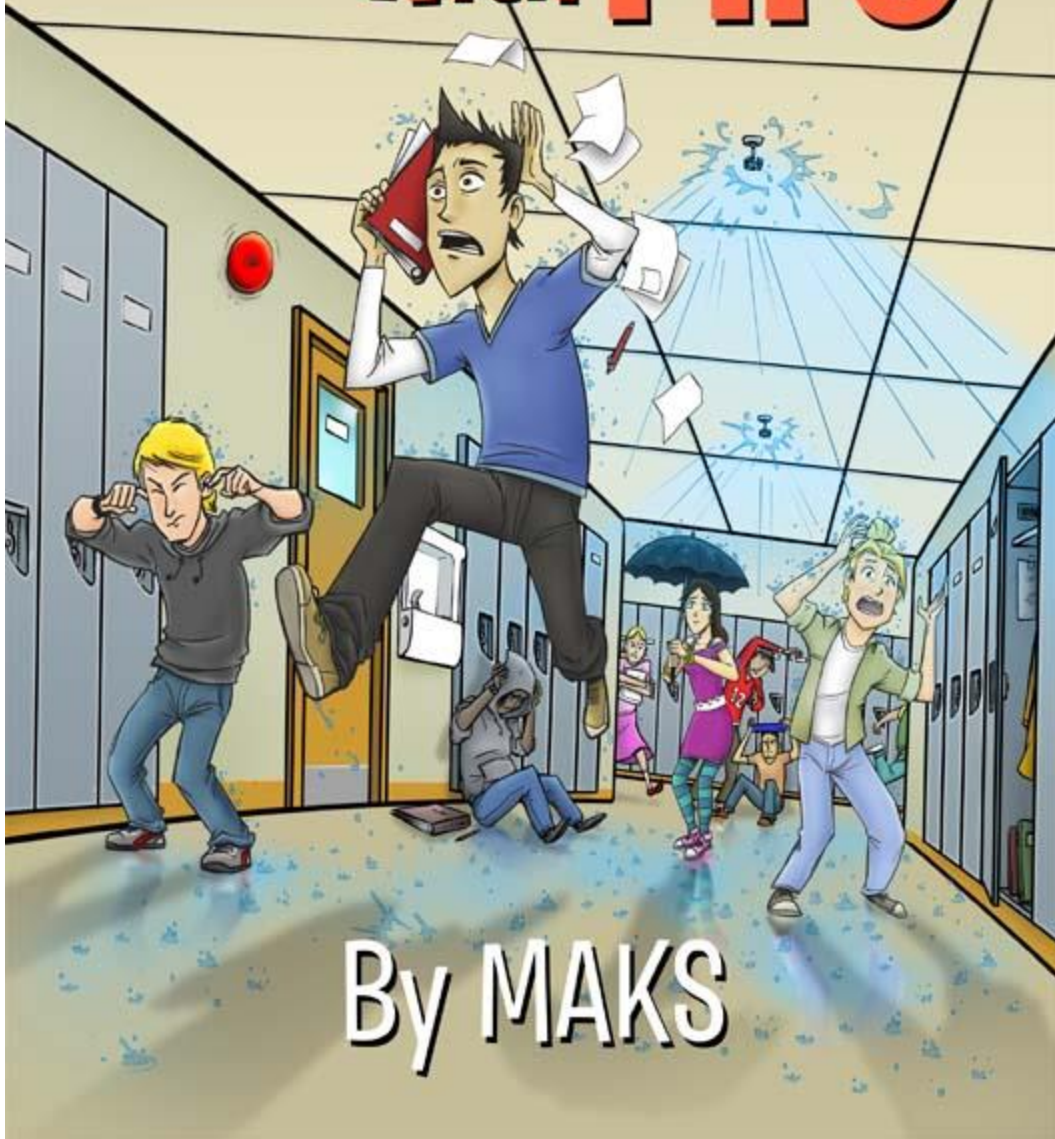


A Kids Opinions Count™ Book

# Playing With Fire



By MAKS

# Playing with Fire



Book Two 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



It was 7:30 in the morning. Tommie was busy preparing breakfast. Scott and Kim were upstairs getting ready for school. Chris was sitting at the kitchen table watching the family room TV, and Max was hanging around the kitchen, waiting to be fed.

WOOOOF... WOOOOF...

No one was paying attention to Max, so he nudged up against Chris. Getting no response from Chris, Max walked over to Tommie and nudged up against her. He almost knocked Tommie over.

“What the?” Tommie said. She looked down and saw Max. “Hungry, are you?” Tommie looked up from Max and over to Chris. “Chris, will you please feed him. I’m busy. The cans are right here on the counter.”

Chris was now phoning his buddy, Danny. “In a minute. I’m trying to get hold of Danny. Max can wait.”

Tommie shook her head and turned her body and attention back to the stove. She dished a smorgasbord of food onto plates and put them into the oven to keep warm.

WOOOOF... WOOOOF... “CHRIS!”

“I just have one more number to try,” Chris replied.

“If you don’t feed him now, I won’t feed you,” Tommie threatened. Then, looking toward the second floor hallway, she shouted, “Scott! Kim! Breakfast is ready!”

The kids heard her, loud and clear. Despite the fact that they were expecting icky oatmeal pancakes, they were starved, and raced downstairs to the kitchen table. Assuming the worst, Scott began to complain before the food was even served.

“Mom, can we just have the cheesecake that Mr. Popinopolous brought us?” Scott whined. “I HATE those oatmeal pancakes.”

“You’ll eat what I made,” Tommie insisted. “Nice try,” Kim whispered sarcastically to Scott.

While they waited for breakfast to be served, Scott and Kim watched television with Chris.

Tommie opened the oven door. The smells wafted out and filled the house. Kim and Scott inhaled the aromas.

“Breakfast smells great!” Kim declared.

“Surprise!” Tommie shouted. She pulled two plates out of the oven, each one piled high with scrambled eggs, french toast and chocolate chip pancakes.

“That looks fantastic!” Kim complimented.

Tommie carried the plates to the kitchen table. Max was camped out in the middle of the floor. Tommie was careful not to trip over him. She put Scott and Kim's plates down in front of them, walked back to the oven, and pulled out one more plate for herself. She returned to the table and set it down at her seat.

"Where's mine?" Chris asked.

"This is awesome, Mom," Scott said. He and Kim were already chowing down.

"Yeah, it looks awesome," Chris parroted. "Where's mine?" Tommie ignored his question. She looked directly at Chris, then at Max, and back to Chris.

"Oh, I get it," Chris said. He stood up and walked over to a drawer and pulled out the can opener.

"There's only one more thing I wish we had," Kim commented. Just then, Tommie got up from the table, walked back to the oven, and pulled out another plate. "Would this be it?" Tommie teased. "BACON!" the kids both shouted.

As Tommie put the plate down on the table, a streak of white fur passed before their eyes.

"MAX!" Tommie shouted... It was too late. Two gulps and bye-bye bacon.

Chris was standing at the counter with the can opener in this hand. He looked guilty. Tommie gave Chris a look that could kill. She was about to erupt, when, KABOOOOM...

The sound of an explosion blasted from the family room. Everyone turned their attention to the flames that were blazing across the television screen.

"That's the Crestview Shopping Mall!" Scott declared. "It's on fire!"

"Shush!" Kim scolded. "Listen!"

Alan Lasowich, who had just reported the whale story, was on TV again.

Lasowich: Late last night, a four-alarm fire raged through the Crestview Shopping Mall, destroying two businesses. No one was injured. The fire is under investigation by the arson squad. Belladonna's Bridal Boutique has informed Center City News that all their records and inventory, including their bridal gowns, were destroyed in the fire. Please contact them at 555-2313 for further information.

"Kim, I guess you can't go window shopping at Belladonna's anymore," Scott teased.

"I have no intention of ever getting married."

"Quiet, there's more," Chris said.

Lasowich: Sleazie's Snow, Skate and Wakeboard Shop was also destroyed in the fire. Sleazie is inviting everyone to come down to the grand opening next week of his second location – make that his only location – at the Harbor Front Boarders and BMX Park.

"Man, lucky for Sleazie his new store is ready," Scott stated. "Lucky?" Kim replied with a frown. "It sounds suspicious to me."

"Me, too," Chris agreed. "Like Lasowich said, it sounds like arson."

"He didn't say it was arson," Tommie lectured. "He said the arson squad was investigating. You should know better than to jump to conclusions like that."

"Riiiiight, right."

“Who would burn down their own place, Dad?” Scott asked. “Someone having business problems maybe,” Chris returned.

“There’s lots of that happening. Owners over-insure their place and then torch it. I saw a documentary on The Crime Channel last week. It showed you exactly how to do it.”

“Maybe Sleazie doesn’t think he really needs two stores,” Kim offered.

“Or maybe someone didn’t want to get married and torched Belladonna’s,” Tommie chimed in.

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

It was Scott’s cell phone. He ran upstairs to answer it. Scott saw Alex’s caller ID. Alex had told Scott earlier that morning, he had a secret he needed to tell him. Alex couldn’t spill the beans in the presence of the adults. Scott had been waiting impatiently for Alex to call.

“Alex! What’s this big secret? What’s up?”

## Chapter Two



"I can't talk."

"Not again," Scott complained. "Did you hear about the fire?"

"Yeah," Scott replied.

"That's it."

"What's it?"

"My dad's coming. I'll tell you in school," Alex said. He hung up on Scott.

Scott scratched his head and wondered what the heck Alex was trying so hard to tell him. He put his cell phone in his pocket and headed back downstairs. When he reached the bottom of the stairs, he heard, RING... RING... RING...

"Kim, that's your cell phone," Scott shouted.

Kim bolted from the table and raced up to her room. She could see it was Amy calling. Kim picked up the phone.

"Amy, what's up?"

"Make sure you catch me before class starts. I got some stuff to tell you."

"Tell me NOW."

"I can't. My dad might hear. I'll tell you later," Amy said and hung up.

Kim put her cell phone in her pocket and headed back downstairs. She wondered what was so important that Amy's dad couldn't hear.

As Kim made it back to the kitchen table, she found the rest of the family finishing up breakfast, including Chris and Max. Chris had finally fed Max, so Tommie had finally fed Chris.

"Do you kids still want the cheesecake?" Tommie asked.

Both kids were now in a big hurry to get to school. They wanted to hear what their friends had to report. Scott was convinced Alex's news had to do with the fire at Crestview Shopping Mall. Kim wasn't sure what Amy's news was. Cheesecake was the furthest thing from their minds.

They answered, "NO!" in unison.

Kim and Scott both looked surprised by the other's response. Tommie just had to ask, "What's up?"

"Nothing's up," Scott said. "Can we go to school now?"

"It's early," Tommie replied. "I don't plan to leave for at least a half an hour."

"Just drop us off and come back," Kim suggested. "Just walk," Chris countered.

"It takes us twenty minutes to walk!" Scott whined.

“It’s your choice,” Tommie announced. “You can always ride your bikes or skateboard.”

The kids both sighed. They were still exhausted from last night’s activities. They’d wait. Kim sat down at the table and finished breakfast. Scott watched the kitchen clock slowly tick by the seconds.

RING... RING... RING... The kitchen phone rang.

Chris walked over to the phone. He recognized the caller ID and answered it. “Hello, Danny. You got my messages,” Chris joked. “I want to hear all about that research project and grant you mentioned last night.”

“And I can’t wait to tell you about it,” Danny replied. “How about meeting me at The Faculty Club for lunch? Let’s say noon.”

“How could I say no? Can you give me a clue what the project is?”

“Yo ho ho. I’ll tell you the rest in person.”

“Come on, Danny. YO HO HO? That’s all I get? What’s with the secrecy? ...Okay, tell me at lunch. I’ll see you later,” Chris said and hung up.

Before the phone hit the cradle, Scott declared, “Yo ho ho? It must be pirates! Danny must be looking for treasure.”

Tommie glanced at Scott and then fixed her eyes on Chris. “What project? What grant? What treasure?”

“I forgot to tell you,” Chris explained. “Danny’s got a new research project and grant. He wants to tell me about it, that’s all.”

“He probably wants you to help him with it,” Tommie said. She didn’t sound happy.

Chris shook his head. “You don’t know that.” He paused for a second. “Besides, if I’m with him, I’ll be out of your hair.”

“Okay, you two. Break it up,” Scott ordered. “Break what up?” Tommie asked.

“Mom, you always give Dad a hard time when Danny asks him to do something.”

“No I don’t!”

“Yes you do,” Chris said.

Tommie sighed. “It’s just that Danny doesn’t have the same responsibilities as your dad. It’s okay for Danny to take off for a week and explore some dangerous old ruin. Your dad has a family to support and a business to run.”

“Well, I’m not taking time off and I’m not doing anything dangerous – unless you think the food at The Faculty Club is life threatening.”

Tommie reacted quickly. “The Faculty Club? He must really want something if he’s splurging for The Faculty Club.”

Kim had her own two cents to add. “Mom, why is it okay for Scott to hang out with Alex – whose second name is TROUBLE – but you don’t like Danny?”

Tommie decided she’d better dial it back. “It’s not that I don’t like Danny. He’s a good friend. I’m just not crazy about some of the things he gets your dad involved in.”

Scott didn’t want the conversation turning to Alex. That could only lead to – trouble. “Mom, we gotta get going!” Scott announced. “I need to get to school early.”

RING... RING... RING... “Don’t answer it, Mom. Let’s go!”

“I told you, I’m not leaving for... let’s see,” she said, as she looked at the kitchen clock, “fifteen minutes.” Tommie reached for the phone and answered, “Hello?”

Scott rolled his eyes. He was annoyed at Tommie for brushing him off.

“Mrs. Campbell, this is Jane at your dentist’s office. I’m calling to remind you of



Scott's appointment today at 12:15."

Tommie took the cordless phone over to the fridge. She checked the family's appointment calendar that was taped to the middle of the door. "I don't think he has an appointment today."

"Well, it's right here in my book, Scott Campbell, 12:15," Jane replied.

"He just had his teeth checked and cleaned last week," Tommie stated. "Why does he have to come in today?"

"Let me check Scott's chart."

As Tommie waited for Jane to return, she asked, "Scott, did the dentist say you'd have to go back today?"

"Huh? No. He just told me to brush longer. Why?"

Jane was back on the phone. "Mrs. Campbell, it says here on Scott's chart that the dentist needs to check Scott's retainer brace."

"Check his brace? How long will that take?"

"He has five minutes scheduled."

"Five minutes? That's all?"

"That's it. Scott'll be in and out," Jane explained. "Will Scott be able to make it?"

Tommie looked at Scott. He was shaking his head back and forth.

Tommie nodded up and down. "Yes, Scott will be there," Tommie replied and hung up.

"I went last week!" Scott whined. "Scott, just do it," Chris directed.

Tommie explained, "He just has to check your retainer brace."

"When am I going to get rid of it, Mom?"

"Probably sooner if you wore the darn thing," Tommie replied. "Did you put it in last night?"

Scott didn't reply.

"I didn't think so," Tommie said. She began to clean up the breakfast dishes when...  
DING-DONG...

## Chapter Three



“Don’t answer that, Dad,” Scott insisted. He was sure that whoever it was would just slow his mom down even more.

“Why don’t you and Kim shoot some hoops outside until I’m ready to go,” Tommie said.

DING... DONG...

“Will you answer that!” Tommie barked at Chris.

“I’ll get it,” Scott said. He walked to the door and looked through the peephole. “It’s Gramma and Grampa.”

“Good grief!” Tommie exclaimed. “They must be wondering what the heck’s going on here!”

“Now we’ll never get out of here,” Kim complained.

As Scott was opening the door for them, he asked Kim, “So what’s your rush?”

“None of your business!” Kim replied. “What’s your rush?”

“I’m not in any rush!”

“Who’s in a rush?” Gramma Erin asked, as she entered the house. She gave Scott and Kim a huge hug and proceeded to the kitchen. On her way, she asked again, “So, who’s in a rush?”

“The kids,” Tommie announced from the kitchen.

Tommie’s parents lived close by. They were retired and very involved in the community and her family’s life. With all that happened last night and this morning, she didn’t have time to call them. Tommie thought for sure they’d be upset with her.

“Never mind rushing anywhere, kids,” Grampa Lanny declared, as he walked into the foyer and carried on to the kitchen. “You’re all going to explain what’s been going on over here.” Erin and Lanny sat down at the kitchen table and made themselves comfortable. Then they motioned to Scott and Kim to join them.

“Sit down, kids,” they ordered. “We’re waiting.”

Scott and Kim dragged their butts over to the kitchen table and sat down. Tommie was trying to look busy at the kitchen sink.

“You too, Daughter Dear,” Erin said to Tommie.

Now Tommie was dragging her butt to the kitchen table. She wished she’d listened to the kids and left earlier.

All six of them were seated. No one spoke. RING... RING...

It was Scott’s cell phone. It was Alex. “Alex.”

“Scott, where the heck are you?”

“I’m still at home. Can you talk now? What’s up?”

Tommie interrupted their conversation. “You’ll see Alex at school. Say good-bye, Scott.”

“You heard my mom,” Scott grumbled. “I’ll see you at school.”

“Hurry it up!” Alex demanded.

“I’m trying to!” Scott whined.

Tommie raised one eyebrow and ordered, “Say good-bye!”

“Bye, Alex,” Scott said and hung up.

“Okay, no more interruptions. We want the whole story,” Lanny insisted.

Scott knew he had no choice. He and Kim did as they were told. And in an effort to speed things along, they took control of the conversation. Within ten minutes they had blabbed the whole story.

“WOW, that was some adventure!” Erin exclaimed.

“We’re proud of you two,” Lanny announced. “So, what big corporations are you going to tackle today?”

“They’re NOT!” Tommie snapped. “Don’t encourage them. They’re going to school and tackling their education.”

“I think they got more education doing what they did last night than they’d ever get in school,” Erin commented.

“Right on, Gramma!” Kim exclaimed.

Scott stood up from the breakfast table and walked toward the hallway. “Mom, we need to go to school.”

Erin ignored Scott. “You know kids, when your mom was your age, she wanted to save the environment and she wrote hundreds of letters to big companies about how...”

Tommie cut her off. “Mom.”

“And did we ever discourage you?”

“No.”

Erin wasn’t finished. “And what are you doing now? Working for the polluters and the O’Dinkles of the world.”

Tommie rolled her eyes and sighed. Her mom was right and she felt like a hypocrite. Tommie had gone from earth shaker to uptight moneymaker. She didn’t like having that pointed out to her. Tommie always thought of herself as someone who raged against the machine. Her raging had been replaced by ranting. It was hardly the same thing. Now her own parents were calling her a wuss and a sell-out.

“You didn’t sell out your convictions, Dear. You just need to feed the family, right?” Lanny added.

Even though Scott enjoyed watching his grandparents stick it to his mom, he still wanted to get to school. He decided to try another approach. “Dad! Can you drive us?”

Chris ignored Scott. He was more interested in finding out why his in-laws were verbally attacking his wife. “Where is this coming from?” Chris asked.

“Just doing a reality check, that’s all,” Lanny replied. Tommie desperately wanted to get out of the house.

## Chapter Four



Tommie looked over at the kitchen clock. Now it was really getting late. “Oh, good grief. It’s eight-ten already. Why didn’t you kids tell me it was so late.” Tommie turned to her parents. “Sorry, Mom and Dad, but we’ve got to go.”

“It’s about time!” Scott declared.

Lanny and Erin weren’t finished with their third degree. “Tommie, we want to know what’s happening with Huckster, too.” Tommie got up from the table and started toward the staircase. “Chris can fill you in. I’ve got meetings this morning with my attorney and then with Huckster. I can’t be late.”

Erin turned to Chris. “Chris, you’ll keep us company for a while, won’t you?”

“Sure,” Chris agreed.

Kim and Scott were already heading to the garage. Erin and Lanny sat back and watched the show.

“TEETH!” Tommie shouted from the base of the stairs. “I’ll meet you in the van. I’ll be out in a minute.”

“Mom, where are you going?” Scott asked. “We’ll be late!” Tommie headed upstairs. “I just need to put on the finishing touches.” Tommie was stressed out about her morning meetings AND her parent’s comments. She needed to look her best. It would boost her confidence.

When the kids were finished brushing, spitting and elbowing each other at the bathroom sink, they hurried down the hallway toward the garage.

“Bye, Gramma and Grampa.”

“Bye, kids!”

“Bye, Dad,” Scott said. Before he was halfway down the hall, Scott turned around and raced back to the kitchen. Kim followed. “Dad, are you going into work today?”

Chris had the luxury of working from home when he wanted to. “I’ll work from home in the morning and then I’m meeting Danny for lunch. Why?”

“Do you think you could set up a secure message system for me and Alex?”

Kim overheard and insisted, “And me and Amy!”

“Sure. We’ll call it your scorch mail,” Chris joked.

“Great, Dad. I don’t want anyone reading my email who’s not supposed to.”

Kim thought for a minute. “If LeHops intercepted our message about the diamond, do you think he got the ones we sent Amy and Alex last night?”

“Good question,” Chris replied. “Maybe. That might explain why he left town so quickly. He knew ahead of time he needed to take care of business.”

“Man,” Scott declared. “There’s spies everywhere.”

“Let’s hope not,” Chris said. “You kids better get going. I’ll take care of your mail, and while I’m at it, I’ll make sure we’re all secure.”

“Thanks, Dad.”

“Bye, kids. Have a good day at school.” Tommie still wasn’t down yet.

On their way past the staircase, Scott bellowed, “Hurry up, Mom!”

“Coming!” Tommie yelled back from her bedroom. She grabbed her purse and ran toward the stairs.

Scott and Kim could hear her coming so they continued down the hallway. As the kids collected their backpacks, Tommie rushed by Chris.

Chris shouted at Tommie. “What? No kiss, goodbye?”

“Chris! I’m late!” Tommie answered tersely.

“Man, those two are always fighting,” Scott said.

“That’s not fighting!” Kim declared. “That’s being practical, especially when you’re in a hurry.”

