Well, it is written out to 'The Bearer'. That could be anyone," Tommie stated. "What's your opinion on this, kids?"

"Wow, we're really rich!" Scott jumped up and down excitedly. "We have the diamond AND we have this money. You can quit work, Mom!"

Tommie rolled her eyes.

"Hold it, Scott. Remember what the reporter said?" Kim cautioned. "The diamond market has collapsed. Our diamond isn't worth anything."

"Yes, Kim, but this will only be temporary," Tommie explained. "The market will rebound. I just hope that when it does, some positive, long-term changes in the industry will happen, too."

"Your mom's right," Chris added. "According to Danny, this diamond is worth anywhere from four to six million dollars. We'll just have to wait for its value to rise again."

“So, what are we going to do with all this money?” Scott repeated. He was keen to spend it.

“Maybe we should think about why we have the money, and work from there,” Kim suggested.

“Huh?”

“Use the same logic we did last night to figure out how to stick it to LeHops,” Kim explained.

Kim could see that Tommie and Chris had no idea what she was talking about, but she suspected Scott was just playing dumb. It was obvious he wanted the family to use the money for themselves. Kim took the lead.

“First of all, Max pooped out the diamond,” Kim began. “Then we found out how in some places, the diamond industry kills whales and makes little kids work for cheap in dangerous conditions. Then we discovered the diamond came from pet food that was made out of whale meat. Then LeHops gave us money for our diamond so people would think we had a mine, and to throw everyone off the track of the pet food secret. Then we found out that Mr. Klein is actually Dr. Klein and that he is trying to protect whales.”

“So what are you getting at?” Scott challenged.

“I’m saying that the only reason we have the diamond and this money is because LeHops killed whales,” Kim reasoned. “I think we should give the money to the whales.”

“All of it?” Scott asked. “I think we should keep some of it.” “No way,” Kim said. “We should give the money to Dr. Klein and Green Harmony. I think it’s only right. We can always keep the diamond for ourselves.”

“Great plan, Kim. That’s a very sensible idea,” Tommie observed. She let the idea sink in a bit, and then asked, “Are we all in agreement that’s what we’ll do? Give the check to Dr. Klein and keep the diamond for ourselves?”

It didn’t take any time at all, before everyone answered, “Yes!” “And what will we do with the diamond?” Kim asked.

“We’ll save that decision for another day,” Chris suggested. “You two have school.”

“That’s right,” Tommie said. “Go and get dressed. I’ll call you when your gourmet breakfast is ready.”

“Gore – maybe,” Scott grumbled, as he and Kim started upstairs.

“Gour – maybe-not,” Kim countered. “I heard that!” Tommie shouted.

“Kids, I’d watch it or you’ll be in the doghouse,” Chris suggested. DING-DONG...

“I’ll get it,” Chris said. He walked to the door and looked through the peephole. “You won’t believe who it is!”

“Who?” they all asked in unison. The kids bolted back downstairs and into the foyer.

“It’s Mr. Popinopolous.” DING-DONG... “Should I let him in?”

“What does he want?” Tommie asked.

“How should I know? Let’s find out,” Chris said, as he opened the door.

“Mr. Campbell!” Mr. Popinopolous roared. “You forgot your cheesecake last night!” He shoved a large box at Chris.

“You didn’t need to do this,” Chris replied.

“It was the least I could do,” he announced. “I am so sorry for being rude to you last evening. You see, my car was stolen. And then this morning the police told me that two of my own employees stole it, and that they broke into your home last night. I feel responsible.”

“That wasn’t your fault, Mr. Popinopolous,” Tommie shouted from the kitchen.

“Please, next time you come to Pop’s, dinner will be my treat.” “Thank you, Mr. Popinopolous,” Chris replied.

“Yes, thank you,” Tommie agreed.

Popinopolous waved and walked back to the car that was parked in their driveway. The kids stood in the doorway and waved back. “Hey, check out the license plate!” Scott said. In the morning light, it was easy to read G-R-E-E-K-2. “Good eyes, Kim. I’ll bet his other plate said ‘Greek 1’, not ‘Greedy’!” Kim felt a little foolish.

As Chris closed the door, Scott snatched the box from his hands and ran to the kitchen. “Breakfast is served!” he shouted, as he put the cheesecake in the center of the kitchen table.

“Cheesecake for breakfast?”

“Yeah, Mom. It’s our opinion that we should have cheesecake for breakfast,” Kim replied.

Scott called back, as he and Kim headed upstairs to get dressed for school. “Yeah, Mom, like Mr. Klein said... kids’ opinions count!”

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