As Tommie approached her office, she saw the kids standing by the door to the garage. She didn’t realize they were interested in her and Chris’s marital relationship. “What are you two waiting for? Get in the van.”

“Aren’t you going to kiss, Dad?” Scott asked. Scott wanted to make sure his parents got along. He didn’t want them getting a divorce. Alex’s parents were divorced when Alex was seven. There were lots of other kids’ families breaking up. He didn’t want that to ever happen to his.

“Oh, for crying out loud. Chris, come here so I can kiss you.” Chris jumped to his feet and ran toward Tommie. All he got for his effort, was a little peck on the cheek.

“There, are you kids satisfied?” Tommie asked. “Yup,” Scott said.

Chris headed back to the kitchen, mumbling as he walked. “No, I’m not satisfied.”

Erin and Lanny heard him. They laughed. Lanny commented, “I feel your pain, Chris.”

Chris was embarrassed.

Scott and Kim went into the garage and jumped in the van.

As Tommie followed them into the garage, she heard Chris saying, “Good luck with your meeting with Huckster. Be strong!”

She peeked back around the corner and shouted, “Thanks for the support. I plan to!”

Tommie felt guilty for the peck on the cheek. “Bye Mom. Bye Dad. Oh, and Chris? I love you!”

“Love you too, honey,” he replied.

As Chris sat down at the table, he overheard Erin quietly say to Lanny, “Don’t you think it’s odd that we ran into Klein and the old man within two days of each other?”

Lanny looked at Erin, as if to tell her to be quiet. The look wasn’t very subtle.

“Okay, you two. What’s going on here?” Chris asked.

“Oh, nothing,” Lanny replied. “We were just talking about some people from our distant past. We haven’t seen them in years.”

“Decades, actually,” Erin added. She quickly changed the subject. “So, how’s Tommie doing with this problem she has at work?”

Chris filled them in on Tommie's situation with HucksterCo.

The kids were already buckled up and waiting in the van. Kim was in the backseat and Scott was sitting up front.

"Mom's mean to Dad," Scott said.

"You need to cut Mom some slack," Kim lectured. "Why?"

"Because she's really nervous about her meeting with her boss today," Kim replied. "And Gramma and Grampa really socked it to her this morning. She feels awful."

"How would you know?" Scott asked. He reached for the horn and tapped it a few times.

HONK... HONK... HONK...

Kim shook her head. "Honking the horn will probably make her slow down. You're really annoying today."

"I'm in a rush."

"Yeah, yeah, we all got that."

"What's taking her so long?"

"The better she looks, the more confident she'll feel in her meeting with Huckster," Kim explained.

"I don't get that," Scott admitted.

"Well, it's just the way it is," Kim offered. "For girls, maybe. But we guys don't care."

"Riiiiight," Kim replied. "So, you wouldn't mind if I messed up your perfect hair." Kim grabbed Scott over the seat, put him in a headlock and proceeded to destroy his meticulously coifed hair.

"CUT IT OUT!" he shouted. He got Kim's point.

"What's going on here?" Tommie said, as she opened the van door and jumped inside.

"Just making a point," Kim replied, as she let Scott go.

Scott immediately checked himself out in the rearview mirror and fixed his hair. When he was finished with his hair, he turned to Tommie and proclaimed, "You look beautiful, Mom."

"Yeah, Mom," Kim added. "You look confident. I'll bet you're going to knock them dead at the office today."

Tommie wondered where this was coming from. She rarely got compliments. "Thanks, kids."

Tommie pressed the garage door opener. MMMM... CLUNK...

As soon as she could clear the door, she threw the van into reverse, and accelerated down the driveway.

VAROOOOM...

Tommie pulled out onto the street. SCREEEECH...

## Chapter Five



The drive to school would take them five to ten minutes, depending on the stoplights and traffic.

“Mom, what happens if the diamond industry doesn’t clean up its act and the diamond prices don’t rebound?”

“People have too much invested to let the whole industry collapse,” Tommie announced. “There’ll be changes, you’ll see. It’ll rebound. Everything works out for the big companies. There’s always a cause and effect. It’s just not always the ones you think. So, when you ask me if the diamond prices will rebound, I know darn well they will, but it won’t be because LeHops has stopped killing whales. It’ll be because the people with the big money will make it rebound.”

“You seem pretty confident about that, Mom,” Kim commented. “I only hope that once the changes are made and the market goes up again, people continue to monitor LeHops’s activities.

Otherwise, he could be back to his old tricks in no time.”

Tommie exited their side street onto a major thoroughfare. She approached a red light. It turned green.

Scott looked at the digital clock on the van’s dashboard. It read 8:30. “Mom, can you hurry it up a bit?”

“I’d love to, Scott. But this idiot in front of me needs to figure out that green means go.” Tommie’s voice became more intense. “Why is it when you’re in a hurry, you’re stuck behind a slow driver? Let’s go, you twit! MOVE it!”

“Mom, they can’t hear you,” Kim whined. “I know, but sometimes it’s good to vent.”

“You’ve got road rage, Mom,” Kim accused.

“I’m a road raver, not rager. There’s a difference you know.”

“You just made that up,” Scott said.

“No, it’s a new legal term. Road rage is when a driver becomes violent. Road rave is when a driver...”

Kim cut in. “We get it. Rants and raves, Mom.”

“Mom’s an everywhere rant and raver,” Scott announced.

As Tommie pulled up to pass the slow car in front of her, she looked over at the driver and waved.

The kids looked over, too. “Oh no! That’s Mrs. Hardy!” Scott and Kim ducked down to hide.

“Mom, you just flipped her off, didn’t you,” Scott shouted from the floor of the van. Tommie ignored the accusation. “You kids can get up now. I’m way passed her.”

They sat back up in their seats. They were pretty mad at Tommie.

“I can’t believe you, sometimes,” Kim declared. “You can be so immature.”

Scott had more to say. “Mom, how come you think there’s something bad behind everything?”

Tommie was a bit taken aback. She knew she’d been particularly negative ever since she found out that HucksterCo was ripping her off. She saw conspiracy, backstabbing and a lack of morals and ethics, everywhere she looked.

Tommie approached the school drop-off lane, pulled over, and stopped the van. “You’re right. I need an attitude adjustment. Ever since this Huckster thing started, I’ve turned into a major B - otch.” Kim decided she and Scott were too hard on her. “Mom, don’t change anything. You don’t need an attitude adjustment. What you need is some help dealing with Huckster. Is there anything we can do?”

Scott agreed with Kim. “Sorry, Mom. Kim’s right. If we can help you, just ask. And I’ll try to be more understanding. If it makes you feel better to rant and rave about stuff, go ahead.”

Tommie couldn’t believe how mature her kids were and how immature she was at times. “I love you kids more than you’ll ever know.”

“We know,” Kim replied. She and Scott got out of the van. Before they closed the door, Tommie cleared something up for the kids. “By the way, I knew that was Mrs. Hardy. She used to teach me, you know. I waved hello to her – just in case you two were wondering.”

“Mom!” Scott said. He’d been sweating it for nothing.

“And Scott, I want to thank you for being so honest with me. I do get carried away sometimes. I don’t want you kids to ever be taken advantage of. I guess I forget to celebrate the good things about people sometimes.”

Scott felt guilty. “It’s okay, Mom. I shouldn’t have said that stuff to you.”

“No. I’m glad you did. Reality check, like Grampa said this morning.”

“See you later, Mom. Have a good day. Drive carefully, and give Huckster hell!” Kim exclaimed.

She and Scott closed the van doors. Tommie lowered the passenger window and called out to her daughter. “Kim, watch your language.”

“Give him heck, then,” Kim replied.

“No, give him H E double hockey sticks, Mom,” Scott added. “I’d love to butt-end him with a hockey stick,” Tommie mumbled.

“What?” Scott asked.

“Thanks for the encouragement!” Tommie shouted. ‘I gotta be positive,’ she thought.

The kids walked toward the school.

Tommie headed to her attorney, RL Bailey’s office. It was on the way to HucksterCo.

“Hey, diamond man!” Alex called out. “Where the heck have you been? I’ve been waiting forever!”

Scott ran toward Alex. Kim made sure to avoid him. The boys met in front of the school doors, entered the school, and headed to their first class.

“I know,” Scott mumbled. “My house was crazy this morning. They all knew I wanted to get to school early, but they all ignored me. Wait until they’re in a hurry. I’ll



drag my butt and show them.” Scott got off his soapbox. “So what did you have to tell me? Is it about the fire? What’s so important?”

“I’ll get the boring thing out of the way first,” Alex declared. “The Jets game was a snooze fest. And even worse – Amy and her family sat right beside us! My dad talked on his cell phone or to Amy’s dad – all game! But something else happened last night and I couldn’t tell you at your place. It’s amazing!”

“What? Tell me!” Scott demanded. “What’s your news?”

Alex rubbed his right wrist to draw attention to the tensor bandage wrapped around it. Scott finally noticed. “So, what’s with your wrist?”

## Chapter Six



“We had a car accident last night,” Alex explained. “Was anyone hurt?”

“Just me. It’s a really bad sprain.”

“What happened?”

Alex began his explanation. “When we were driving home from the Jets game, my dad got a call on his cell. He suddenly changed direction and drove to the Crestview Shopping Mall fire instead of home. I saw flames and smoke exploding out of the shopping center.”

“Wow!” Scott said.

“The flames had to be five stories high!”

“Man, I wish I was there,” Scott replied.

“Yeah. I can see why people get hooked on fires,” Alex announced.

“Like firemen?”

“No, like fire maniacs!” Alex said.

“You mean pyromaniacs,” Scott corrected.

“Of course, pyromaniacs. I knew that. And there’s something else I know about the fire. And it’s really important.” Alex paused for dramatic effect.

“What?” Scott insisted.

Alex blurted out, “Some guy ran right in front of our car. My dad had to swerve to miss him. The guy was almost road kill.”

“Man! Is that when you got hurt?”

“Yeah, when I stuck my arm out to stop my sister from flying into the front seat.”

“You’re like a hero,” Scott said. “How’s Mia?”

“She’s fine, but I wasn’t protecting her,” Alex admitted. “She was holding the take-out from O’Dinkle’s. I didn’t want my burger and fries to end up on the floor. When I got home, my dad insisted on putting a tensor on my wrist. He was really happy I saved my little sister.”

“But you didn’t! You saved the food!”

“Hey, if my dad wants to think I’m a hero, let him. At least I got five minutes alone with him – not to mention the kudos I got when you sent me that message. You’d have thought he died and went to newspaperman’s nirvana. Maybe now he won’t think of me as a useless kid.”

“So, is your wrist really hurt?”

“No.”

“Then why leave the tensor on it?”

“I’ll get sympathy from my fans.”

“Alex, you’re such a poser.”

“Well I’m not lying about the fire. It was awesome.”

“So, is this your big news?” Scott asked. He could hardly believe he had acted like a moron at home just so he could hear about Alex’s accident. “Why couldn’t you tell me this at my place? What’s so secret about this?”

“This isn’t all of it.”

“So, spill it!” Scott demanded.

“Something big is going on. My dad didn’t sit down or stop talking on his cell all night.”

Alex suddenly stopped speaking, apparently lost in thought.

Alex’s dad wasn’t always a newspaperman. Up until recently, he was an agent for a government organization called The Company. He was never home, and Alex’s stepmom was always busy with his step-sister, Mia. Alex felt closer to Scott’s parents than his own.

Six months ago, Alex’s dad left The Company and became the publisher of The Center City Communicator. Alex figured his dad would have more time for him, but apparently not.

One good thing did come out of the career change, however, his dad now spearheaded a group of businessmen who invested in the new Harbor Front Boarders and BMX Park in downtown Center City. Alex and Scott were big boarders and BMXers themselves. If Alex had his choice though, he’d take his dad over the park.

Alex finally spoke. He sounded disappointed.

“He’s such a rip-off of a dad. Not like your parents – they’re always there for you.”

Scott wanted to keep it that way. He felt for his friend, but was starting to think that there was no big story.

“Alex, you’re so full of it. You don’t have anything to tell me, do you.”

Alex regained his composure. “Guess who showed up at the fire?”

By the tone of Alex’s voice, Scott knew there was only one answer. “Amy.”

“Yeah!” Alex said. “How did you know?”

“Because she wasn’t home last night when we called,” Scott explained. “Is this your big story?”

“NO,” Alex barked. “Why did YOU call Amy?”

“I didn’t! Kim did. Get real! We wondered where everyone was.”

“Now you know. In Amy Montgomery hell. At least the fire was cool.”

“That’s an oxymoron,” Scott said. “Hey, who are you calling a moron?”

Scott rolled his eyes and replied, “So, your big story is that your dad talked on the phone all night, you saw the fire in person, and you’re pretending to have a sore wrist. Is that about it?”

“No. Of course not! There’s more!” Alex explained. “I had to set the stage.”

Scott shook his head and gave Alex a punch in the arm. “You are such a piece of work. Why do I hang out with you? So, tell me. What’s so important?”

BZZZZ...

The school bell rang.

“Shoot!” Alex exclaimed. He was finally ready to tell Scott the real news. “I’ll have to tell you after Hardy’s class,” Alex said, as the boys approached the classroom door.

Scott glared at Alex. He was really ticked-off at him. As Scott walked through the doorway, he felt a tap on his shoulder. He turned around quickly. The tapper was his teacher.

“Scott, may I see you for a minute, please?” Mrs. Hardy asked. “Sure,” Scott said nervously.

“I noticed you and your family were involved in quite the adventure last night.”

“Yes, we were.”

“I just wanted to let you know that I think you did a very wonderful thing. Imagine, my students, exposing the LeHops Diamond Company and Hoppy Pet Food scam. I’m so proud. Excellent work.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Hardy.”

“If you’d like to talk about it in class today, you can,” Mrs. Hardy offered.

Scott wasn’t sure that was a good idea. “I’d rather not,” he admitted. Scott and Kim really weren’t braggarts. Besides, he figured most of the kids wouldn’t have a clue what happened last night.

“All right,” Mrs. Hardy agreed. “Maybe later, Scott. One other thing.”

“Yes, Mrs. Hardy?”

“A question about your mom,” Mrs. Hardy said. “I saw her driving you kids to school this morning.”

‘Oh, I’m dead meat,’ he thought. ‘My mom was an idiot and I’m going to get punished. Guilt by association.’ Sweat formed on his upper lip.

“Does your mom drive like that every morning?”

Scott’s stomach churned. ‘She DID flip her off. She lied. I’m telling Dad tonight.’

“Pardon?” Scott said, hoping he didn’t hear her right.

“I’m sorry, for an English teacher I didn’t phrase that question very well, did I. What I meant to ask was, does she drive you to school every day?”

“Either her or Dad usually drives,” Scott replied. No reprieve. Same question. Scott imagined everyone in the class was listening to their conversation. Now they’d all know what a nutcase his mom was.

“I was wondering if I could get a lift with you tomorrow morning. My car was acting up today and the garage attendant told me to bring it in. Since the garage is right where I saw you, maybe your mom could pick me up on the way?”

‘I don’t believe this,’ Scott thought. He was relieved. “I’m sure we could pick you up.”

“Thanks, Scott. I would appreciate that,” Mrs. Hardy said. “Did your mom ever tell you that I taught her?”

“Yes, she mentioned it this morning.”

“She was an excellent student, Scott. Your mom had a great imagination – and her opinions and causes were interesting, to say the least. She liked to make sure everyone knew about them.”

“That’s what my Grandparents said.”

Mrs. Hardy smiled. “How are Lanny and Erin?”

“They’re good. Do you know them, too?”

“Sure. They used to come to parent-teacher night. I loved to tell them how your mom was doing, just like I tell your mom and dad how you and Kim are doing. The apples sure didn’t fall far from the trees, you know.”

“We’re starting to find that out,” Scott replied. He walked to the back of the class and took his seat beside Alex. Scott wondered what Alex’s really important news was.

“Alex. Tell me, now,” Scott whispered. Mrs. Hardy looked toward Scott. “Later. Hardy’s looking at us.”

Scott would still have to wait.

## Chapter Seven



Amy was busy making sure her hair was just right before she entered the class. She spotted Kim coming down the corridor.

“Kim, wassup?” The girls met in front of Hardy’s class. “You guys rock! The entire Campbell family, crashing the diamond market and putting Hoppy Pet Food out of business. Amazing!”

“We couldn’t have done it without you and your dad. Man, you guys came through for us. I didn’t think anyone would tell the truth.”

“How come you didn’t call me?”

“I tried to call you and no one was home!” Kim declared. “Where were you last night, Amy? And why did you want to meet early? What’s up?”

“I went to the Jets game with my mom and dad,” Amy explained.

“That’s nice,” Kim replied.

“No, it isn’t. My mom didn’t even watch the game. She was too busy talking to the mayor’s wife. And my dad was on his cell phone all night.” She paused for a second. “I don’t know why they take me anywhere. They don’t even know I exist.” Amy looked hurt. Kim had seen that look before.

Kim knew that Amy’s family was different from her own. They were filthy rich. Her dad owned CCTV and her mom was a society girl. They were always busy with work or parties or charities. Amy had everything she’d ever want, except for the one thing she really needed – quality time with her parents.

“At least you got to go to the game,” Kim said, trying to console Amy.

“Oh, yeah? Guess who I was stuck sitting beside?”

“I don’t know. Who? Is this your big news?”

“Sort of. Guess. Who would be the worst person to be stuck sitting beside?”

“Alex...” Kim knew the answer.

“Yeah! We had seats right beside that idiot, Alex!”

“Tough break.”

“No kidding. I hate him. And it gets WORSE.”

“How could it?”

“My dad was talking to Alex’s dad all night!”

“And?”

“And? How can you ask me that?” Amy frowned.

Kim looked confused. “I don’t get what you’re trying to tell me.”

“What if Alex’s parents and my parents start hanging out? Then I’ll be stuck with that goof-ball all the time.”

“Is this your big news?”

“What if your parents were hanging out with Alex’s? Wouldn’t that freak you out?”

Kim thought about it. “I guess you’re right. The less I see Alex, the better.”

“You got it. And it gets even worse!”

“How?”

“When we were driving home we saw the fire at Crestview Shopping Mall. My dad called it in to his station. We stopped and waited around for the guys to come and cover the story. Guess who else was there?”

Once again, Kim didn’t need to guess. “Alex.”

“Right, Alex. Talk about being in hell, with the fire and the devil and all that.”

Kim had to laugh. It was pretty funny.

“My dad talked to his dad at the fire, too,” Amy complained. “Something’s going on between them and I don’t like it one bit.”

“Amy, both your dads are in the media. It was probably just work related. I wouldn’t read much into this.”

“I hope you’re right.”

Kim knew how much Amy hated Alex, so she changed the subject.

“I’m glad you finally went home and read your messages. Your dad’s station was the first one to report the truth. He must be happy.”

“I’m not sure he is.”

“How come?”

“Two reasons. First, my mom was really mad this morning when the news said that the diamond values were plummeting,” Amy admitted. “Do you know how many diamonds she has? She’s more proud of her diamonds than me!”

“Amy, you’re exaggerating.”

“No, I’m not. And even my dad was mad.”

“Why, because your mom was mad?”

“No, he doesn’t care if she’s mad. He usually just buys her another diamond.” Amy thought for a moment. “Now, what’s he going to do?” She looked at Kim, waiting for an answer.

“I don’t know,” Kim replied. She couldn’t identify with Amy on this one. Her parents disagreed on things but they usually talked out their problems. They never bought each other’s forgiveness.

Amy had more to say. “And then, after we left your house this morning, I heard my dad talking to someone on his cell. It sounded like my dad’s company is going to lose a bundle in advertising revenue because of what he did.”

“Why?” Kim asked.

“Do you know how many diamond and pet food commercials he runs for LeHops Diamonds and Hoppy Pet Food?”

“But your dad did the right thing.”

“Yeah, he did. But sometimes the right thing doesn’t pay off.” BZZZZ...

The second bell rang. Kim and Amy walked into class and sat down in front.

None of the kids mentioned the diamonds or the pet food. They probably weren’t interested in the news, didn’t even see the news, or didn’t make the connection to Kim

and Scott.

Mrs. Hardy began to teach. BLAH... BLAH... BLAH...

The topic was Shakespeare and most of the kids didn't have a clue what any of the plays meant.

BLAH... BLAH... BLAH...

... is what most of them heard for the next forty-five minutes. BZZZZ...

"Thank goodness that's over with," Alex said to Scott. "I hate this junk. I don't get it."

"It's really not that bad, Alex," Scott admitted.

"I doth not believe you. Let's maketh it to yon dooreth, noweth!"

Mrs. Hardy overheard. "Alex, I heard you imitating the old English style of speaking. Would you like to audition for the play the drama club will be putting on?"

"I thinketh not, ye old Mrs. Hardy," Alex answered – without thinking. 'Did I just say that?' he asked himself.

The entire class burst out laughing.

"Thinketh again, Young Man. I'll speaketh to Principal Toole. Perhaps he can convinceth thee."

"Way to go, numb-nuts," Kim chuckled. "I think you'll look great in leotards."

"Better than you!" Alex exclaimed.



## Chapter Eight



Kim and Amy walked out of English and headed to History. “Rats!”

“Rats?” Amy quizzed.

“Yeah, rats. I was so busy with the diamond thing I didn’t do the assignment for Z’s class.”

Scott and Alex walked up behind them. Scott overheard Kim’s comments and realized he hadn’t done the assignment either. That would be a surprise to their teacher. The Campbells were almost always prepared.

“What if he asks us questions?” Kim asked Scott. “He always expects us to know the answers. What’ll we do?”

“See, it doesn’t pay to be brainiacs,” Alex announced. “He never expects much from me.”

“No one expects much from you,” Amy declared.

“So, I take it you didn’t do the assignment?” Scott asked Alex. “No, I didn’t. I was busy helping you guys. And that’s what I’m going to tell him.”

Scott and Kim looked to Amy for help. “Don’t look at me! I didn’t do it either.”

As they reached the doorway to the classroom, Scott pulled Alex aside. The girls went in ahead. “Alex, tell me what’s so important!”

“MAN!” Alex exclaimed, shaking his head. “I can’t believe I let those dumb girls sidetrack me.”

“So, what do you know?”

“It’s about the fire last night. It was set.”

“Set? You mean you think it was arson, like they said on TV?”

“I KNOW it was arson,” Alex bragged.

“You do? How?”

“I overheard my dad on his cell phone at the fire last night. He said something about arson and putting some deal in jeopardy.” Scott was surprised and interested.

“And there’s more,” Alex added. “What?”

“There’s a meeting at my house today at 1:00. It probably has something to do with the fire.”

“Too bad we can’t listen in.”

“We can.”

“How?”

“Easy. We just have to cut school for the rest of the day.”

“We can’t do that,” Scott said. “We’d get caught skipping. Principal Toole would take a fit. And besides, we’d miss basketball practice tonight. We’ve got a big game against the Terriers in two days.”

“We don’t need the practice.”

“Yeah, we need the practice.”

“So, we miss a practice. Scott, you’re such a suck. I can get everyone the rest of the day off!”

“And how are you going to do that?”

“I’ve got a foolproof plan,” Alex stated. “Actually, it’s Toole proof. Principal Toole, fool-proof, Toole-proof. Get it?”

The guys chuckled. “So what is it?”

“I’ll use my wireless Internet connection to hook up with the school’s computer,” Alex explained.

“How’s that going to get us out of school?”

“If I interface with the environmental controls and the security system, I can create a little chaos,” Alex snickered. “That’ll get us out.”

“Oh, I get it. Like setting off a fire alarm. Can you really do that from your laptop?”

“Sure. I’ve been figuring out how to do a lot of neat things,” Alex replied confidently. “We’ve got a spare next class. We can do it then. We’ll get out of school and make it to my house in time to spy on the meeting.”

Scott was starting to come around to Alex’s way of thinking. Technology... missing school... spying on arsonists... was definitely better than school and even basketball practice.

“Okay, Alex. Let’s do it.”

BZZZZ...

The bell signaled the start of History class. The boys took their seats at the back. Mr. Z entered the classroom and sat down at his desk. He waited for the students to settle in.

History class was usually boring, but this week’s topic was traitors. Everyone likes to hear about the bad guys. Today they were going to learn about Robert Hansen, the man the FBI called the greatest traitor ever. The kids were supposed to be prepared to discuss him. Most of them weren’t.

Mr. Z stood up, walked around to the front of his desk, and leaned up against it. “I’d like to depart from our lesson plan today and discuss what happened last night,” he said.

“All right!” Zach shouted from the back of the classroom. Zach was the football team captain. He wasn’t the brightest light, but he was good looking and popular, especially with the girls.

“I’m guessing you haven’t done your prep work, Zach,” Mr. Z said. “Anyone else not prepared?”

Scott and Kim were ready to put up their hands and confess, when Cal decided a segue to another topic was needed. Cal was Zach’s best friend. He played football, too, and was a lot smarter than Zach, although for some reason, Cal didn’t want anyone to know.

“Great. Let’s talk about the Jets game,” Cal announced. “They never should have lost last night.”

“No, Cal. That’s not what we’re discussing,” Mr. Z declared. He looked at Kim and then Scott.

‘Shoot,’ Scott thought. ‘He’s looking at me.’  
‘Rats,’ Kim wondered. ‘What’s he going to say?’

## Chapter Nine



“Kim and Scott Campbell, would you please join me at the front of the class.”

The two slowly got up out of their seats and joined Mr. Z.

“I’d like you to tell the class what happened last night. And I’m not talking about the Jets game.” He cast a sly grin in Cal’s direction. “I’m talking about the diamonds and whales.”

The kids were nervous. There was silence, as they thought about what to say.

Alex decided to help out. Answering questions in class was one thing, but bragging about his own accomplishments was quite another.

He stood up and waved his arm with the tensor on it. “I’ll tell the story,” Alex declared. “Besides, if it wasn’t for me, their parents would probably be in jail and the whales would still be getting killed and...”

“Alex,” Mr. Z said, interrupting Alex’s speech, “I think this is Scott and Kim’s story.”

“But I helped – tons.”

“Maybe you did, but let them tell it. When they get to the part where you helped, then you can explain your role.”

Alex shut up for the time being. He was doubly disappointed. He couldn’t tell his story and no one asked about his arm.

“It all started yesterday afternoon,” Scott nervously began, “when the vet found a crystal the size of an alley marble in our dog Max’s poop. I took a picture of it with my 3-D digital camera and sent it by email to The Spaced Channel. I asked them if they knew what it was.”

“Why did you send the picture to The Spaced Channel?” Mr. Z asked.

Kim answered the question. “Mr. spaced out here thought it was a crystal from a meteorite.”

The entire class laughed. They all knew Scott was a Star Trek addict.

“Some meteorites do have diamonds in them,” Scott rebutted. “What diamond?” Allana asked. Her interest was definitely tweaked. She looked at her cheerleader buddies, Cynthia and Erica, and mouthed, ‘Diamond!’.

“The diamond crystal their dog pooped out,” Alex barked. He could barely contain himself. “Be quiet and listen so they can get to the part about how I helped!”

Mr. Z stared at Alex. Alex dialed it back.

“Did Alex say you found a diamond?” Cynthia asked Scott. “I thought you said the

dog pooped out a marble.”

“No,” Scott explained. “I said the dog pooped out a crystal that was the size of an alley marble.”

“Then why did Alex say it was a diamond? And what’s this about a meteorite?”

Scott tried to clear things up. “The Spaced Channel emailed me a message – that the crystal was a diamond.”

“The Internet spies intercepted the email message and told the world we had a diamond mine,” Kim added. “Then everyone either tried to get our diamond mine or sell us something.”

“So, why didn’t you tell people you didn’t have a diamond mine?” asked Sara, the smartest student in the school.

“We tried to, but no one believed us. That’s when we came up with our ingenious plan,” Scott bragged.

“I don’t get it,” Cynthia declared. “It sounds like you guys were famous. What was so bad about all the attention? Everyone wants to be famous!”

“We had all these people camped out on our front yard trying to sell us stuff,” Scott explained. “There were so many of them we had to have police protection. Do you think that’s fun?”

“Someday, I’ll have police protection,” Allana added. “I’ll need a body guard, too.”

“Too bad she doesn’t have a brain to go with that body,” Kim mumbled to herself.

“I’ll be your bodyguard!” Alex proclaimed.

Mr. Z got them back on track. “Girls and boys, we’re talking about the diamond. Kim, please continue with the story.”<sup>34</sup> Breaking News!

“Okay, Mr. Z. ...So, the media was making up all these stupid stories about our diamond and a diamond mine and stuff like that. And then they went really nuts. They said my mom and dad killed a man.”

“Who’d they kill?” Zach asked.

“No one! Didn’t you see the news this morning?” Amy called out.

“News? Who watches the news?” Zach challenged.

“Anyone with a brain,” Sara snapped. “I suppose you watch cartoons.”

“So?” Zach replied.

“But your parents didn’t kill anyone,” Cal announced. “Even I know that. I saw that on CCTV this morning.”

“You watch the news,” Mr. Z said. “I’m impressed, Cal.”

“Thanks, Mr. Z.”

“For those of you who didn’t see the news,” Amy explained, “it turns out that LeHops was killing whales and using the oil in their diamond mining process, and then using the whale meat in their pet food business.”

This was a big surprise to most of the class.

“And that’s not all!” Scott exclaimed. “Little kids work in some of LeHops’s mines. The mining conditions are really dangerous and kids die doing it!”

“I didn’t know that,” Erica admitted. “That’s awful. Can’t they work somewhere else?”

“They’re little kids,” Kim explained. “They shouldn’t be working at all. They should be in school!”

The class agreed.

“So, how come people let LeHops get away with it?” Jeremy asked.

Everyone turned to look at him.

Jeremy rarely spoke in class and no one really knew him well. His best friend used to go to the school, but left part way through the year. No one knew why. Since his friend left, Jeremy stuck to himself and rarely said anything. But today’s topic had him engaged.

Mr. Z decided to answer his question. “Rich consumers love diamonds. It’s like most things that you want. You don’t really care where they come from, as long as you can have them.”

Kim added, “And people love to make money. That’s why no one knew that Hoppy Pet Food was using whale meat.”

“How would anyone know that?” Jeremy asked.

“I don’t know. But they should have.”

“We should know a lot of things, but we often have no way of finding them out, or even knowing that we should know them,” Amy stated.

“It sounds like you think everything’s a conspiracy,” Cal observed.

Amy really wanted to be a reporter and she defended her position. “You have to ask the five Ws,” she explained. “You know – who, what, when, where, why – and how. Get smart. Inform yourself.”

“What?” Zach asked.

Amy continued, “LeHops is the who. The what was that he was killing whales and using their oil and meat. The why was because he was making lots of money doing it. The where was it was far away, which is part of the reason no one knew. The when was now, and the how was because no one cared or bothered to ask questions or investigate. That’s how most bad things keep happening. Because no one cares.”

Mr. Z was pleased with the way the discussion was developing. “That was very impressive, Amy. I think you’ll be a great investigative reporter some day.”

Sara was jealous that Amy had it all figured out. “So, when you figured out the five Ws and the H, what did you do to fix the problem?”

Scott replied immediately. “We sent another email to The Spaced Channel. We told them we uncovered a conspiracy but that we couldn’t tell them what it was. We said we’d give them clues and they could figure it out and expose it.”

“I still don’t get it,” Sara admitted. “How was that going to solve your problem?”

“Alex, can I borrow your laptop?” Scott asked. “I’ll get onto my email site and read the message we sent. Then you’ll all see what we did.” Scott took Alex’s laptop, opened it up, turned it on, and typed and talked at the same time.

## Chapter Ten



“The Internet started the lie, so we decided to use it to launch a counterattack against LeHops,” Scott explained.

“We leaked some misinformation of our own,” Kim added. “We told them we had some information about our diamond we needed confirmed and questions we needed answers to.”

“Yeah. So this is what we wrote,” Scott said. He read the email aloud.

“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.

“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 the lines. We’re afraid that if you don’t figure it out, we’ll be in d-e-e-e- e-e-p trouble,” Scott said.

“Okay, Scott, I got the diamond reference,” Cal admitted. “But what’s the d-e-e-e-e-e-p thing?”

“I know! I know!” Sara shouted out. “There are six E’s in deep. Get it? Six feet under? They’ll be dead!”

Scott continued to read his email. “LeHops Diamond Company?

Is Hitler really 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?”

“Oh, I get it now!” Sara said. “The news people put the five Ws and H together the way they wanted to. They just said what suited them. The PetBizz TV people took the animal angle, the business channel took the business angle, and stuff like that. I watched

a lot of it on TV.”

“Right, like Sara said,” Zach exclaimed. “That was pretty easy. Even I would have thought of that.”

“So, you kids managed to turn the media’s attention to the real stories – that your mom and dad didn’t kill anyone and that LeHops abused child miners and slaughtered sperm whales. You got the world mad enough to actually impact his business.”

Kim interrupted Mr. Z and admitted, “Actually, it was Amy and Alex’s dads who broke the real stories. The other channels had to eventually tell the truth or look like idiots.”

Amy decided it was time to tell her story. “Yeah. When Kim needed to get people to report the real news, she messaged me.”

“AND me,” Alex cut in.

“And Alex,” Amy confirmed. “Kim and Scott asked us to tell our dads what was really happening. Our dads printed off their emails and got the facts confirmed by the Center City Police. Then they reported the real truth this morning.”

“This demonstrates a very important point,” Mr. Z announced. “What’s that?” Cal asked.

“This should prove to you kids that you DO have a voice and that you should make yourselves heard. Make your opinions count.”

“Right! We should be heard!” Zach announced. “We got opinions.”

“But, before you say anything, you should also be well informed,” Mr. Z added. “You need to KNOW the five Ws and H.”

“I knew there had to be a catch,” Allana declared. “Mr. Z’s just trying to trick us into watching the news and asking questions.”

“You got me, Allana. I’m trying to trick you into learning. That’s my job. I’m a teacher.”

Mr. Z looked up at the clock on the wall. “I see we have about ten minutes left. I won’t start a new lesson today. Maybe we should review what we learned yesterday.”

AHHHH... GHEEEE... RAAAATS...

The students moaned and groaned. Kim and Scott took their seats. Alex took his laptop and put it in his bag.

“We’ve been talking about famous American traitors and their role in history,” Mr. Z lectured. “Can someone summarize what we learned about Benedict Arnold last class?”

Sara immediately raised her hand. “Sara?” Mr. Z said.

“Benedict Arnold was a very interesting lesson,” Sara began. “I always thought that he was just a traitor. I didn’t realize that he fought for the Americans for a long time before he switched sides. He even achieved the rank of a brigadier general, and was shot twice in two different battles, fighting for the American revolutionaries.”

“Remind the class how he became a traitor,” Mr. Z asked. “Arnold was passed over for promotion by the US army,” Sara continued. “He decided he could get a higher rank and more money if he switched sides. He made a deal with the British. They agreed to pay him a lot of money if he delivered West Point and its 3,000 defenders to the British. As it turned out, even though Arnold’s plan didn’t work, he was still paid a ton of money for his efforts.”

“Does anyone else have anything to add?” Mr. Z asked. Jeremy put up his hand.

“Jeremy,” Mr. Z said.



“Lots of Americans and British changed sides during the war. But Americans hated Arnold mostly because he sold out for a profit, not because he changed sides.”

“Very good, Jeremy,” Mr. Z said. “Does anyone see the irony here?”

“Yeah, Jeremy’s last name is Arnold,” Zach answered. He thought he was so clever.

“What does that have to do with anything and how is that ironic?” Mr. Z asked.

“It’s funny,” Zach replied. Jeremy looked embarrassed.

Mr. Z continued as if Zach hadn’t said anything. “I’ll ask again. Does anyone see the irony here?”

There was silence for a minute before Alex suddenly blurted out, “I get it. It’s not okay for Benedict Arnold to sell out Americans for a profit, but it is okay for people to ignore what LeHops was doing so that they could get what they want.”

Mr. Z was surprised. It took him a moment to process Alex’s observation.

“Excellent, Alex! I hadn’t thought of that!”

‘It’s a pleasure being a teacher today,’ Mr. Z thought. “What did you think I was going to say?” Alex asked.

“Well, I thought you’d see the irony in the fact that if Arnold sold out the Brits, he’d be an American hero, not a traitor,” Mr. Z said. “But I like your observation better and I’ll tell you why.”

The kids were totally tuned in. They waited for Mr. Z’s explanation.

“We judge people’s actions based on our own motives. As Americans, we don’t think it was right for Benedict Arnold to change sides just so he could get a better rank and make more money. We think he was wrong and we’ve labeled him a traitor because of it. The British, however, think of him as a hero.

“In the case of LeHops, most people don’t care how he gets his diamonds, as long as he has diamonds to sell to us.”

“Yeah, I get it,” Cal said. “We let bad things happen if it benefits us – just like Benedict Arnold did. We change sides and opinions all the time, as long as we come out a winner. We’re all Benedict Arnolds!”

“But none of us knew all that stuff with the diamonds was happening!” Allana exclaimed.

“That’s because we all put our heads in the sand,” Amy explained. “We never ask questions, and neither does the media. It’s all fluff!”

“So what questions are we supposed to ask?” Cynthia chimed in. “The five Ws!” Amy shouted. Class was lively. Energy was high and so was the volume.

“And don’t forget the H!” Alex added.

“You think that’s the answer to everything, Amy,” Sara said sarcastically. She hated the attention Amy was getting.

Mr. Z came to Amy’s defense. “It’s an excellent place to start, Sara. Now, getting back to traitors and treason, our topic this week. I have one more observation to make and I want you kids to think about it.” He paused for a moment. “Think about how we’ve turned treason into a profitable business venture!” Mr. Z declared. “Nowadays, people who commit treason or change allegiance for profit, are protected under the government’s witness protection plan and are almost made into heroes.”

“Like the MOB guys,” Zach said. “They rat out their bosses and get a new identity and lots of money to do it. I watch The Crime Channel all the time.”

“That’s correct, Zach,” Mr. Z observed.

“And like Robert Hansen,” Sara declared. “He sold information to the Russians for years. When they arrested him, they found a huge stash of swag, including diamonds.” She paused for just a second and blurted out, “Hey, maybe LeHops was buying some of Hansen’s information!”

“That’s an interesting thought, Sara,” Mr. Z replied.

“And Hansen, who should have been put to death for being a traitor to the US, ended up being sent to a minimum security prison,” Cal added. “He even got to keep all of the money he was paid AND they made a TV movie about him.”

The class was surprised Cal knew so much. He’d blown his ‘dumb jock’ cover.

“Cal,” Mr. Z said, “you’ve got a lot of good information. Can I ask what your source was?”

“The Internet. The C&BS web site. It was really good. And it also said, just like Zach said about the MOB, that the government gave Hansen a lesser punishment because he sold out other spies. It PAYS to be a traitor!”

BZZZZ...

“Excellent work today, people,” Mr. Z declared. “I like the way you kids applied the historical lesson to the present – and particularly to the Campbells’ situation. Class dismissed.”

“Time to blow this Popsicle stand!” Alex announced.

## Chapter Eleven



Kim and Amy went off to Math class.

Scott and Alex had a spare and headed for the school's common room. It was the place the kids could hang-out, do homework, chat... whatever.

"Are you still game to get out of here and spy on my dad's meeting?" Alex asked Scott.

Scott was having second thoughts. It was one thing to think about doing something wrong – it was another thing to actually do it.

"Cat got your tongue?" Alex said. He sat down at a table in the common room and opened his laptop. "Fraidy-cat?"

Kim called Scott a fraidy-cat yesterday when she was daring him to take the can of dog food over to Mr. Klein's. He didn't like it yesterday and didn't like it today.

Without much thought, Scott replied, "No! I'm not afraid of anything. Do it, Alex."

Alex smiled and exclaimed, "Time to raise a little H E double hockey sticks!"

Alex typed a few commands on his qwerty. The display lit up with flashing lights and a schematic. Scott couldn't believe what he was seeing. The site map to the entire school security, environmental controls and computer system was right in front of them. Scott was totally caught up in the excitement of the tech moment.

"Man! That's sweeeeet!" he said. "What are you going to do now?"

Alex explained his plan. "I'll put the lights on fifteen second timers and crank the heat up. Then I'll turn on the sprinklers and set off the fire alarm. When we're all out of the school, I'll put phase two of the plan in motion."

Scott wasn't that teched-out that he didn't realize the water could do a lot of damage. "Maybe we shouldn't do the sprinkler thing. Just do the lights and the heat and the alarm," he said. "The water will wreck the books and computers and stuff."

Alex scratched his head and looked over the map. "I think I can do something about that." He typed in a few commands. "Okay, Mr. Wuss. I've made sure the sprinklers just go off in the hallway. I'm bad, but I'm not stupid," he said, as he laughed and typed in a few more commands. "Plug your ears!"

BURRRRING... BURRRRING...

Off and on went the lights, up went the heat, off went the fire alarm, and down came the water.

"Success!" Alex declared. The students ran for the doors. "Look at them all panic." Alex slammed shut his laptop. "Wait until they get into the hallway. That's where the fun

starts.”

He and Scott grabbed their backpacks and proceeded out of the common room and into a sea of hot, soaked, student bodies.

“Don’t push! Exit in an orderly fashion!” Principal Toole shouted to the students. “This is not a drill! I repeat. This is not a drill!”

No one was listening to him. Each kid pushed and shoved, as they tried to get in front of their classmates. Practice doesn’t necessarily make perfect in a real situation.

Alex and Scott made their way down the hallway. They were in no rush. As they got closer to Ms. Fogarty’s Math room, they noticed Kim and Amy in the hallway. Alex squished through the crowd to catch up to the girls. Scott was right behind him.

Alex tapped Kim on the shoulder really hard so she’d notice. Kim swung around to see who was there.

“Alex! BUG off!”

Before she could turn back around, Alex announced to the world, “WET T-SHIRT contest!”

“Oh, NO!” Kim screamed. Kim turned away from Alex. She and Amy grabbed their chests. “That bonehead!” Kim said to Amy. Kim quickly flung her elbow back toward Alex – as hard as she could.

“OOOOW!”

Her elbow connected. Kim smiled.

“What the heck did you do that for?” Scott yelled at Kim. “Whoooops. Wrong idiot,” Kim replied.

“Why’d you hit me?” Scott whined. “Guilt by association,” Kim answered.

Scott worried this wouldn’t be the last of it.

The girls continued down the hallway. They noticed that Alex wasn’t the only pervert in the school. Most of the boys were staring at the girls. There really wasn’t much to see, but the boys were checking out the girls’ chests anyway.

On their way passed another classroom, they walked by a couple of teachers.

“Look, there’s black stuff dripping from Shasky’s forehead!” Alex exclaimed.

“What is that stuff? It’s pouring off!” Scott said.

“I’ll bet it’s that spray on hair.” Shasky wasn’t the only teacher literally having a meltdown.

The teachers dripped, melted, drooped and cursed under their breath while they directed traffic. They couldn’t escape the deluge until all the kids were out of the school.

It seemed like an eternity to the staff, but within four minutes, the school was empty. Alex and Scott looked for a prime location to watch the comings and goings of the fire department and whomever else might show. They sat down on the grass, got comfortable, and Alex opened up his laptop. He was ready for phase two.

Within minutes, the police, fire department and an ambulance arrived on the scene. They all paraded by the students and into the school.

Kim and Amy made sure they were a safe distance away from Alex and Scott. They were still mad and embarrassed by Alex’s wet T-shirt comment. Once Amy and Kim were settled, Amy pulled her cell phone out of her backpack and called her dad.

RING... RING...

Richard Montgomery saw his daughter’s name on his call display. He answered his phone. He could hear the alarms going off in the background. “Amy, are you all right?”

he asked. "Are you out of the building?"

"Sure, Dad," Amy replied. "How do you know about the fire alarm already?"

"It came over the police scanners. Are all the kids safely out? Is there much of a blaze?"

"All the kids are out, but I can't see any fire or smoke," Amy said. "Have you sent anyone to cover the story?"

"Alan Lasowich is on his way," her dad replied. "You're sure you're okay?"

"Yes, Dad."

"I'll see you tonight," he said.

Amy was shocked. "Aren't you coming down here?" In Amy's mind, this proved he didn't care.

"No, Dear. I can't. I have some very important business to take care of this afternoon."

Amy was really disappointed. Even a fire at her school couldn't get her dad's attention. "Bye, Dad," she sighed.

Kim was listening to Amy's half of the conversation. "Is your dad coming?" Kim asked.

"No, he's sending Alan Lasowich," Amy replied. "Dad's got something more important to do."

Kim decided to try to cheer up her friend. "Maybe you can help him with the story," Kim suggested. "We can figure out the 5 Ws." Kim's idea worked. Amy was immediately distracted and started thinking about what to report to Lasowich. She and Kim sat down on the grass and watched for him to arrive.

The rest of the students at Spring Valley were also camped out on the grass. They were waiting too, but not for reporters. They were waiting for the Principal to tell them they could go home.

Alex decided to call his dad. This would be a great excuse to check up on him.

RING... RING...

Joel Black picked up his cell phone. Like Richard Montgomery, he knew who it was. "Alex. What do you want?" he said curtly.

"Dad, there's a fire at the school!"

"It's a false alarm. Something's wrong with the computer system," Joel replied.

"How do you know?" Alex asked. He wished he could take back his words. It might have sounded like HE knew something.

Joel's spy instincts kicked in. "Alex. Is there something you want to tell me?"

"Like what?"

Joel knew Alex was good with technology. A techno-whiz kid as a matter of fact. He wouldn't put anything past him, but Joel had more important issues to deal with, so he let it slide. "Alex, if they send you home..."

Before Joel could finish his sentence, Alex cut him off. "If we get to go home, I'm heading to Scott's."

Joel was relieved. He hadn't counted on his kid being out of school and potentially dropping in on his meeting.

"Call me and let me know if you get out," Joel insisted. "Sure, Dad," Alex said and hung up the phone.

Alex turned to Scott and proclaimed, "Man, this is BIG!"

“What is?” Scott asked.

“Wait, I’ll explain in a minute.” Alex noticed that the system failures had been corrected in the school. He needed to add a couple more. He certainly didn’t want the school re-opened. Alex typed a few instructions into his laptop and sirens began to sound in the school again.

“Ahhhh, gheeee,” Alex feigned disappointment. “More problems.”

“Alex, you’re a bad boy,” Scott chuckled. “So, what did your dad say?”

“He’s plenty worried I’m going to get out of school and come home. He wants me to go to your place. He wants me to call him and let him know if we get out.”

“Wow! He really doesn’t want you home this afternoon.”

“No, and that tells me – big things are happening.”

Scott nodded his head in agreement.

As Alex made sure the school’s systems continued to malfunction, Amy spotted her father’s lead reporter. “There’s Alan Lasowich!” she exclaimed. “Let’s go talk to him.”

“But Amy, we haven’t figured much out yet,” Kim said. “All we know is when and where. We don’t know anything else.”

“Maybe I can at least help him find people to interview,” Amy reasoned. She and Kim got up and hurried toward Alan.

Scott also saw Lasowich. He wanted to stay as far away from the media as possible. He knew the trouble they could cause.

Problem was, Alex saw Lasowich, too.

## Chapter Twelve



“Hey, look! It’s that reporter guy from CCTV,” Alex announced. “Let’s go talk to him.”

“What for?”

“To get on TV, what else?”

“No, I don’t think so.”

“Why not?”

“I just don’t want to,” Scott insisted.

“Well, I do!” Alex declared, as he ran toward Lasowich. Scott reluctantly followed.

Alex and Amy both converged on Lasowich. They not only surprised him – but each other.

“What are you doing here, Alex?” Amy said. “Get lost!”

Alex pushed Amy aside and declared to Lasowich, “If you want the best interview, interview ME!”

“And why should I interview you?”

“Because I’m Alex Black. I helped break the story about the diamonds and the pet food last night. I can break this one wide open, too!”

Scott pulled Alex away from Lasowich and said, “Mr. Lasowich, Alex doesn’t know anything.”

Scott then whispered to Alex, “Shut-up or he’ll figure the whole thing out.”

Amy saw her chance. “My name is Amy...”

Lasowich didn’t realize Amy was his boss’s daughter. He was more interested in what he just heard Scott whisper, not so quietly, to Alex.

“So, Alex Black is it?” Lasowich asked.

Scott elbowed Alex and gave him a look that screamed, shut-up. Alex got the message. “Yes, Sir. But I was just kidding. I really don’t know anything.”

Amy tried to interject again, saying, “He’s right. He doesn’t know anything. He’s just DUMB Alex Black. The worst kid in the school.” Lasowich was sure he was onto something. Who else but the worst kid in the school would set off alarms for no reason – if that was what this situation was really all about. Lasowich didn’t know how Alex might have done it, so he decided to bait the hook with what little information he had. “I understand that there is no fire, but that the computer system is running amok.”

Alex tried to act surprised. He raised his eyebrows and said, “Really?”

“Yes, really.” Lasowich noticed Alex clutching his laptop. “You wouldn’t happen to

know anything about that, would you?"

"No way, Sir. I hardly know anything about computer systems and stuff like that."

"That's a SuperDuperComputer with a wireless Internet capability you've got there," Lasowich said, as he moved a step closer to Alex. "That's state of the art. I don't even think that model's for sale yet. Where did you get it?"

"My dad. He has connections."

"Well, I'd say whoever corrupted the school's system is a real genius. The next Billy Barrier!" Lasowich said. He thought this would hook Alex for sure.

"Billy Barrier! I'm WAY smarter than he'll ever be!" Alex declared. "I could program circles around him and his nerds!"

"Alex," Scott said, as he tugged on his arm.

Kim and Amy watched the whole thing. "I think Alex did this," Kim whispered to Amy, as Lasowich continued to press Alex for a story.

"Now we know the who, what, when, where and probably the how," Amy whispered back. "But why?"

"Hey, if it gets us out of school, who cares?"

"Kim, you'll never make a good reporter."

"I don't want to be. I'd like to get the afternoon off and go home. I didn't get much sleep last night."

"Look at Alex. He's squirming like the worm he is," Amy said. She was right. Alex looked very uncomfortable. He was being pulled in two directions. One half of him wanted to run away from

Lasowich, but the other half wanted to tell him what he did and take all the tech-know credit. He couldn't decide what to do.

Principal Toole was about to make life even more complicated for Alex. He was walking toward him.

Scott could see that Alex was just dying to confess to Lasowich. If that happened, Scott knew that he'd be in trouble, too. 'Guilt by association' as Kim said. Scott had to take action. He put Alex in a headlock and whispered in his ear, "Alex! Toole is coming our way. So, shut-up!"

Kim noticed Toole coming as well. She nudged Amy and pointed toward him. "This should be good." The girls stayed close. They didn't want to miss a thing.

Principal Toole stopped right beside Alex. Alex was now standing between Lasowich and Toole.

'What am I gonna do?' Alex wondered. 'What am I gonna say? How am I gonna get out of this mess?'

Then it came to him. Alex got a brainstorm. As cool as a cucumber, Alex asked, "Principal Toole, is there anything Scott and I can do to help?"

Lasowich chuckled to himself and said, "Smooooth."

"No, Alex," Principal Toole replied. "It looks like we have some computer problems here. This could take a while. Thanks for the offer."

"If you're sure, Principal Toole," Alex replied.

"I'm sure," Principal Toole said. "This is pretty complicated stuff. Nothing you'd understand. We have the technology professionals dealing with it."

Alex was ready to explode. 'Nothing I'D understand?' he thought. 'Nothing HE'D understand he means.'



Scott looked at Lasowich. He was trying to communicate without words. Scott's eyes were begging Lasowich not to rat them out.

As Principal Toole walked away, Lasowich and his cameraman followed.

Lasowich turned and spoke back over his shoulder to the boys. "I was young once."

The boys weren't sure what he meant by that, until he added, "I think I'll look for another story. You two owe me."

Scott was relieved and Alex was frustrated. He wished he could tell the world what he just did. But he couldn't.

As soon as Principal Toole and Lasowich were out of earshot, Scott said, "Man, you've got guts. I thought we were dead. I thought Lasowich was going to nail you, and then, if that's not bad enough, you go and open your big mouth in front of Toole."

"You'll never make a good agent if you freak-out in the face of danger. You have to be cool. I learned that from my dad."

"Right. I forgot. You're Alex the secret agent kid."

Kim and Amy walked closer to the boys. "YOU did it, didn't you," Amy said accusingly.

"Aaaalex," Scott warned. "Keep your big mouth shut."

It was one thing to take the credit in front of the cameras. It was another to waste his time with Kim and Amy.

"Go find someone else to bug," Alex ordered.

"Let's get as far away from these two losers as we can," Amy said to Kim.

"We're outta here," Kim replied. The girls walked off in a huff. Another twenty minutes passed. It was already five to twelve.

Principal Toole finally made the announcement the students were hoping for.

"Students! Unfortunately, we have to send you home. I'll see you all tomorrow."

"Yea!" the students cheered in unison. "Nice!" Scott commented.

Alex wished he could let everyone know they owed him for the afternoon off, but instead he bit his tongue and packed his laptop into his backpack. He and Scott got up to leave.

Kim and Amy knew the truth, but they weren't about to let on. It would probably mean they'd re-open the school. Kim decided she'd rather spend the afternoon goofing-off with Amy than sleeping. "Amy, why don't we go to my place? We can get lunch, shoot some hoops, and watch soaps."

"Good idea. We've got a big game against the Terra Nova Terriers in two days. We have to practice. But we need to take a break at two, to watch 'All My Kids'."

"Agreed," Kim replied. The girls started down the sidewalk toward Kim's house.

Meanwhile, Scott and Alex grabbed their skateboards from their backpacks and tore off down the sidewalk. "Out of the way!" Alex yelled at the girls. Kim and Amy jumped off the sidewalk and onto the grass.

"You JERK!" Kim yelled out.

"Sticks and stones!" Alex taunted back.

Amy shouted, "Yeah, I'd like to break your bones!"

When the girls were out of earshot, Scott reminded Alex to call his dad.

"Riiiiight," Alex said. "I need to tell him we're out of school and going to your place for the whole day."

Alex placed the call. Joel wasn't pleased about his son not being in school, but at least

he was going to be at Scott's.

“Alex, give me a call when you want to come home. I'll send Mrs. Riverez for you.”

“You don't have to do that, Dad.”

“I INSIST! Now, tell me you'll call when you're ready to come home!”

“Sure, Dad. I'll call. Have a good day. I know I will.” Alex turned to Scott. “Let's GO!”

## Chapter Thirteen



It was almost lunchtime. Chris was on his way to the university to meet Danny. He'd been pretty unproductive that morning. The only thing he managed to do was set up the kids' scorch mail, as he nick-named it. His mind was all over the map. He thought about the diamond caper, The Ring Master, his in-laws' verbal attack on Tommie, Buck Huckster... It was one of those days.

Chris met Danny in the entranceway of Center City University's Faculty Club. "Danny, thanks again for helping us with the diamond last night," Chris said.

"No problem," Danny replied. "You guys had quite the exciting evening."

"I wouldn't want to go through that, again."

Despite the 'Please Wait to be Seated' sign, Chris followed Danny, as he walked over to the best table in the dining room and sat himself.

As Danny got comfortable in the overstuffed chair, he asked, "How'd Tommie deal with it?"

"Fine. Everything was fine until her parents gave her a hard time this morning."

"Oh, they can be real bulldogs those two. What were they ragging on her about?"

Chris, Tommie, Danny's wife, Mary and Danny had been friends for years. Danny dated Tommie before she met Chris. Chris had been taking geology and archeology courses at university with Danny. Danny introduced him to Tommie. They clicked and the rest is history.

Chris replied, "They raked her over the coals for discouraging the kids to do anything like that again."

"That doesn't surprise me."

"Well, it surprised me."

"You know I've known Tommie a lot longer than you," Danny said. "AND I know Lanny and Erin can be a couple of you-know- what disturbers themselves."

"Right. But from what I know of them, they usually just sweat the small stuff all the time."

"Not always, and besides, the small stuff leads to the big stuff. That's how it starts. If people let people get away with the small stuff, what's stopping them from becoming LeHops and the oil company executives and the big polluters and the Buck Hucksters of the world? We don't need more of them. We need more Lannys and Erins and Albert Kleins. And it looks like Kim and Scott are following in their footsteps."

Chris thought back to Erin's earlier comment – that she knew Klein decades ago. He wondered about his in-laws. "Were they activists when they were young?"

Danny laughed. "You'll have to ask them."

Danny was being cryptic. Chris wondered if Danny was hiding something.

"Are you telling me that you agree with them?" Chris asked. "I'm just saying that you and Tommie should be encouraging the kids. If they want to stand up for things they believe in, then support them. Don't turn them into conservative corporate yes-men like you two are."

"I get the message. Now can we change the subject?" Chris asked. Chris knew Danny was right.

"Sure. I'm dying to tell you about this project," Danny declared. "Good. Now, start by telling me what a yo ho ho is."

Danny explained, "The university's been hired by some businessmen to conduct underwater geological surveys of the continental shelf."

"Why are they contracting with you?"

"The university just received a new piece of bleeding edge research equipment on loan from the Federal Government. It's the prototype of the system NASA sent to Mars to look for evidence of underground water. They assigned me to the technology and to this project. We installed it in the university research cruiser yesterday. It's kick-butt technology."

"What's the purpose of the research?" Chris asked. "Oil? Minerals? Sunken treasure? Atlantis?"

"I really don't know," Danny admitted. "They just want four specific areas mapped."

"So? What's all the excitement about?"

"They're paying the university – and me – a huge whack of cash."

"How much are you talking about?"

"The university will make a half a million and they'll pay me a hundred and fifty thousand."

Chris was stunned. "Good grief! That's a lot of money!"

"They're giving me ten days to complete the job. If I do it quicker, I get a bonus of fifteen thousand a day," Danny added.

Chris could smell a rat.

"Doesn't this sound suspicious to you?" he asked. "What's with the hush hush?"

Danny saw the waitress approach their table. He turned to Chris and said, "The usual?"

Chris nodded his head. Danny ordered. "We'll have two steak sandwiches, two double orders of your famous onion rings and two Caesar salads. You can add a couple of iced teas to that, thanks."

"Before we discuss my project, I want to hear what's happening with Tommie and Buck Huckster."

As they waited for their lunch, Chris gave Danny a blow by blow. Ten minutes passed.

The waitress approached their table, juggling two big trays that were carrying their lunch. She set the food down and left.

"So, on to your project. Who's gonna help you with the work?" Chris asked.

"They've asked me to keep my crew small and only use people I know and trust."

“I know where you’re going with this. Tommie warned me. I’m not sure I can help you with this one. I’m pretty busy at work,” Chris said, trying to weasel out of it. He was concerned about the secrecy and Tommie’s comments. “Danny, I think you need to consider why these guys want the information. Are you sure they’re not terrorists?”

“Why would you say that?” Danny asked.

Chris paused for a moment. “I remember something I saw on The Historical Channel. Apparently the Germans brought their sub- marines right up to our coastline during the war,” Chris answered. “The government thinks they were smuggling people into the States through some underground tunnels.”

“Yeah? So, what’s that got to do with this?” Danny asked. He was a bit annoyed at Chris’s hedging.

“I’m not sure what I’m saying,” Chris admitted. “You must be doing more than just mapping the shelf. You need to think about their real objectives.”

“I’m thinking about the university’s objective,” Danny reasoned. “You know we’re desperate for money. What could be wrong with taking a contract from some businessmen for some serious cash? You know I can’t make that kind of money as a professor. And there’ll be lots of money to continue my own personal research.”

“This doesn’t sound right to me. Back out of the deal.” Now Danny was starting to feel a bit nervous.

“Too late. They already gave the university and me, half the money, up-front. I’m in. Are you going to help? I’ll pay you a third.” He paused for a reply. “Come on, Chris. You can invest it in the kids’ university fund.”

“Danny, I need to think about it.”

“At least come out and take a look at the equipment. You can do that, can’t you?” Danny egged Chris on. “Or will Tommie ground you?”

Danny knew what buttons to push. It didn’t take long for Chris to respond. “Danny, I’ll help you. But I’m doing this against my better judgment.”

“You’re doing this against your better-half ’s judgment you mean,” Danny teased. “Let’s take the university research cruiser out now and do some preliminary radar work.”

Chris didn’t have anything planned for the rest of the day. He looked at his watch. It was still early in the day. He checked his cell phone for messages. There weren’t any. He called into the office to see if there was any reason he needed to go into work. They had everything under control. Other than Tommie’s wishes, Chris couldn’t find a single excuse. He gave in. “Let’s go, Danny. Pay the check.”

They headed out to the harbor in separate vehicles. Neither of them had any idea what they were getting into.

## Chapter Fourteen



A couple of hours earlier, Tommie wondered what lay ahead for her. She'd met with her attorney, RL Bailey, to discuss how she was going to get the money Huckster owed her.

Now, Tommie sat in the HucksterCo executive boardroom, waiting for Buck Huckster to show up. It was 11:30. He'd already kept her waiting for forty-five minutes. She was confident and loaded for bear, thirty minutes ago. Now, she was feeling small, insignificant and powerless – exactly what Huckster wanted. With her lipstick fading and her confidence waning, in bounced Bridget, Huckster's silicon secretary.

"Tommie, Buck asked me to tell you that he's sorry he can't make the meeting. Something important came up. He also asked me to tell you that if you still want to discuss your problem, you should talk to our corporate attorney." Bridget didn't wait for a response. She turned around and wiggled her way out of the boardroom.

Tommie was fuming as she watched Bridget leave. "She's wasting that wiggle on me," Tommie said. She got up, closed the boardroom door, pulled out her cell phone, and placed a call to RL.

RING... RING... "Hello?" RL answered.

"Hi. It's Tommie. It's definitely time to take action. I'm ready. That jerk just stood me up. He sent his Barbie doll secretary with a message. She said I need to deal with the company's attorney now." RL replied, "That's a clear sign they're getting ready to cut you loose. I'd say it's time to get all the documentation you can before they escort you to the door. Make sure you get copies of everything – emails, phone records, memos, anything that has to do with you. Have you got the specific documents I told you to get this morning?"

"No, not yet," Tommie replied. "I have a meeting with Cheryl, from Human Resources. She'll give me what I want. She's a good person."

"If there are any documents you can get copies of from other people in your position, that would be terrific," RL reminded her.

"I'm on it," Tommie answered.

"Give me a call later and let me know what you've got. We'll meet as soon as you have the documentation we need to support your case."

"Okay, RL. Talk to you later." Tommie hung up and marched out of the boardroom. She stopped off at her office where she picked up a few folders that were jammed with

information she had already collected to support her case. Tommie wanted to put them in a safe place at home. Her next stop was Human Resources.

On her way to Cheryl's office, Tommie recalled their last conversation – when Cheryl told Tommie that Buck Huckster had a history of breaking his promises to his employees. Tommie was hopeful Cheryl would provide her with whatever relevant documentation that existed.

As Tommie walked into Cheryl's office, her adrenaline blasted through her veins.

Cheryl looked up from her desk.

"Hi, Tommie," Cheryl said in a pleasant voice that totally conflicted with Tommie's mood.

Tommie blurted out, "Huckster was a no-show for our meeting. That guy has no intention of paying me."

Cheryl nodded her head.

Tommie sat down in the chair in front of Cheryl's big mahogany desk. She realized she sounded rude and decided to reign in her frustration. "New office furniture? It's really nice."

"Yes. Thanks," Cheryl replied sheepishly.

Tommie noticed the business card holder on Cheryl's desk. "New title? When did this happen?"

"Yesterday. It's been promised to me for some time now."

"Vice President of Human Resources. Wow. Did you get a raise, too?" Tommie asked.

"A small one," Cheryl replied nonchalantly.

Tommie had calmed down and wanted to get back to the issue at hand. "I talked to my attorney. He's ready to get the ball rolling.

He thinks I have a solid case. I just need you to give me a copy of my personnel file so I can get all the paperwork over to him. We need copies of the employment agreement, arbitration agreement, commission plan and non-disclosure. I wish I'd have gotten copies myself when I signed on, but as you know, it was company policy not to let any of this become public."

Cheryl took a deep breath and let out a long, loud sigh. "Tommie, I'm afraid I have some bad news for you."

"What?"

"Well, when they put my old files into the new file cabinets," Cheryl said, pointing to matching mahogany file cabinets, "your file was misplaced."

In that instant, Tommie knew Cheryl had been bought off. She'd changed her allegiance from Tommie to Buck Huckster. She was a traitor.

Tommie decided to try another angle. "How about if you just give me a copy of the generic employment agreement and commission plan. That will be good enough."

"Sorry. I can't do that. There isn't a generic plan. They're all different."

Cheryl had a folder on her desk. It had Tommie's name on it. Cheryl picked it up and handed it to Tommie. "Tommie, I'd like you to sign these documents. We need to repopulate your personnel file. I need these signed before I can cut you your next paycheck."

Tommie took the folder and flipped through it. There were documents she'd never seen before. "Cheryl, what are these? I've never seen these let alone signed these before."

“They’re standard employment agreements. I’m sure you already signed these.”

“The only things I signed were an offer of employment, an agreement to arbitrate and a non-disclosure. What’s this at-will document and this no-speak and non-compete? And where’s the commission plan?”

“Just sign them and I’ll get your paycheck cut,” Cheryl insisted. “And the commission plan is being re-written.”

“What?”

RING... RING... RING... It was Tommie’s cell phone. “Excuse me, Cheryl.”

Tommie pulled out her cell and answered it. “Hello, Tommie Campbell speaking.”

“Tommie. This is Paddy O’Dinkle.”

In her most professional voice, Tommie replied, “Mr. O’Dinkle. What can I do for you?”

“Huckster said we could accelerate our project by three weeks. I wanted to see how you planned to achieve this, Tommie.”

Tommie shook her head. She was really upset but had to keep her cool. “That may not be possible, Mr. O’Dinkle.”

“Are you telling me that Huckster was lying?”

“No, that’s not what I’m saying. He may not have totally understood our strategy. How about if I talk this over...”

“Tommie, I’d like to see you as soon as possible to address this.” Tommie had no choice. O’Dinkle’s was the biggest contract the company had and she was responsible for it. “Sure. I’ll meet your people at your office in fifteen minutes. I’m sure we can find a solution to this little challenge,” Tommie said and hung up the phone.

“Cheryl, I’ve got to go. I’ve just been called to an emergency meeting with O’Dinkle. If you find anything you can share with me, I’d appreciate it.”

“Sorry, I couldn’t help you,” Cheryl said. “Could you sign those documents before you go?”

Tommie took the folder from Cheryl. “I’ll take them with me and have my attorney look them over.”

Cheryl didn’t like that response. “Leave them here and sign them another day,” Cheryl insisted, as she reached for the folder.

Tommie pulled it away from Cheryl. “No. I’ll take them!” Tommie said. She put the folder under her arm, turned and marched out of the room. When she was in the hallway and no one else was around, she called RL.

“Hello. Bailey here.”

“RL, it’s Tommie. Cheryl reneged. She’s giving me squat. And by the way, she’s been paid off.”

“How do you know?” RL asked.

“Well, she just went from a worker bee to the VP of Human Resources, that’s how!” Tommie exclaimed. “And that’s not all. She gave me a bunch of new documents to sign before they pay me my salary.”

“What kind of documents?”

“Non-competes, no-speak, at-will employment.”

“Those are all pretty standard,” RL said. “But I should take a look at them. When you get time, let’s get together.”

“Will do,” Tommie replied.



She hung up her cell and put it away. It wasn't long before, BEEP... BEEP...

Tommie looked down at her watch. It was noon, time to remind Scott of his dentist appointment. As she walked back to her office to pick up the O'Dinkle file, she pulled out her cell phone and placed the call.

## Chapter Fifteen



RING... RING...

Scott stopped skating and answered his cell phone without looking at call display. “Hello?”

“Scott, don’t forget your dentist appointment,” Tommie said. “Ah, Mom. Do I have to?”

The disappointment with Cheryl – and the reality that Tommie was going to have to deal with everything at work on her own – suddenly hit her like a ton of bricks. She started to cry. Scott thought it was because he gave her a hard time about the dentist.

“Yes, Scott. You have to.”

“Okay. I’ll head there now,” Scott said. “I’m sorry, Mom. I didn’t mean to...”

Tommie realized what Scott was thinking. “Oh no, Scott. You’re not making me sad. It’s just that Huckster didn’t show for the meeting and HR won’t give me the documents my attorney wanted me to get. And to top it all off, I have to go put out a fire at O’Dinkle’s that Huckster started himself.”

“A fire?”

“No, not a real fire, just a big huge problem,” Tommie replied. “That guy is evil, Mom. I’ll bet he bribed the HR people.”

“I think you’re right, Scott. Now, I don’t know if anyone in this company is going to help me. They’re all taking care of themselves.”

“Mom, you’ll get this guy. He can’t get away with this. We’ll take care of you. We’ll stand behind you. Like Kim and I said, we’ll help you.”

Tommie thought about how negative she was sounding. “Thanks, Scott. And you know, I have a feeling that everything will turn out all right. And with you and Kim for my kids, I have more to be thankful for than anyone else I know. Now, get to the dentist, will you?”

“Sure, Mom. And I’ll make sure I wear my retainer every night,” Scott said, hoping this would cheer her up a bit.

Tommie laughed. It did cheer her up. Family can always count on each other when the going gets tough.

“See you tonight, Dear,” Tommie said to Scott. “Bye, Mom. I love you.”

“I love you too, Sweetie.” They both hung up.

Alex had been listening to the lovey-dovey conversation. He never heard the word ‘love’ in his house. “What’s up?” Alex asked. “Just a minor detour. I have to stop at my

dentist's office. It's on the way to your house."

"What's with the 'I love you' bit?"

"My mom is getting ripped off by her boss. She's pretty down about it. I was just trying to make her feel better."

Alex was close to Tommie and Chris. "Can I help?"

"Thanks, Alex. But I don't think so. Anyway, I gotta get going to my dentist." Scott hopped on his skateboard and started down the sidewalk.

"But we gotta get to my house!" Alex shouted at Scott. "It'll only take five minutes. I have to go!"

Alex jumped on his board, too. "Wait up! I'll come with you." Alex shouldn't have been talking and skating at the same time. CRASH...

"OOOOW!" Alex cried. "That hurt!" He had landed a trick... right on his butt and his right hand. "It's a good thing I have this tensor bandage on my wrist. I think it just saved me from breaking it!"

"You should wear one on your brain!" Scott exclaimed. "You're the worst skater alive!"

Alex picked himself up and got back on his board.

"I can't wait until they open the Harbor Front Borders and BMX Park," Scott said. "Then we can do some real riding and skating."

"Yeah, that's gonna be cool," Alex agreed. "And we should be able to get free lifetime passes because my dad's the big guy behind it."

"Do you really think your dad's involved in this fire, or are you just B S'ing me as usual?" Scott asked.

"I know my dad wouldn't do anything illegal, but I don't know about the rest of the guys he's doing business with."

The boys approached the sidewalk that led to the dental clinic. "My mom said this shouldn't take long. Are you coming in?"

"I'll stay out here. These are great curbs to grind."

"Okay. See you in five minutes."

"Make sure that's all you take. We don't want to be late for my dad's meeting."

Scott left his skateboard and backpack outside on the grass by the dental clinic entrance. He hurried through the front doors and checked in with reception. He was happy when she escorted him directly to his dentist's cubicle. There was a lady waiting for him. She didn't look familiar. She sat him in the chair, told him his dentist was at lunch, and that Dr. Dentril would see him.

'Sounds like a made-up name,' Scott thought.

A dentist came into the cubicle. His face was covered with a surgical mask. "Hello, my name is Dr. Dentril. Your regular dentist asked me to see you. He wanted to make sure the brace for your retainer was on solid. We've had some problems with the glue not working properly. I just need to look inside your mouth. Please open wide." He examined Scott's back molars where the retainer brace connector was cemented.

"It looks like this is holding," Dr. Dentril commented. "No problem here... but I do see a little clamp is bent. It holds your retain- er when it's in. Haven't you noticed it doesn't connect properly?"

"No, I haven't." Scott hadn't been wearing his retainer. It wasn't a lie, but it wasn't the whole truth either.

“I’ll just replace it. It’ll only take a minute.”

Scott had no idea what he was talking about. The doctor was tinkering in his mouth. Thirty seconds later, he was finished. “There, that’s it. All done. You can go now.”

“Thanks, Doc,” Scott said, as he rushed outside to join Alex. He picked up his backpack and jumped on his skateboard. The two of them continued their skate to Alex’s house. They were in a big hurry. It was already 12:30.

Scott was hungry. As he skated, he reached into one of the side pockets of his backpack. He pulled out some beef jerky and a drink box.

CRUNCH... CRUNCH... CHOMP... GLUG... GULP... MUNCH... BURP... BELCH...

Back in the dentist’s office, Dr. Dentril was speaking on his cell phone. “Yes, Gramps. I have the transmitter in place.”

“Did he suspect anything?”

“No, Gramps. He didn’t suspect a thing.”

“Is the receptionist and dental assistant taken care of?”

“Yes, Gramps. I paid off the receptionist and dental assistant as you requested. They won’t say a word. Can you hear anything? Is it working?” the grandson asked.

“Listen,” the old man replied. He put the phone close to the receiver.

CRUNCH... CRUNCH... CHOMP... GLUG... GULP... MUNCH... BURP... BELCH... “Sounds like the kid’s eating.”

“I did not plan for this contingency!” the old man exclaimed. CRUNCH... CRUNCH... CHOMP... GLUG...

“This is terrible. When will it end?”

The grandson replied, “I warned you before we did this, Gramps. He’s a teenager. All they do is eat!”

“Foiled again! We must devise a superior strategy!”

“I’ve got work to do. I’m heading to the office,” the grandson barked.

As Scott continued to chew on the beef jerky, a piece of it stuck to his retainer brace. Scott used his tongue to loosen it. He then took a swig of his juice. He noticed something weird going down his throat. It wasn’t jerky or juice.

“Oh, oh,” Scott said. “I think I swallowed that thing the dentist just put on my tooth!”

“You’ll poop it out eventually,” Alex replied.

“Funny stuff, Alex,” Scott barked. “Maybe I should go back.”

“We don’t have time! Maybe a diamond will come out – like with Max.”

Scott didn’t appreciate Alex’s humor.

The boys continued on to Alex’s house. It was almost 1:00. They were pleased with what they found when they arrived.

## Chapter Sixteen



“Look at these Jags and Mercedes parked on the street!” exclaimed an excited Alex. “The meeting’s on!”

“So, how are we going to spy on these guys?” Scott asked. “I have my ways,” Alex confidently replied.

“Awesome! But what if your dad finds out we’re here?”

“He won’t. We’ll sneak in. Follow me.” They’d gone a few steps when Alex turned to Scott and smiled. “Wait until you see what my dad’s done to our house. He put in a super-duper security system. My house is totally wired. State-of-the-art. Dad had some of his old buddies from The Company design and install it. No one gets in or out without the system knowing.”

“So, what do you mean, it’s totally wired?” Scott asked.

“I mean everything. The fridge, the stove, the microwave, the media systems in every room, the toaster, the coffee maker, the computers, the doors, the windows, the curtains, the environmental controls, the locks, the sprinklers...”

“I get it, Alex.”

“My house is like the Pentagon. The school was a snap,” Alex admitted.

“How did you figure out how to fool your house’s system?”

“I have my ways.”

“Come on, Alex. Spill the microchips.”

“It was simple. When Dad’s friends installed it, I followed them around. They just thought I was a dumb kid. I videotaped everything they were doing with our hat-cam.”

Alex and Scott developed the hat-cam for last year’s science fair project. It was an ingenious piece of technology. Scott used a digital camera that was so small it fit under his favorite Dallas Mavericks cap. They hid the lens in the embroidery.

They used the cap to record how people reacted to them when they walked through shopping malls. One day they’d wear preppy clothes, and the next, they’d wear skater clothes. It was a study in social science. It was clear that the preppy look got them great service. The skaters’ look, with their baggy jeans resting on their hips, and their Moe Boxers showing, got them dirty looks and no service.

The boys won first prize. That same day they had the hat-cam confiscated when Alex tried to record the activity in the girls’ change room at school.

Kim recognized the hat and revealed the plan before anything was uncovered, so to

speak. Alex managed to convince Principal Toole that it was all a big mistake and Toole gave him the hat-cam back.

Alex continued to say, “It was easy to figure things out after that.” As Alex and Scott approached Alex’s house, they noticed his housekeeper’s car coming down the street.

“Quick, don’t let her see us!” Alex exclaimed. “Hide in the shrubs beside the garage.”

“Why?”

“Just DO it!”

Scott and Alex hid themselves and their skateboards in the bushes. Mrs. Riverez pulled into the driveway and parked her car. She walked over to the garage. She stood in front of a keypad and entered a code.

BEEP... BEEP... BEEP... BEEP...

The garage door opened. As she walked through the garage, Alex and Scott slipped in, undetected. Mrs. Riverez entered a code into a second keypad beside the door into the house.

BEEP... BEEP... BEEP... BEEP... CLICK.

The door unlocked. Mrs. Riverez opened the door and walked into the house. Without her noticing, Alex snuck up and slipped his fingers between the door and the frame, stopping the door from closing all the way.

Alex waited until he was sure Mrs. Riverez was gone. He opened the door, and he and Scott crept in, totally undetected.

“This worked even better than my plan,” Alex admitted. “I was going to use my sister Mia’s code. The whole family has their own code. That way Dad can track everyone’s comings and goings, sort of. Now, if Dad checks he won’t even know anyone else was here. He’ll just think it’s Mrs. Riverez.”

“But now, Mrs. Riverez might find out we’re here.” thump... thump... THUMP... “Shuuuush. I hear someone coming.”

The boys hid in a closet. They peeked through a tiny crack in the opening. They saw Mrs. Riverez walking toward them.

THUMP... Thump...

She stopped at the keypad.

BEEP... BEEP... BEEP... BEEP... CLICK.

She entered her code into the panel on the wall. It unlocked the back door to the garage. She opened it and walked through.

SLAM...

Mrs. Riverez was gone. Alex and Scott got out of the closet, grabbed their backpacks and made their plans to sneak upstairs.

“Man! That was good luck!” Scott declared.

“Yeah, the tech gods are watching out for us today,” Alex joked. “Your place is awesome! So, where do we go from here?”

“To my room. I can use the intercom to monitor voices anywhere in the house from my techno lair.”

“Anywhere? Even the bathrooms?” Scott challenged. “Sure!” Alex bragged.

The boys proceeded down the hallway to the front of the house. They’d have to pass by the meeting room – their biggest challenge. How could they do this and not get noticed? They were in luck. The door was closed and there was no one around.

The meeting room, which was actually the Black's very large dining room, was totally soundproof, but it wasn't Alex-proof.

"This is just too easy," Alex bragged. The boys snuck up the stairs to the second floor and down the long hallway to Alex's room. Scott had been there before, but today it all seemed new and exciting. He felt like a spy.

Once in Alex's room, they closed the door and walked over to the intercom.

"I'm going to turn on the intercom so we can listen in," Alex explained. He pressed a few keys on the intercom pad.

Silence.

"What's going on here?"

## Chapter Seventeen



The boys couldn't hear anything.

"It's not working!" Alex exclaimed. "Something's wrong."

"Calm down, Alex. Try it again. Maybe you hit the wrong keys."

"No, I didn't!" Alex protested. "But I'll try again, just to make you happy."

Alex punched a few keys on the intercom keypad. Silence.

"SHOOT!" Alex declared. "What gives?"

"Maybe your dad put in extra security for this meeting."

"Yeah, that's probably it. But now how are we going to listen in? Any suggestions?"

They both thought for a moment.

Scott was the first one to offer a plan. "This is kinda simple. I can call your cell phone from mine and we can put your cell phone into the meeting room. Then we can listen-in up here on mine!" Scott proposed.

"Excellent! Except we'll need to get them all out of the room and out of the house," Alex declared sarcastically. "How the heck do we do that?"

Scott already had an answer.

"We set off their car alarms! I'm sure at least one of the cars has an alarm."

Alex thought for a second. "Not a bad idea, but how can we do that and not get caught?"

The boys pondered the challenge. "Got any balloons?"

"Huh?" Alex replied. "I don't get it."

"We can make some water balloons and throw them out your window at the cars. If they land on a car with an alarm, they'll set it off. Simple. We won't even have to leave the house."

"Why didn't I think of that?" Alex replied. "I bet my sister has some balloons in her room. Let's go check it out, but we have to hurry. We're missing the meeting."

The two boys raced across the hallway to Mia's room. It was jammed full of dolls and craft stuff. They rummaged through her drawers, her craft boxes and her closet.

"I found some!" Alex declared. They hurried back to Alex's bathroom, filled up the balloons, put them in a clothes hamper, and pushed the hamper to the window that overlooked the cars.

Alex opened the window, grabbed a balloon, cocked his arm back, and threw it as far as he could. It sailed through the air.

SPLAT...



It landed on a huge black, Mercedes. Nothing.

“See if you can hit that Lexus,” Scott said. Alex readied himself, aimed and fired.

SPLAT...

“Rats!” Alex complained.

“Try the Hummer,” Scott directed. “There has to be a security system in that.”

“But it’s way down the street. I don’t think I can throw that far,” Alex admitted.

“Why don’t I try that big old Cadillac?”

“That one can’t belong to one of these guys. It’s an old tank! It’s yellow! What kind of big businessman owns a big old yellow caddy?”

“Who cares who owns it,” Alex argued. “As long as an alarm goes off.”

Scott agreed. “It’s worth a shot.”

Alex cocked his wrist and chucked a balloon. SPLAT...

It landed right on the hood.

“I just thought of something,” Scott said, but it was too late. TWANG... TWANG... TWANG...

A sound attacked their eardrums.

Then a voice boomed out, “The yellow rose of Texas is the only girl for me.”

“It’s country western music!” Scott announced. “YUCK!”

“Where’s it coming from?”

“Somewhere in your front yard!”

The boys peered further out the window. “I think it’s coming from one of the cars,” Alex said. “It must be a car alarm! Hide in the closet!”

“Alex, like I said, I just thought of something.”

“Tell me AFTER we’re in the closet.”

“But we don’t HAVE to go in the closet,” Scott declared.

Alex tried to wrestle Scott into the closet. Scott decided the only way to tell Alex what he had to tell him, was to give up and go into the closet.

Once they were both safely inside, Alex asked, “So what’s so darn important?”

“If the room is soundproof and they can’t hear us, how the heck are they going to hear a car alarm?”

Alex deflated like a balloon. In all their excitement, they hadn’t considered the obvious.

But Scott wasn’t totally right.

## Chapter Eighteen



The noise was blasting, not only from the car that was outside, but in the room from an electronic gizmo in one of the men's pockets.

"What is that awful noise?" one of the men in the meeting asked.

"That's the Yellow Rose of Texas!" Buck Huckster announced. "It's my car alarm." He stood up and peered out the window to the driveway. His car was still where he had parked it.

"Shut that darn song off!" Mr. Devries shouted.

"Don't be bad mouthing the Texan National Anthem."

"Just shut it off!" Mr. Gorky demanded. "We don't need to draw attention to this meeting."

Huckster pulled the remote from his pocket, pressed a button, and the assault on their ears ceased.

The men resumed their meeting.

Before the boys got out of the closet, Scott had to ask, "What's that smell? Did you fart?"

"NO!" Alex snapped. "You must have."

"Well, I didn't. That's GROSS! Couldn't you hold it in? Open the door. We don't need to be in here."

Alex opened the closet door. The boys pushed each other, trying to get through the closet door first. As soon as they escaped the queef in the closet, they both took deep breaths.

"I thought I was going to DIE in there," Scott complained. "Well, Mr. Smarty Pants. Your big idea didn't work."

"Well, Mr. FARTY Pants. You figure out a better one."

Alex had one in the works. "How about we set off the house's burglar alarm?"

"Isn't your house alarm connected to the police?" Scott challenged.

"Oh, right." Alex paused for a few seconds. "We could set off a fire alarm. They'll all have to evacuate and then..." Alex already knew that the idea was bad. "...the fire department will come. They'll search the house and find us. Then we'll be in big trouble."

"That was another stinker," Scott said, just as Alex squeezed another fart out. "Hey, why don't we set off a stink bomb?" Scott suggested, holding his nose. "That's pure

genius, Scott.”

“All we need is your butt!” Scott declared.

Alex ignored Scott’s comments. “Let’s get on the Internet and see how to make one.” Alex quickly accessed [www.stinkybombs.com](http://www.stinkybombs.com). “Here’s one made from stuff we’ve got in the house.”

“I thought about something, Alex. If we do set one off, your whole house will reek. Maybe it isn’t such a good idea.”

“Yeah, you’re right. So, now what? We need to come up with something. We’re wasting time. Every second we do nothing, we’re missing...”

Scott cut him off. “I’ve got it!”

“What’s your idea?”

“What if you just mess with the environmental controls – like you did in school? Make it so they can’t work in the room. You can make the room so hot or so cold that they have to leave it. And we can make the lights go on and off – annoying things like that. Then, when they leave it, we plant the cell phone and put everything back to normal.”

“That is brilliant. And we can do it all from here!” Alex exclaimed.

The stink bomb idea was still fermenting in Scott’s head. “Alex, can you vent air from one room to another?”

“Sure. Why? What are you thinking about?” Then it came to Alex, “Ahhhh. Stink bomb again.”

“Riiight,” Scott replied. “We could stink up a bathroom and vent the air into the meeting room.”

“Scott, you’re diabolical! Use my parent’s bathroom. You know where to go. Spray anything stinky you can find.”

“No problem,” Scott said, as he got to work.

Alex got busy himself. In less than three minutes, he had programmed the computer to raise the room temperature to unbearably hot, to make the lights turn on and off every fifteen seconds, and to vent the air from his parent’s bathroom into the meeting room. He delayed all this from happening for two minutes.

Alex then raced to his parent’s bedroom to make sure Scott got the bathroom stinky enough. When he got there, Scott was standing outside the closed bathroom door. A huge selection of spray cans and bottles were lined up in front of him.

“Mission complete!” Scott announced.

Alex walked over to the door, opened it slightly, and took a whiff. “Great, but not bad enough, yet. Wait until they smell this!”

## Chapter Nineteen



Alex pulled down his pants, matched his crack with the one in the bathroom doorway, and let go.

PLLLLLLLLLLLLLL...

... Was the sound of a long, loud, putrid fart. Then, without warning, WHIRRRR...

The two minutes had gone by faster than expected. The vent system sucked the air out and tried to pull Alex's butt right through the crack. He was stuck.

"I can't move! Help me!" he yelled to Scott.

Scott decided to use his weight as leverage to free his buddy. He grabbed Alex's hands, put his feet up against the doorframe, and leaned backward.

WHIrrrrr...

The suction stopped. "WHOOOOA!" Alex screamed. BANG...

Scott fell backward onto the carpet. Alex went flying over him. CRASH... CLUNK...

Alex landed face first on the floor. "OOOOW!" Alex whined.

Scott looked over at Alex. He was whimpering in pain. Alex's bare butt was facing upward. It was beet-red. "You should see your bum!" Scott laughed.

"Shut-up, Scott. It's not funny. I could have been really hurt."

"No, really. You should see it."

Alex dragged himself to a full-length mirror. With his backside facing the mirror, he slowly turned his head around to check out the damage. One butt cheek was white and the other, red.

"Gross, eh?" Scott said. "It must really hurt!"

Alex toughed it out. "I'm all right. Let's see if it worked," Alex replied, as he gently pulled his pants up over his throbbing butt.

"First, let's activate the phones. You call me," Scott directed. Alex made the call.

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

"Now, who could that be?" Scott joked. "Just answer it!"

"Hello?"

"Okay, we're all hooked-up. Let's see if we caused enough stink to get them out of the house," Alex said. He rushed out of his parent's room, hit the floor, and crawled down the upstairs hallway to the balcony.

Scott was right behind him. They peered through the railing together.

Alex nudged Scott. They looked at each other and smiled. The men were bailing out

of the meeting room.

The boys were pleased with the results.

“What’s that FOUL smell?” Buck Huckster complained, as he pushed his way out of the room. “Did someone just die in there?”

“Man! It’s hot in there,” Devries added. “And that stink!”

“And your lights! They’re possessed!” Mr. Lee exclaimed. “We can’t meet here. I’m leaving,” Mr. Singh proclaimed.

“I can assure you gentlemen, it is simply a glitch in my computer system,” Joel Black announced.

“I suggest we all head outside for a breather and let them fix their glitch,” Gorky directed.

“We should go out back,” Lee said. “We don’t want to be seen.”

“Lee’s right. John will key in the code to open the door. Just go through the kitchen and out to the backyard,” Joel ordered. “This will take no time at all to remedy.” The Men Of Business exited the house through the kitchen door and milled about on the back lawn. Joel directed his associate, John, to check out the central computer, environmental and security control panel in the basement. Joel joined the men outside. The main floor was now clear.

“Success. They’ve all left. We haven’t got much time before they get things straightened out,” Alex whispered. He left Scott upstairs and rushed downstairs into the meeting room. Alex placed the cell phone in the light fixture above the table.

While Alex was busy in the meeting room, John had signaled Joel to rejoin him in the house. The men met outside the meeting room door.

Alex was about to rejoin Scott, when he heard voices. He realized he was trapped. As he looked for somewhere to hide, he heard his dad say, “So, what did you determine, John?”

“I don’t know what happened. The lights were on fifteen second timers and the heat was way up.”

“And what about that stench?”

“It seems that the air change system somehow got cross wired with the ventilation system. It was sucking air from your upstairs bathroom and venting it into the meeting room.”

Joel’s face turned red. He wondered, ‘Did I remember to flush before I came down to the meeting?’ The family had Mexican food and O’Dinkle’s last night. Alex wasn’t the only one with gas.

“It’s fixed now. New systems always have a few bugs to work out,” John said. Little did he know that Alex and Scott were the bugs. “We can call the men back in.”

“Did you check to see if anyone came into the house without us knowing?” Joel asked.

“That was the first thing I did. Mrs. Riverez came in about twenty minutes ago, as you know. She left a couple of minutes later. There’s been no one else, in or out.”

“Are you sure?” Joel asked. “Certain.”

“Good,” Joel replied. The two men walked out to the backyard to call the others back in.

Scott was listening and watching from the balcony. He had no idea what was

happening in the meeting room.

Alex grabbed his cell phone from the light fixture. He'd need it to communicate with Scott. Alex hid in a small storage closet. "Scott," he whispered.

"You're trapped," Scott replied quietly.

"I know, dummy. I'm hiding in a closet. They won't know I'm here. Head back to my room. Listen in on the cell. I'm turning off the receiver on this end. You can't talk to me, but you'll hear what's going on."

Scott obeyed and retreated to Alex's room. 'What'll happen if we get caught?' he wondered.

'Oh, man. I'm in deep,' Alex admitted to himself. He crouched down in the closet and made himself as comfortable as possible.

"Gentlemen. You can all come back inside now. John has informed me that he has resolved the situation. We're still working the bugs out of this new security system."

"Well, I'm guessing those bugs are dung beetles," Lee announced.

"Dung beetles. That's very funny, Lee. I didn't know you had a sense of humor," Mr. Chang said.

The men laughed, as they filed back into the house. Before long, the meeting had resumed.

## Chapter Twenty



"I'm sorry about the stink and I can assure you the lights and the heat will behave themselves," Joel promised. "There's still a lot of business to take care of today. We shouldn't waste any more time."

With the men seated around the table again, the meeting resumed. Joel began to re-cap what had been said.

Huckster interrupted him and said, "I know I'm the new kid on the block here. But, if that fire at your place was arson Chang – you're an idiot! I thought we were supposed to stay under the Feds' radar."

"You say that like you think we're a bunch of criminals," Singh said. "We're simply the Men Of Business. The MOB. That is all."

"Yeah, Huckster. We're all legitimate businessmen," Lee chortled. "Just like you."

Joel tried to diffuse the situation. "I want to get business taken care of before we deal with the fire."

"Well, it's being dealt with now," Chang replied. He turned his attention back to Huckster. "So, what's your problem?"

"I hope your stupid stunt last night doesn't bring the authorities down on us," Huckster snapped at Chang.

"Hey, I don't need my other store any more. They don't call me Sleazie for nothing!" Chang laughed. "And my wife's bridal shop was losing money. We just took care of two birds with one flint stone."

"You didn't try to torch that school today, did you?" Gorky asked. "We don't torch schools. The kids are our future. They're our clientele!"

"No way," rebuked Chang. "How stupid do you think I am? And as far as my store fire – I followed arson instructions I saw on The Crime Channel. They did a whole show on foolproof pyromania."

"What do you mean, YOU followed instructions?" Gorky barked.

"I didn't want any loose ends, so I did it myself!" Chang bragged. "No one knows it was me." Chang turned and looked straight at Joel. "You didn't even recognize me when you almost ran me over last night."

"I almost killed you!" Joel exploded. He couldn't believe how foolish Chang was, and how he put the whole operation in jeopardy. Joel had to keep his cool. He dialed it back.

"Gentlemen. I'll make sure the Center City Communicator news coverage calls it an

accident,” Joel stated. “But I can’t control what Montgomery reports over at Center City TV. The arson squad is investigating.”

“There’s no need to worry about the arson squad,” Chang replied. “Those two guys are real happy with the gifts they received. You know, in appreciation for their outstanding service to our community.”

“Chang, if you pull another stunt like that, your inventory won’t be the only thing burned to a crisp,” Gorky threatened. He was a very intimidating man.

“Message received, loud and clear,” Chang said. “It better be,” Lee returned.

“Are we finished with this?” Joel asked. “Yes,” Lee replied.

“Good. Now, we need to talk about the situation with LeHops and our currency.”

“You seem to know all about it, Black. Chang’s little fire was one thing, but blowing the whistle on LeHops?” Gorky declared. “You better have a good explanation. A life-saver – if you get my meaning.”

“Or Black’ll be wearing cement shoes,” Huckster teased.

Gorky glared at Huckster. A shiver ran up Huckster’s spine. For the moment, Huckster was intimidated and decided not to say another word.

Gorky turned his attention to Joel. “I’m waiting.”

Joel kept his composure and reported, “You know that I called this emergency meeting to explain what happened and to take care of the business we should have dealt with last night – but couldn’t because of the LeHops problem. You all know we had to cancel the meeting because the cops were onto LeHops. He’d have led them right to us. Now, we need to proceed without him.”

“What? LeHops is out? We need his diamonds and international connections!” Lee exclaimed.

“He needs to get his own house in order. If he doesn’t get diamond prices back up, what good will his currency be to us?”

“Black, explain to me why you blew the lid off his operation,” Singh demanded.

“I had no choice. My kid had the goods on him. If I didn’t do it, someone else would have. This way, no one would ever suspect I had a connection to him. You know he’ll get this whole thing straightened out and the entire world will forget about it – before you can say sperm whale.”

The men laughed. “You’re quick on your feet,” Chang announced.

“I was trained by the best,” Joel chuckled. He was referring to his extensive ‘Company’ training. The men valued Joel as a new member of the Men Of Business.

“What do you guys think is going to happen with the diamond trade?” Devries asked. “We rely on those stones for heavy-duty pay-offs. Now, that Hansen was caught with diamonds, I hear the governments are going to be tracking every freaking stone. It’ll be worse than marked money.”

“That diamond identification technology has been around for a long time,” Singh replied. “LeHops has managed to stop any government from implementing it. LeHops isn’t going to lose control of the industry.”

“Let’s hope this whole thing blows over soon. I’d hate to have that industry regulated so tightly we have to drop it as one of our currencies. What the heck would we use to replace it? Latinnum?” Lee laughed.

Joel took control. “Now, let’s cover what we would have last night. With the exception of the geological surveys, Chang’s accident, and LeHops going AWOL for a



while, everything is proceeding as planned. The Harbor Front Boarders and BMX Park construction is ahead of schedule. The park will be operational by the weekend.”

“And what about the geological survey and the tunnels?” Gorky asked.

“The continental shelf research will begin as early as tomorrow,” Joel replied.

“It’s a crime they shipped that equipment to the Egyptian archeological dig, first,” Huckster complained.

“That set us back a couple of months. Now, the park is ready and we still don’t know where the tunnels are,” Singh barked.

“We’re taking a big risk that those underwater tunnels still exist,” Lee added.

“Gentlemen. I have it on good authority that the tunnels are there,” Joel said.

“Yeah, yeah. We know all that. But, are we confident they’re intact?” Chang asked. “The harbor was dredged, remember? Can we still use them?”

“We’re betting the farm on it. But really, there’s no way to know until we get the mapping done,” Joel responded.

“If we’d got our act together quicker, and put the right pressure on the right authorities, we wouldn’t be behind the eight ball right now,” Gorky admitted.

“This is the first time we’ve all worked together. This kind of association doesn’t form overnight,” Chang replied.

“We didn’t have any choice,” Lee said. “With that blasted Conglomerate breathing down our necks and becoming more powerful and influential than any of us individually, we needed to join forces or go the way of the dinosaur.”

“Black, you were preaching to the converted when you approached us with the idea of working together,” Singh offered. “The one thing you did bring to the table was a plan to make it happen. It’s just too bad it took us so long to trust each other. Not that any of us really do, but at least we’re giving it a try.”

“Men, we can’t start second guessing ourselves. We need to proceed as planned,” Chang reasoned.

“Chang’s right,” Joel said. “We’ve all got a lot at stake here. The critical piece is that geologist’s report. We expect him to have it completed within ten days. We’ve made sure to have him map a couple of areas, just so he won’t know what we’re looking for. Of course, we gave him the leeway to do his work his way, but we can’t be sure when he’ll map that one mile stretch of shelf that extends into the harbor from the park.”

“Black’s right. Cool it,” Gorky ordered. “Once we get this tunnel operational, no one will ever know we’re smuggling goods in from the harbor and out through the Boarders and BMX Park facilities. It’s perfect! We all just look like a bunch of good citizens, spending all that money on the kids.”

Alex and Scott couldn’t believe what they were hearing.

‘What are they smuggling?’ the boys wondered.

‘Drugs? Guns?’ Alex thought.

‘Diamonds?’ Scott wondered.

They would soon get their answer. It wouldn’t be what they expected.

## Chapter Twenty-One



“I can’t wait to smuggle in my knock-off shoes and designer clothes and all the other stuff kids buy,” Devries declared.

“Yeah,” Gorky said. “I’ve had it with the blasted government border patrols, airport dogs and radar detection. I can’t wait to use these tunnels to move my goods. No one would ever suspect I’m smuggling foreign-made video and computer games and electronics – by submarine.”

“You gentlemen forget that if it wasn’t for the government and The Conglomerate, you wouldn’t be in business,” Joel lectured. “If The Conglomerate’s ‘Made in North America’ lobby wasn’t so influential in Washington, you’d be out of business. Cheap goods would be coming in from every foreign nation in the world. The government is keeping your illegal activities in business. So don’t bite the hand that eventually feeds you.”

The entire group started to laugh.

“Funny, isn’t it. The Conglomerate thinks they’re keeping the competition out of the country, but all they’re doing is helping us bring it in at much higher margins. What a joke those so-called legitimate businessmen are. That Billy Barrier isn’t as smart as he thinks he is.”

“Right,” Lee joked. “The Men Of Business owe their livelihood to the government and big business.”

“Praise the Feds!” Singh said. “If my diet drug traffic was legalized, I wouldn’t make such outrageous profits!”

“Praise MogulChip, ReallySoft and Addictive Games,” Gorky laughed. “If they didn’t charge so much, I wouldn’t be able to!”

“So, Black, remind me what your take from this operation is?” Singh asked.

Joel smirked and answered. “You know what my take is. I maintain my cover as the owner of the newspaper. I keep you guys informed of all the shipments and I take a little piece of all your action.”

“Little? Twenty percent isn’t little,” Devries complained.

“You guys all have slightly tarnished reputations, questionable ethics and suspicious business dealings,” Joel lectured. “Without me, there’d be no wholly legitimate front for this operation. Who’d ever believe an ex-Company man would be a turncoat? I’m finally getting what I deserve for all my years of slaving away as an agent. I’m turning my experience and connections into money. It’s the American way!”

“So, were you involved with any of the stuff Robert Hansen was doing?” Huckster asked.

“No way. It’s one thing to sell out corporate America, it’s quite another to sell out the American people.”

“So, you decided it’s okay to sell out corporate America, right?” Lee laughed.

“Hey, when I saw how easy it was for Hansen to subsidize his income, I decided it was my turn,” Joel answered. “It’s not even a risk to do this. If I ever get caught, I’ll just turn states evidence on all of you and get a walk!”

Gorky wasn’t impressed. “You may get a walk from the government, but you’d get cement shoes from me!”

Joel felt like he was in a bad movie. Gorky was over the top. “Gentlemen,” Joel interrupted. “I’d say we’ve concluded this meeting. I don’t think it would be a good idea to meet here again.” They all nodded in agreement and started to leave.

Joel had one more piece of business. “Before you leave, I’m afraid we’re going to have to take a rather substantial collection so that I can make an investment in our favorite cause – kids. Otherwise, I have no cover for holding this meeting. You know how small this town is. If Montgomery finds out about this meeting, he may make problems for us.”

“Right, the best defense is a good offense,” Devries added. “So, what’s your plan?”

“I’ll put an article in my paper tomorrow. It’ll say this meeting was held and that we generous businessmen each donated fifteen thousand bucks to the new children’s hospital. Make your checks out to Center City Children’s Hospital Fund and give them to John.”

The men did as they were told.

‘This sounds like it’s a meeting of every organized crime syndicate in the country,’ Scott thought to himself. ‘I thought Mr. Black was a crime fighter, not a crime lord. Mr. Black’s flipped. He’s a traitor.’

Alex was devastated. He remembered what they discussed in class. Tears rolled down his face. ‘My dad’s Benedict Arnold, or worse – Robert Hansen!’

“Black, I have to admit I never thought this plan would work when you first told me about it,” Lee confessed. “But the more I see how you operate, the more I realize I need to do some heavy recruiting from your old organization. I don’t mind you making money, if you’re making even bigger bucks for me.”

“Right. After all the money we spend paying off the senators and governors and other senior staffers, it’s nice to see some of it trickle down to the junior G-men,” Gorky laughed.

“Yes, the trickle down theory of economics,” Huckster added. “The only thing I let trickle down in my organization is unkept promises. Never put anything in writing, never get caught on tape, and never have witnesses.”

“Huckster, sometimes I think you legitimate businessmen are more crooked than the rest of us,” Lee announced.

“At least there’s honor among thieves,” Singh said. “I certainly don’t think of you as an honorable man, Huckster. I’ll bet you have absolutely no loyalty in your organization. I bet you don’t even take care of your people.”

“I’ve accomplished everything myself,” Huckster claimed. “I don’t need to take care

of my people. I take care of myself. I don't have any people worth taking care of."

"You're a shortsighted numbskull," Lee announced. He looked at Joel and asked, "Tell me again why you included him in this?"

"I know it's hard to believe, but he is legitimate. He helps makes us look good."

"You're right, Black. I'm the handsomest guy here," Huckster announced.

Chang whispered to Lee, "With that cowboy hat, red hair, freckles and dumb look on his face..."

Huckster didn't hear the putdown and continued to talk.

"Besides, I got big plans for those underwater caves. You guys don't have to know what they are. All you have to know is, I'm not competing with any of you. You have Buck Huckster's word."

They all broke out into hysterical laughter.

"And you have our word that if you're lying, your dead," Gorky threatened. "Cement hand-made Italian shoes."

The men laughed again. This time it was nervous laughter.

"You guys are all still in the last millennium," Huckster declared. "Haven't you figured out how to use the law?"

"What? I'm going to threaten to sue someone if they cross me? Is that your solution?" Chang asked.

"And you call yourselves – Men Of Business," Huckster replied with a snicker. "You need to use legal business instruments to protect yourself. That's what I do."

The men quickly glanced at each other. "We're listening," Gorky said.

For the first time, they were interested in what Huckster had to say. He loved the attention.

## Chapter Twenty-Two



“I don’t need loyalty. I can rip-off or fire any of my people at-will and not worry about retaliation,” Huckster bragged.

“That sounds like bad business to me,” Lee said.

“Well, it’s exactly how big business and The Conglomerate members operate nowadays. You’re the guys with the morals and ethics!” Huckster laughed.

“Get to the point,” Chang returned. “How do they do it?”

“It’s a few simple legal documents. The most effective one is called a no-speak.”

Huckster looked at Gorky. “It’s like cement shoes, except better.”

“Okay, mister legitimate businessman, what’s the deal?” Gorky challenged.

“When anyone joins my organization, I get them to sign a few standard business documents. One is an at-will employment contract. That means I can let them go at anytime, for no reason at all, and they can’t do a thing about it.”

“Even if you owe them money?” Devries asked.

“Yes, even if I owe them,” Huckster replied. “And it gets better. Once they sign the at-will employment contract, then you get them to sign a non-compete so they can’t work for anyone else in your business, or you sue them.”

“Sue a Men Of Business family? The courts would love that one!” Singh remarked.

Huckster quickly responded. “You sue the employee! It’s all legal. And that’s not all. Once they sign the non-compete, you make them sign a non-disclosure. That means they can’t say anything to anyone about your business deals, trade secrets, how you do business, what technology you use... ”

“Anyone?” Gorky asked.

“Right. Anyone. Even the Feds.”

“Seriously?” Singh said.

“Seriously. How do you think The Conglomerate keeps out of the courts!”

“Shoot, this guy does know what he’s talking about,” Gorky admitted. “Maybe we should trade in our guns, knives, baseball bats, steel pipes, fire, cement shoes and stuff for pieces of paper.” Huckster pushed his chest out with pride. “It’s also really important to have them sign a contract to agree to take any disputes to an arbitrator. It’s important to get the right one... if you get my meaning. You don’t need your big lawyers anymore. There’s no record of these arbitration proceedings. Nothing is made public. The decisions are binding and you walk away – pretty much unscathed.”

“Let me get this straight. When a guy joins our organization, we get them to sign an

at-will employment contract, a non-compete contract, a non-disclosure contract, and agreement to arbitrate disputes,” Singh summarized.

“So, instead of whacking them if we have problems, we can fire them. If they have a problem with that or if they join another crime family, or even if they speak to anyone – we can take them to the arbitrator,” Lee added.

“That’s right. And not only that, you can stretch out the arbitration process for years,” Huckster stated. “It costs the poor jerks tons of money to pay for attorneys. You break them financially – a fate worse than death. AND, there’s more! I saved the best for last... the no-speak.”

The Men Of Business were sitting on the edge of their seats, waiting for Huckster’s next words. “The no-speak says they can’t say anything to anyone about anything that has to do with your operation,” he explained.

“Anything? Not just business deals?”

“Anything. And best of all, they can’t testify for anyone.”

“Why?” Lee asked.

“Because they signed the no-speak,” Huckster replied. “Holy witness tampering!” Singh sang.

“Totally legitimate,” Huckster explained. “It’s not witness tampering.”

“Isn’t it suborning perjury?” Lee asked.

“I’m not making anyone lie,” Huckster remarked. “They just can’t tell the truth.”

“So, we use the law to protect us,” Gorky said.

“I don’t get it. These documents seem to be totally anti First Amendment,” Devries commented.

“That’s the beauty of it,” Huckster proclaimed. “There is no Freedom of Speech. These documents eliminate it. And, what’s your worst fear? Someone stealing from you? Someone offing the wrong guy? Someone moving in on your territory? No, it’s a canary! A songbird! A rat. An informant. A mole.”

“We get the picture,” Gorky said. “You’re right. Our biggest fear is the witness protection program.”

“So, the key here,” Huckster explained, “is to never put any commitment in writing that anyone can tie to you – but to get all of your employees and associates to put all of their commitments to you in writing. It’s that simple.”

“Huckster, I think I speak for all of us when I say... we’re impressed,” Lee announced.

Huckster had more bragging to do. “I haven’t paid sales commission to anyone yet. And if I did, I’d be paying out millions a year. How do I do this? I never put the commission plan in writing. I make all my offers verbally. I never offer the same thing. I get my people to sign the documents I just told you about, and if they refuse, I threaten them with termination. I’m covered every single way!”

“Millions?” Gorky said. “Did I just hear you right?”

“We need to get a piece of his action,” Chang declared. Huckster wondered if he’d said too much.

## Chapter Twenty-Three



Scott heard the men talking about how they could use this new information and legal tools. ‘Buck Huckster! He’s the guy ripping off my mom. And now he’s telling all these other lowlifes how to do it. This guy is evil! He’s worse than LeHops! He’s worse than death!’

Scott pulled out a notebook from his backpack and wrote down all that he could remember about the documents Huckster described.

Joel took control of the meeting, again. “We’ve got everything cued up to go, once we establish the location and condition of the tunnels. Keep checking page twenty of the paper for our progress and directions.”

The meeting broke up. The men left.

When the door closed on the last one, Alex’s dad and John returned to the meeting room.

“If all goes as planned, we’ll make the biggest organized crime bust in the history of the United States,” Joel stated proudly. “There’s only one thing bothering me. We still haven’t figured out who The Ring Master is. If we could take him down as well, we’d put these guys out of commission for a long time.”

“Are we even sure he’s involved with these guys? Maybe he’s part of The Conglomerate?” John suggested. “Or worse, both.”

“The guy is an enigma.”

“Are we certain The Ring Master is even real?” John asked. “Maybe it’s just some dis-information someone’s created to put the authorities on the wrong trail.”

“We can’t afford to ignore the possibility that he does exist. Someone’s laundering the money.”

“For all we know, he could have been in the room today.”

“You might be right, but I don’t think so. These guys run big organizations, but they’re not that sophisticated.”

“Those Men Of Business guys who flipped may not be geniuses, but they are great actors. You can’t tell the ones going into witness protection from the ones we’re trying to take down,” John declared.

“I know! So, we’re all set with the new identities for the two of them, right?” Joel asked.

“Ready to go. As soon as this goes down, those guys go directly into the witness

protection program.”

“And if we don’t get The Ring Master, we still send at least three of the crime family bosses directly to jail – do not pass go and do not collect \$200,” Joel joked.

“I’m glad you can keep a sense of humor.”

“Hey, I’ve been in The Company a lot of years. I found humor helps keep me sane.”

“I hate that we have to put them into the program,” John complained. “They literally get away with several murders and all the illegal criminal activity they’ve been involved in for years.”

“I know,” Joel agreed. “It doesn’t seem fair. And what’s worse is, when these guys become informants, the public makes them out to be folk heroes!”

“Heroes or not, we’ll have the last laugh on them,” John added. “We’re shipping them to awful locations. They’ll wish they never turned state’s evidence.”

The two men started to laugh.

“No matter what, this operation will get rid of some very dangerous men.”

“You know someone else will be ready, willing and able to take their place,” John commented.

Joel nodded in agreement. “We can only hope that this takedown will do some good. Now, I better contact Montgomery. He needs to be kept in the loop.”

As Joel dialed Richard Montgomery, John walked over to the closet where Alex was hiding. “I need to get those night vision goggles in the closet here,” John said.

‘I’m dead meat!’ Alex thought. His stomach churned. He started feeling sick. He needed to pass gas in the worst way, but he had to hold back. He squeezed his butt cheeks together as hard as he could. It hurt like the dickens. His one cheek was still smarting from being sucked through the doorway. thump... THump... THUMP... The footsteps got louder.

Alex was in pain. He squeezed harder and harder. The door handle to the closet turned.

“Wait, John. I forgot, I have them in my car.”

John let go of the handle and turned to Joel. “What did Montgomery say?” He began to walk away from the door. Alex breathed a silent sigh of relief.

“I couldn’t get an answer on his private line. We’ll have to take care of this in person.”

“Huckster surprised the heck out of me, today,” John confessed. “Me, too,” Joel admitted. “All that talk about the at-wills and non-competes and no-speaks. I have to tell you, John, white-collar crime is as criminal as Gorky’s approach.”

“And more common,” John added.

“Agreed. We need to get The Company to look into this. I never heard any of this brought up in the Endrun case. I wonder how it was missed?”

“Maybe there was a conspiracy to keep it quiet.”

“Maybe they all signed no-speaks so they couldn’t talk about it,” Joel replied. “I’m worried. This is dangerous. Really dangerous. It’s a total affront to Freedom of Speech and the First Amendment – and I can’t believe we never realized this before.”

John walked outside while Joel reset the alarm. SLAM...

They were gone.

The closet door flung open and bumped into a chair. BANG...

Alex bolted out of the closet and out of the meeting room. RIIIIIP...



PLLLLLLL...

## Chapter Twenty-Four



Alex exploded from both ends.

“Scott! Did you hear that?” Alex blasted into the phone. There was no reply. Alex remembered he didn’t have his receiver on and started to laugh. He turned on the receiver and tried again.

“Scott! Did you hear all that!” he yelled at the top of his lungs. Scott didn’t need the phone. He’d heard Alex the first time – all the way upstairs. Scott rushed out of Alex’s bedroom and started down the stairs. “I hear you! I hear you! AND I smell you!”

The two met outside the meeting room.

“Alex, no wonder your dad doesn’t have any time for you. He’s in the middle of taking down these corrupt Men Of Business. He’s a hero!”

“My dad’s still a Company man.”

“Yeah. Wow. That was amazing. Your dad is awesome!”

“I know!” Alex declared.

“What does Mr. Montgomery have to do with this?”

“I don’t know,” Alex replied. He thought for a moment and remembered what his dad had said about LeHops. “Maybe Mr. Montgomery’s going to break the story and that way my dad won’t look like the rat.”

“Makes sense to me!” Scott replied.

“Let’s get something to eat and figure out how we can help my dad,” Alex declared.

Scott nodded. It was already past two and they were starved. Scott followed Alex into the kitchen. He sat down at the table and waited to be served, just like at home.

Alex hurried over to the fridge and pulled out some leftover bean and beef burritos. He threw them on a plate and into the microwave. While the burritos were heating, he poured some lemonade, dished out some hot sauce, and grabbed a bag of nacho chips. Alex put them on the table.

“This explains your gas attacks!” Scott declared. Alex laughed. “Smell familiar?”

“Gross.”

DING... DING... DING...

The microwave went off. Alex walked over and grabbed the plate of steaming hot burritos, carried them back to the table, and sat down. He and Scott dug in.

“We need to figure out what to do now,” Alex ordered. “I want to make up for the hard times I’ve been giving my dad, lately. Even last night at the Jets game, I was a total jerk to him and my step-mom and Mia.”

“And I want to figure out how to take down Buck Huckster,” Scott declared.

“That’s the guy who’s ripping-off your mom!”

“Yeah,” Scott replied. “Man, if we can take these guys down, your dad will be happy and so will my mom!”

“So, how are we going to do it?”

“I guess your dad has to catch them in the act. So, it must be really important to find out exactly where those tunnels are and if they’re useable,” Scott guessed.

“Yeah, that sounds like the plan. What can we do?” Alex asked, again.

Scott’s eyes opened wide. He grinned ear to ear. Alex couldn’t help but notice.

“What?” Alex said. “Why are you grinning like an idiot? You’re not going to fart are you?”

“NO!” Scott exclaimed. “But I think I know how we can help!”

“Tell me!”

Meanwhile, Chris and Danny had arrived at the docks. They boarded the university cruiser.

“So, where’s this amazing equipment?” Chris asked. He was like a kid in a video game store. He couldn’t wait to check it out and play with it.

“It’s installed in the wheelhouse,” Danny replied. “That way, we can drive the boat and watch the radar’s monitor at the same time. “Well, what are we waiting for?” Chris said. The two made their way to the wheelhouse. Danny was keen to see the reaction on Chris’s face.

“Holy radar equipment!” Chris exclaimed when he saw the radar monitor. The liquid crystal flat screen display was three feet across. It was hooked up to a substantial computer and a specialized laser map printer.

“I wasn’t kidding when I said this was kick-butt technology.”

“No, you weren’t. Does it work as good as it looks?”

“According to the Mars mission and Egyptian expedition it does.”

“How the heck did they take this to Mars?”

“They didn’t take this one. This was the prototype. This is the one they took to Egypt.”

Chris wanted to hear about the Mars mission, but Danny was more interested in getting his own mission started.

“We’ve got work to do,” Danny said. “I’ll show you how to use this in case I have to go under.” Danny had moved to a large cabinet and opened it.

Chris knew that was where the gear was stored. “You’re not planning to dive today, are you?”

Danny was already checking out the gear. “I will if we find any- thing that needs investigating.”

“Such as?”

“I may need to compare what we see on radar with what I can see on the harbor floor,” Danny replied, as he completed his check. “A new communications helmet also came with this equipment. I want to check it out. If it works the way it’s supposed to, I’ll be able to talk to you while I’m down there. Now, I’ll show you how to use this equipment.”

Danny walked back to the radar equipment, pulled up a chair, and sat down. Chris did

the same. Danny spent the next fifteen minutes showing Chris how to operate the radar, the computer and the printer. Chris was a quick study.

“Do you think you have it?” Danny asked.

“Sure, I’ll just watch you for a while and then I’ll give it a go,” Chris replied. He was excited about seeing it work. “Where are we heading?”

Danny pulled out a map and opened it up on a table beside the equipment. There were red circles on the map. He pointed to each area. “There are four specific areas I have to map. We’ll take a run over to the closest.”

“And that would be?” Chris asked, as he looked at the map. Danny quickly assessed the situation. “It looks like the closest is the shelf area by the new skateboard park,” Danny stated. “I’ll untie the cruiser. You take the wheel.”

When Danny gave the all clear, Chris started the cruiser’s engine and headed toward the first site. Their adrenaline began to flow.

## Chapter Twenty-Five



“Yo ho ho and a bottle of rum! Alex, I think I know who the geologist is they were talking about!” Scott exclaimed.

“Who?”

“My dad’s buddy, Danny. I’m sure of it. Maybe we can get Danny to start the survey work by the skateboard park. That way your dad can get the information he needs right away. It’s perfect!” Scott was pumped.

“It sounds like a great plan, but what makes you think it’s Danny?” Alex asked.

“Danny’s really into underwater geological surveys and stuff,” Scott explained. “My dad helps him.”

“I know that.”

“Yeah, but you don’t know that this morning my dad told us that Danny got a new research project. It’s gotta be him. I’m gonna call my dad and see if I’m right.” Scott punched in Chris’s cell phone number.

RING... RING...

Chris answered, “Hello?”

“Dad, where are you?” Scott could hear a boat engine.

“Danny and I are in the harbor. We’ve taken the university cruiser out to do some research work.”

“You have? Great!” Scott declared. “Can Alex and I help?”

“Aren’t you in school?”

“We got the afternoon off. What are you and Danny doing?”

“He has to map four areas of the harbor and I’m helping him.”

“Dad, you should do the area closest to the Boarders and BMX Park, first.”

Chris was surprised by Scott’s remark. “What are you talking about, Scott? How did you know that’s one of the areas we’re supposed to map?”

CUUUU... CUUUU... CUUUU...

“Static’s really bad, Dad. I can’t hear you.” The line went dead. Scott tried to call, again. He couldn’t get a connection.

“Darn. My cell phone battery is dead,” Chris said. “I forgot to recharge it last night.”

“What was that all about?” Danny asked.

“It was Scott. He told me to start mapping closest to the skateboard park.”

“How did he know what we’re doing?”

Chris shook his head and answered, "I have no idea."

"Alex, my dad's cell phone's not working. I know he got the message – to map near the park – but I don't know if he's going to or not."

"We could go out and meet them."

"What? Take your boat out into the harbor?"

"Yeah, I can drive it out there," Alex bragged.

"I don't know if we should. It's dangerous out there."

"Come on, Scott," Alex goaded. "Fraidy-cat."

"You're not going to sucker me in with that again. There's being scared for no reason and there's being cautious for good reason. I'm being cautious."

"If you won't do it, I'll go myself." Alex began to march toward the door to their backyard. Halfway to the door he stopped and turned around. "Rats!" he shouted.

Scott was sure Alex had changed his mind. A smile came over his face. He was relieved that they wouldn't be going out on the water. Scott got a little brave – and a little dumb – himself. "Fraidy-cat," Scott said.

"What? No! I just remembered our boat's in for repair," Alex explained. "We'll have to use yours."

Now, Scott was a fraidy-cat. He tried to reason with Alex, without sounding scared. "Our boat's not made for the harbor."

"It's big enough!" Alex replied. "Let's go!"

Scott had to think fast for an excuse. "My sister's home."

"Scott, quit your whining. We're going. You were a hero last night and I'm going to be a hero today, even if that means I have to drive your dinky ski-boat myself."

"It's not dinky."

"It isn't even an inboard!" Alex was on a roll.

Scott reluctantly followed Alex to the front door. "Hey, if we go out the door now, your dad will know someone went out and no one came in, won't he?" Scott was looking for any excuse not to go out onto the water.

Alex thought for a second and decided, "You're right! It's a good thing I didn't open that back door, either."

"So, we're stuck here until someone comes home and we can sneak out, right?" Scott reasoned.

"Wrong. We can sneak out through my window," Alex directed. "Follow me."

Scott and Alex headed back up to Alex's room. Scott grabbed his backpack. He was resigned to the fact that there was no stopping Alex. Alex opened the window and the two boys crawled out onto the garage roof. They made their way to the drainpipe at the front of the garage and shimmied their way down. They rushed over to the bushes, pulled out their boards, and headed to Scott's.

Alex was on a mission. He boarded as hard as he could. Scott had a hard time keeping up. They didn't speak a word to each other the entire way. When they got to the Campbells', Scott opened the garage door.

MMMM... CLUNK...

They walked into the house, down the hallway, and passed by the family room.

Kim was lying on the couch in the family room and saw them walk by. "Close the garage!" Kim shouted.

The boys looked over and saw Kim and Amy watching their favorite soap – All My

Kids.

“Don’t you guys have somewhere else to be,” Scott declared. “We got the day off, too,” Amy replied. “You know that. Now, go close the garage door, like Kim said.” Scott ran down the hall.

MMMM... CLUNK...

He ran back to the family room where Alex was waiting impatiently for him. “Let’s go, Scott.”

“Alex,” Kim called out. “I never thought I’d say this to you, but thanks.”

“For what?” Alex asked.

“For getting us out of school.”

“How’d you know it was me.”

“It was written all over your stupid face,” Amy replied. “And you were just dying to tell my dad’s reporter.”

“Why didn’t you fink on me then?”

“That’s a good question,” Kim said. “This bit of information could come in handy.”

“She’s going to blackmail you,” Scott teased. ‘And probably me, too,’ he thought.

“You’ve got no proof,” Alex rebutted.

“Alex, we’ve got things to do. Ignore her. I do,” Scott said. He walked to the kitchen and unlocked the patio door. Scott motioned Alex to follow him.

Alex wasn’t finished with the girls, yet. He just had to get a parting dig in. He stood between the girls and the TV and started to whine, “Ooooh, Steven. Please don’t leave me. I’m having your baby and I need a heart transplant, and my brother is really my father and...”

“Shut-up Alex!” Kim yelled. “Get out of the way.”

Alex was on a roll. “Ooooooh, Laura. I can’t marry you. You have six toes and so do I. We’re both pirates and I’m afraid you’re actually my long lost sister...”

“Get out of here!” Amy screamed, as she kicked at him. Alex dodged her foot.

## Chapter Twenty-Six



“We’re out of here,” Scott said. He had returned to the family room, grabbed Alex by the sleeve, and dragged him to the kitchen. “We’ve got more important things to do with our day than lie around and watch this garbage!”

“Like what?” Amy asked, as she and Kim got up and followed the boys to the kitchen.

“None of your business!” Scott barked. He took something off the kitchen shelf, opened the patio door, and he and Alex took off toward the boathouse. The door closed behind them.

Kim thought Scott was acting weirder than usual. She followed him to see what he was up to. She stood at the door and watched Scott and Alex head toward the boathouse. Kim flung open the patio door and shouted, “You’re not taking the boat out, Scott!”

“Yes, I am!”

“You’re not supposed to take the boat out by yourself,” Kim ordered.

She bolted out the patio door, caught up to the boys, and planted herself in their path.

Amy watched from the open patio door. This was more exciting than the soap – besides, there was a commercial on so she had at least two minutes to kill. All of a sudden, Max bounded past Amy and through the doorway toward the kids. He jumped up on Alex’s back and pushed him into Kim. They fell to the ground with Kim on the bottom, Alex in the middle, and Max on top. Max thought this was a great game, just like the one he played with the intruder and the puddle the night before.

“Get off me, you jerk!” Kim screamed at Alex.

Amy slammed the door shut and ran to help her friend. “Alex, get off her!”

“Get Max off me first!” Alex bellowed back. Scott reached over and grabbed Max’s collar. He pulled him off Alex.

“Get off me, you idiot!” Kim shrieked, as she squirmed under Alex, trying to escape.

“Alex, quit clowning around. Let’s get going,” Scott directed. “If you insist,” Alex said, as he pushed himself off of Kim. Kim jumped up and resumed her position in front of the boys.

She backed up as they moved toward her.

“Kim, get out of the way!” Scott exclaimed. “We’re in a hurry.”

“You’re not going by yourself,” she replied.

“Of course I’m not. Alex is coming.”

“Amy!” Kim yelled. “We’re going for a boat ride!”



“Cool! Where are we going?”

“You’re not going anywhere!” Scott shouted. He was desperate to get Kim to back off.

“I’m calling Dad,” Kim threatened. “Go ahead!”

Kim pulled her cell from her pocket and placed the call. There was no answer. Scott was pretty sure there wouldn’t be. Kim tried another number. Scott hadn’t planned for that.

“Who are you calling?” he asked nervously. “Mom!” The phone continued to ring. Tommie was in a meeting with O’Dinkle himself. She had her phone turned off.

“She’s not answering!”

Scott was relieved. “We’re going! You and Amy get lost!”

“Where are you going with the boat?” Kim pressed.

“We’re trying to find the cruiser Dad’s on,” Scott explained. “That’s all you need to know. Now, mind your own business.”

“Dad’s out there?” Kim asked.

“He’s with Danny. They’ve got the university research cruiser. He’s helping Danny with something.”

“He helps Danny all the time. So why do you need to go out?” Kim asked.

“I can’t tell you.”

“You guys tell us what’s going on! Right now!” Kim demanded. “Alex, you tell them. It’s your story.”

Alex stalled for a minute, and then said, “I don’t want to put your lives in danger.”

“Tell us what you two are up to.”

Alex’s answer was one word, “Atlantis.”

“So, my dad is out there looking for Atlantis,” Kim announced sarcastically. “How stupid do you think we are?”

“Alex, don’t answer that!” Scott advised.

Alex bit his tongue. “That’s all I’m going to say.”

Scott chuckled and thought, ‘Alex is so full of it, literally and figuratively.’

“Amy, they’re not going to tell us anything.”

“Oh, I think they’ll tell us and they’ll tell us all of it – if they don’t want us blowing the whistle on them.”

Scott played dumb. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“If you don’t tell us the truth, we’ll tell Principal Toole that Alex and you set the alarms off today.”

“You wouldn’t dare,” Alex shouted. “Yes, I would,” Amy threatened.

“What’s the big deal. Why do you have to know so badly?” Scott asked Amy.

“Because, I suspect you guys are on to something. And I want to know what it is.”

“On to what?” Alex asked. He tried to sound as innocent as he could, but he knew it wouldn’t work.

“On to a big story. I’ll bet you got out of school today, on purpose.”

Kim was getting more suspicious by the second. These guys were up to something big, otherwise, Scott wouldn’t risk taking the boat out and he certainly wouldn’t take it out and drive right to their dad. That’s the quickest way to get grounded.

“Okay, you two. Tell us what’s up, or I’ll call Principal Toole and tell him what I suspect.”

## Chapter Twenty-Seven



“You don’t have any proof, Kim,” Alex declared confidently. “Alex, when it comes to you doing something stupid, it won’t take much to convince Toole you did it. He’ll believe me over you, even if I don’t have proof.”

“Alex, if she says anything, you and I will be in big trouble.”

“So what?” Alex barked. “I can handle trouble.”

“But can you handle being benched against the Terriers?” Amy added. She was right on the money with her comment. There’s no way the boys wanted to miss out on their basketball game. It’s one thing to miss a practice here and there, but never a game – and never one against their biggest rivals, the Terra Nova Terriers.

Kim was losing her patience. She started to call the school. “Shoot, Alex. They’ve got us!”

“Hang up, Kim,” Alex ordered.

“Alex, we need to tell them. They might even be able to help us. Look what the four of us accomplished last night.”

“Okay,” Alex grudgingly agreed.

“Besides, I could use Kim’s advice on how to handle Huckster,” Scott proclaimed.

“Huckster? Are you talking about Mom’s boss?”

“Yup.”

“Okay, start at the beginning and don’t leave anything out,” Kim demanded.

The kids sat down on the dock and Alex told his story. “It all started with the fire last night at Sleazie’s. I overheard my dad on his cell phone saying something about arson and putting some deal in jeopardy. I also heard him say there was an emergency meeting at my house this afternoon at 1:00. I told Scott what I overheard and, well, you can figure out the rest.”

“So, that’s why you needed to get out of school,” Kim reasoned.

“Right. I figured if I created a little chaos with the school’s computer systems, we could all get out, and Scott and I wouldn’t have to play hookey.”

“I have to admit, Alex, that was brilliant,” Amy said.

“So, you and Scott wanted to spy on your dad’s meeting,” Kim offered.

“Yeah, so we...”

Scott cut him off. He didn’t think they needed to get into the water balloons, the stinky bathroom and the rest. The girls didn’t need to know that.

“That’s when we heard that Mr. Black was working with a bunch of criminals who

smuggle illegal goods into the country, and that they wanted to use some old tunnels in the harbor that go right under the Boarders and BMX Park,” Scott rambled on.

The girls took a minute to process the information. “Your dad’s a criminal?” Kim asked.

“No, my dad is working undercover with some other guys to set the criminals up and take them down.”

“WOW! What a story!” Amy declared.

“So, let me see if I get this,” Kim said. “Alex’s dad is pretending he’s a criminal so he can trap some real bad guys, and what, get them sent to jail?”

“That’s it!” Alex replied.

“So, why are you guys trying to get in touch with Dad and Danny?”

“The tunnels are under the harbor and we think Danny’s been hired to find them. Remember the project he told Dad about?”

“Isn’t that a bit of a stretch?” Kim commented.

“Well, he’s out in the harbor now, isn’t he? We want to make sure he and Danny map the right area first, so Alex’s dad can bust these guys.”

“I need to tell MY dad!” Amy declared. “Amy, I think your dad already knows.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Because I heard my dad say he was calling your dad. I’ll bet that’s why we got stuck at the game together last night. It was a secret meeting.”

“I knew it!” Amy exclaimed. “See Kim, I wasn’t imagining it. They ARE working together!”

“Cool,” Kim replied.

“Cool? That’s all you can say?” Amy barked.

Kim grabbed Amy by the arm and pulled her away from the boys. She whispered to her, “Amy, there’s a big story here. Don’t you want to be the one to break it to your dad? Just put up with Alex for a while. Use him and then toss him!”

Amy liked Kim’s thinking. “Use the situation to my advantage! That’s what you’re saying.”

“Yeah! Now let’s find out everything we can from these two!”

“I’m on it!”

The girls broke their huddle and Amy went on the offensive. She asked as many questions and dug for as much information as she could get out of the boys. When the interrogation and the story of the Men Of Business was over, Scott had one more detail to add. “And Kim, you’ll never guess who one of the guys is?”

“Buck Huckster?” Kim remarked. Scott had mentioned him earlier. She knew he had to fit into this somehow.

“Yup. He’s crooked. And if we can help Mr. Black take these Men Of Business down, Huckster will be one of them!”

“Great!” Kim declared.

“And that’s not all. I know how he’s going to make sure he never has to pay Mom!”

“How?”

“At-will, non-compete, arbitration and no-speaks.”

“Scott, speak English.”

“I just did.”

Kim was about to haul off and hit him, when Scott pulled his scribbler from his

backpack and started to read the notes he took at Alex's house. All three listened intently. When Scott was finished, Kim declared, "Huckster is really evil!"

"That's exactly what I think!" Scott exclaimed.

"Him and his buddies are despicable!" chimed in Amy.

"What are we waiting for!" Alex announced. "Let's get these guys!"

The four of them were on a mission, and despite their differences, they were now working together.

Alex wanted to help his dad take down the Men Of Business. Amy wanted to help her dad break a huge news story. Scott and Kim wanted to help Tommie stick it to Huckster. The Men Of Business were under attack from the Kids With Opinions.

The four jumped up from the dock. As soon as Scott unlocked the boathouse, the kids were in the ski-boat and ready to go.

Alex untied the boat. Scott started the engine, put the boat into reverse, and slowly hit the throttle. All of a sudden, THUNK...

The boat pitched to one side.

## Chapter Twenty-Eight



An uninvited guest had joined them.

“We can’t take Max!” Scott cried. He put the boat in neutral and shut off the engine.

“Get him out of here!” Alex insisted, as he grabbed for the dock and steadied the boat.

Max had already made himself comfortable. He was waiting for someone to put his lifejacket on.

“You’re not going with us today, Max,” Kim said. She grabbed him by the collar and lugged him out of the boat. “I’ll take him inside and be back in a sec.”

The kids watched as Kim struggled with Max. She finally got him inside the house and closed the door.

Kim ran back to the boat and jumped in. Alex pushed the boat away from the dock. Scott started the engine again and steered the boat toward open water.

Within minutes, Scott left the serenity of the bay and entered the harbor. The bigger cruisers and ships created dangerous wakes that could capsize their ski-boat. They had to be very careful.

“I’ll head the boat toward the Borders and BMX Park area,” Scott said. “Alex, get the binoculars from the dash. See if you can spot the university cruiser. It’s hard to miss. It’s orange and lime green.”

All four kids searched the waters for the cruiser.

“Scott, you need to steer clear of that cruise ship and those little pilot boats,” Kim ordered.

The cruise ship was so big, it needed two pilot boats to escort it through the harbor. One drove in front of the cruise ship and the other behind it.

“We’re nowhere near them,” Scott replied.

“It looks like they’re coming toward us,” Kim responded.

Scott disagreed. “They’re going to the docks... way over there.” Scott and Kim were used to driving their boat in the safety of their bay. Scott wasn’t experienced with how quickly the bigger ships could move, or how dangerous their wakes were. He was being careless, and the more Kim drew his attention to it, the more he ignored her.

Amy agreed with Kim. “They’re coming this way!”

Scott stayed his course. Alex was ignoring them all. He was too busy checking out the cruise ship. He was sure he saw naked women on board, but he wasn’t about to tell anyone. They might want the binoculars.

“I think I see the university cruiser!” Kim exclaimed. “It looks like it’s just behind the cruise ship.”

Scott immediately changed course and raced full throttle across the harbor toward the cruiser. He didn’t see the huge wake left by the cruise ship. The ski-boat hit a wall of water and pitched upward on the wave.

“WHOOOOA!” they screamed in unison. The boat’s engine stalled out, right at the top of the wave, seemingly in mid-air. The boat crashed down on the rough water, throwing them all about the deck. They picked themselves up and reviewed the situation. Fortunately, no one was hurt, however, the engine was flooded and they were stranded in the middle of the busy harbor.

“Now, what are we going to do?” Kim shouted.

The girls and Alex ragged on Scott as he frantically tried to get the engine going again.

HONK... HONK... HONK...

“LOOK!” Amy yelled. The kids looked toward the sound. A pilot boat was approaching them. When it was close enough to the kids, someone on the deck shouted out to them.

“Ahoy! My name is Bruce Welch. Do you need assistance?”

“Yes,” Kim yelled back. “The engine isn’t working.”

“I’ll see if we can help!”

A minute later, the pilot boat came alongside the Campbells’ ski-boat. Bruce was shocked when he saw the boat was full of kids. “What are you guys doing out here?”

“We’re looking for my dad!” Scott replied. “Where’s your dad?”

“He’s on the university research cruiser,” Scott said. “I think it’s right over there.” All four kids pointed in the direction of the cruiser.

Bruce looked over and saw it. ‘That cruiser?’ he thought. ‘How interesting.’ Then he spoke to the kids. “Would you like us to haul your boat over there?”

“Can you do that?” Alex replied.

“We can’t leave you stranded out here. Throw me your lead rope. I’ll pull your boat alongside mine and you kids can come onboard. Then we’ll take you and your boat to your dad.”

Scott did as he was told. The kids were grateful. They couldn’t believe their good fortune. They were now safely on a much larger boat and on their way to the university cruiser.

About the time the kids took off from the dock near the Campbells’ boathouse, Chris and Danny had activated the radar equipment. By now, they’d spent the better part of an hour, mapping the continental shelf – directly in front of the Borders and BMX Park.

“Look, here!” Chris said. “It looks like we’re picking up something out of the ordinary. If I’m reading the map right, there’s a gaseous pocket down there.”

Danny looked at the map. He traced some lines with his fingers and studied the map and the information very closely. “It looks like a cavern, and we’ve been mapping it for some distance already.”

Chris looked to where Danny was now pointing his finger. “Maybe it’s the tunnels you told me about,” Danny suggested.

“The ones that were used to sneak spies into the country during the war!” Danny

thought for a moment. “Let’s try to follow it and see if we can find an entrance.”

“Which way? Out to open water or in to shore?” Chris asked. “Let’s go out.”

Chris steered the cruiser toward open water. They watched as the equipment continued to render the possible tunnel.

“Wait,” Danny directed. “It looks like the cavern or tunnel, or whatever it is, stops here. Maybe the entrance is under us. I’ll get my diving gear on. Put the anchor down.”

As Chris lowered the anchor, Danny pulled out the dive equipment. “There’s an extra set here – just in case.”

“Is that the new communications helmet you mentioned?” Chris asked.

“Yeah. It’s terrific! I’m not stuck with the cumbersome two-way communications cables we used to have. The only downside is, you have to use it in open water. The transmitter-receiver has to be floating. Once it goes under water it doesn’t work.”

Danny put the helmet on his lap and pointed to a built-in microphone and ear set. “You can receive and transmit using this system. One end of the cable is attached to the helmet and the other, to a floatation device attached to the antenna. There’s five hundred feet of light, thin cable.”

Danny put on his dry suit, air tank, weight-belt and flippers. Then he strapped on a flashlight and a knife. The belt was also equipped with a global positioning transponder, which sent out a signal to the radar equipment on the boat, and plotted Danny’s position on the map.

Once the helmet was on, Danny activated the communication link and transponder. He exchanged a few words with Chris – to make sure everything worked.

Then Danny climbed down the ladder at the side of the cruiser and disappeared under the surface of the water. The cable automatically released as he descended. The floatation device doubled as a diver’s marker and was large enough to be spotted from quite a distance. Chris was pleased he had such sophisticated equipment to track and talk to Danny.

As Danny continued to descend, Chris heard his first underwater communication. “Aw’ll be baaawk.”

“You’re coming in loud and clear, Arnie,” Chris joked. He ‘watched’ his friend descend through the depths.

“This is amazing equipment, isn’t it?” Danny replied.

“It sure is. Where are you?” Chris asked. “It sounds like you’re standing right next to me.”

“I’m just coming down to the harbor floor.”

“The transponder is imposing your location on the map. I can hear you and I can see you. It can’t get much better than that. What do you see?”

“These harbor waters are murky. The visibility is terrible in this area. There’s a lot of sand and clay down here, and it’s covering up the natural harbor floor. It must have been pumped here when they dredged the harbor. My flashlight and headlamp are useless – the light just reflects back off the silt in the water. I’ll have to use my compass and feel my way to the entrance.” Danny was hoping, if there was an entrance, that it would still be accessible. Chris was hoping it wouldn’t.

## Chapter Twenty-Nine



“Pilot 145 calling Center City University research cruiser, come in. Over.”

Chris answered the call. “Pilot 145, this is Center City University research cruiser. I’m receiving you. Over.”

“Is Chris Campbell on board? Over?”

“Yes, this is Chris Campbell. Over.”

“Mr. Campbell, this is Bruce Welch. I’m towing your boat. We’re transporting your kids to you. Over.”

“What?” Chris looked toward the pilot boat. He could see the two boats linked together. “My kids? Over.”

“Yes, I have Scott and Kim and their friends, Amy and Alex. Over.”

“Is everyone okay? Over.”

“Yes, everyone is fine. Our estimated time of arrival is two minutes. Over.”

“I copy you, Pilot 145. I have visual. Over.” Chris waited and watched the approaching boat.

“What’s going on?” Danny asked.

“I’m not sure,” Chris replied. “But if the kids are involved, well...”

“... it’s certainly going to be interesting,” Danny offered. He continued to explore the bottom of the harbor and listen to what was happening above the surface.

As the pilot boat drew nearer, Chris saw Scott, Alex, Kim and Amy standing on the deck. He wondered what they were doing out there.

“Dad! Dad! Hey! It’s us!” Scott excitedly cried out. “He knows it’s us, dummy,” Kim snapped.

Pilot 145 pulled alongside the university cruiser, taking care to avoid the diver’s marker. Bruce helped the kids onto the cruiser.

Once everyone was safely onboard, Bruce hopped on as well, leaving his partner to watch their boat.

“Thank you, Bruce,” Chris said, as he shook Bruce’s hand. “I have no idea why they’re out here.” Chris turned to the four kids. “They know they shouldn’t be.”

“Just doing my job,” Bruce said. “We’re here to keep the harbors safe for everyone.”

Chris waited for Bruce to get back on his boat so he could deal with the kids. Bruce didn’t seem to be in a hurry. He walked to the wheelhouse, checked out the radar, the plotter and the printer, and commented, “I always wondered what kind of equipment this cruiser had.”



“Dad, you should see the radar and stuff on his boat!” Scott exclaimed. On their ride over on Pilot 145, Alex and Scott noticed sophisticated radar equipment and computers onboard.

Bruce quickly explained, “We need to make sure the waters are safe for the boats we escort. We’re pretty high tech.”

“So are we!” Chris returned. He loved to talk technology and saw no reason why he couldn’t show off the new university radar equipment. Chris was distracted and the kids had a brief reprieve.

“Dad, where’s Danny?” Scott asked.

Chris turned his attention away from Bruce and toward the kids. Welch continued to look over the radar equipment.

“Danny. Where are you?” Chris spoke in a normal voice. “Are you talkin’ to me?” Danny replied like Robert DeNiro. The kids looked around the cruiser but couldn’t spot Danny. “Who was that?” Scott asked.

“Bond... James Bond,” Danny replied. “Where is he?” Kim insisted.

“He’s underwater,” Chris teased.

“No way! Danny! Where are you?” Scott shouted. “I’m underwater! Chris, show them my blip!”

Chris pointed to the trail of little stars that were being plotted on the radar screen in real time. It was tracking Danny and showing his exact location. “This is Danny,” Chris said.

Danny didn’t hear him. “Chris, are you showing them my blip?” Danny shouted.

“I am! And I’m showing Bruce Welch from Harbor Safety. Bruce, meet Danny. Danny, meet Bruce.” The two exchanged hellos.

“How are things going?” Chris asked. “Everything is fine.”

Chris turned his attention back to the radar. “This certainly is kick-butt equipment, isn’t it Bruce.”

“Dad, you said kick-butt!” Scott said. “That’s almost swearing! This equipment must be really kick-ass if you said kick-butt!”

“Scott, I almost forgot I was upset with you kids.”

“Way to go, big mouth,” Kim barked. “Fooogedaboutit,” Danny inserted.

“Huh?” the group replied in unison.

“I’d love to see how this printer works,” Bruce commented. “Sure,” Chris replied. He showed them the kinds of maps the printer was capable of rendering.

Everyone was impressed, especially Bruce. “What kind of equipment is this?”

Chris told him everything he knew.

“I thought I’d seen it all!” Bruce exclaimed. “I wish I could show my bosses at Harbor Safety. They’d probably be interested in contracting with the university to do some work. We spend a lot of money monitoring the ports and harbors we patrol.”

Danny heard Bruce’s comment and couldn’t resist the opportunity to get another contract.

“We’d love to do work for you! Chris, why don’t you give him a sample of what we rendered so far today.”

Bruce couldn’t believe his good fortune. “My bosses will be ex-static!” Bruce said, mimicking Mike Tyson.

Danny appreciated the humor.

Chris wasn't sure Danny should be sharing the information he was collecting. "Danny, are you sure we..."

"Chris, you know the university is always looking for contracts. Just do it."

Chris did as he was told. He printed off the map and handed it to Bruce.

"Thanks very much, Chris," Bruce said. "I guess I should be heading back to my boat." As he climbed back onto his boat, he said, "I'll take your boat back to your dock. I need to secure your boat to ours before we head out. It'll take us a few minutes. I want to make sure I've done it right."

"Thank you, Bruce," Chris replied. They exchanged information and said their good-byes.

The kids all thanked him as well, but they wished he would stay longer. They knew that once Bruce was off the boat, Chris would go off on them.

## Chapter Thirty



“Okay, Scott, I want to know what was so important that you kids risked your lives to get out here?”

All of a sudden, it hit Scott, like a ton of burritos. He had to go to the bathroom – badly. “Dad, is there a bathroom on this boat? I need to go!”

“You’re not getting out of this that easy,” Chris replied. PSSSST...

Scott leaked out a little fart. “Dad! I have to go!”

“Down the stairs and to your right,” Chris said. “But I’m not finished with you.”

Scott whizzed by him.

Chris turned his attention to Kim. “Out with it, Young Lady.” Kim was quick on her feet. “We got the afternoon off. Scott thought for sure that Danny was looking for a pirate’s treasure. Scott figured it might be by the new park and he convinced us to come out and help you look for it.”

Chris remembered the one-sided conversation with Danny, and the yo ho ho comments about pirates. Their explanation sort of made sense, but it still wasn’t acceptable.

“You kids should know better. It was a dumb thing to do.”

“We know. We’ll never do anything like this again,” Kim promised. “But do you think there IS pirate treasure out here?”

Chris, Alex, Amy and Kim discussed the possibilities.

Down below, the burritos were about to blow. Scott made it to the washroom – just in time. He pulled down his pants, sat on the can, and, KABOOOOOM...

The loudest fart he’d ever made, blasted from his butt and so did the transmitter.

“What the heck was that?” exclaimed the grandson. “Did you fart?” he asked the old man.

“No! Don’t be so uncouth. It must have been you,” the old man accused.

“Oh, the receiver is still on. It must be from the Campbell kid,” the grandson said, as he and the old man raced into the room that housed the surveillance equipment. They were immediately accosted with the sounds that toilet bowls would hear, if they had ears to listen to rears.

“Disgusting!” the old man cried out.

Scott was so full of gas he could have blown up the Goodyear blimp.  
WHOOOOOSH...

Finally, it was all over and Scott flushed the transmitter down the toilet.

“That’s it for this one. Another transmitter down the drain, literally,” laughed the grandson.

“We’ll try again.”

“Gramps, give-up!” the grandson pleaded. “Never!”

Scott hurried back up to the deck, just in time to hear Chris and the kids finish their discussion about pirates and treasure. He couldn’t hold back any longer. “Danny, did you find any tunnels down there?”

“Tunnels?” Chris replied.

“Yeah,” Kim interjected. “Tunnels. Where the pirates would have hid their treasure!”

Scott got the message. “Yeah. Where else would pirates put their treasure, Dad?”

Chris was about to play along, when Danny replied to Scott’s question.

“Can you guys see me? I’m going in!”

“In what?” Chris asked nervously.

“In the cave,” Danny said. “Are you tracking my location?”

“Yes, everything is working, but shouldn’t you come back up to the surface? You don’t have much air left and I don’t know how much cable you have.”

“I’ve still got forty minutes of air and two hundred feet of cable. I’ll go in a little further,” Danny insisted. “It looks like a manmade tunnel!” There’s no way he could leave now.

They gathered around the radar equipment and watched Danny’s little blip on the screen.

“Chris, you won’t believe this,” Danny exclaimed. “What? What do you see?”

“Amazing!” Danny said, as he poked his head out of the water... under the water.

“Like I said. I found a tunnel – and an air pocket – a big one!”

“I still have you on the radar.”

“OOOOUCH! What was that?” Danny asked himself.

The kids gasped. They imagined a giant squid or shark had grabbed his leg.

“Oh! It’s stairs!” Danny exclaimed. “Leading out of the water. I’ll climb out – or should I say – walk out and see where they go!” Danny hauled himself out of the water and stood on the tunnel floor.

Bruce had finally finished securing the ski-boat to the Pilot Boat. Everyone was so busy with Danny, they didn’t notice how long he was taking.

VAROOOOM...

Bruce headed away from the university cruiser.

Scott saw Bruce leave, but didn’t think much of it at the time. He was too focused on Danny.

“What do you see, Danny?” Scott asked.

“You’re not going to believe this!” Danny declared.

## Chapter Thirty-One



Alex and Scott looked at each other. They both remembered what Gorky had talked about earlier.

“Dead bodies with cement shoes on?” Alex inquired. “No! That’s a strange suggestion.”

“He’s just being stupid,” Scott announced.

“I found old air tanks. These look like they’re from the forties!” Alex was excited. “I have to call my dad!” he blurted out.

“Your dad? Why your dad?” Chris asked.

This time, Alex thought before he spoke. “Uuuh, I have to let him know where I am!” He smiled and nodded, hoping they believed him. Then he pulled out his cell phone and walked away from the group, so he wouldn’t be overheard. He signaled Scott to join him. Scott followed as Alex made the call.

RING... RING...

Joel saw Alex’s caller ID. “Hello, Alex,” he answered. “Are you still at Scott’s?”

“No, Dad. I’m out in the harbor on the university research boat.” Alex waited for his dad to explode.

It didn’t happen. Instead, Joel calmly asked, “What are you doing out there? Who are you with?”

Alex was surprised and answered, “Mr. Campbell and his buddy, Danny, are doing some neat research out here, Dad. They’re mapping the bottom of the harbor by the skateboard park. They found tunnels here. It’s amazing.”

“That’s very interesting, Alex.”

“Dad, do you want me to get a copy of the map they made? You could see how cool it is,” Alex suggested. He thought he could covertly help his dad.

“Thanks for the offer, Alex, but that’s not necessary.”

“Are you sure, Dad? These tunnels are awesome and Danny is actually walking in one, right now. It’s underwater – but there’s no water in it.”

“That does sound awesome, Alex. When will you be home?” Alex shouted out, “Mr. Campbell. When will we be going home?”

“As soon as I can get Danny to the surface,” Chris replied. “Dad, Mr. Campbell said we’d be heading home as soon as

Danny comes up.”

“So, you’ll get a ride home with the Campbells?”

“Yup. Don’t worry about me, Dad. You just do what you have to do.”

Joel wasn’t sure he knew how to interpret this and replied, “I’ll do what I have to do. See you later, Son.”

“Bye, Dad. I love you,” Alex said.

Joel was most surprised by this comment. “I love you too, Alex.”

They both hung up.

“Does he suspect anything?” Scott asked. “Nothing.”

“Wow. You ARE Secret Agent Kid!” Scott declared.

The boys rejoined the girls and Chris. Alex was really proud of himself. Their secret was safe, except of course, from Kim and Amy. They hoped the girls could be trusted. Amy grabbed Alex by the arm and pulled him away from Chris. Kim and Scott followed.

“Alex, I need to call home. What did you tell your dad?”

“I acted real cool,” Alex replied, and then explained what he said, finishing with, “...So you can call your dad and say the same thing.”

“Boy genius,” Amy said, half sarcastically and half seriously. She pulled out her cell and called her dad. The rest listened.

RING... RING...

“Amy. What can I do for you?” Richard Montgomery asked.

“I just wanted to call you to tell you I’m with the Campbells. I’m on the university research boat.”

“What are you doing out there? Don’t you have basketball practice tonight?”

“No. Remember? We got out of school, today,” Amy replied. He’d completely forgot. Richard had more important things on his mind. “Right. So, how did you get on that boat?”

BEEP... BEEP...

“Hold on, Amy. I’ve got a call coming in. I need to take it.” Amy waited for her dad to come back on line. Finally, she heard him say, “Okay, Amy. What were you telling me?”

Amy continued with her story. “Mr. Campbell is helping his friend do some research. We’re here watching. It’s really cool. We’re in front of the skateboard park and we found a tunnel that goes under the water. It has air in it! Isn’t that neat, Dad?”

“Yes, Amy. That’s really neat.”

“We have maps of it and everything. It goes from way out in the harbor toward the skateboard park.”

“That’s nice, Dear. I’ll call your mom and let her know where you are.”

“Okay, Dad.” Amy was surprised her dad didn’t seem interested. She thought this was going to be a huge story.

“Bye, Amy,” Mr. Montgomery said and hung up.

Amy hung up and turned to the kids. “My dad didn’t even get excited.”

“Neither did mine! Maybe it’s part of their cover-up.”

“Yeah! That must be it.”

“Mr. Campbell, what’s happening with Danny?” Amy asked, as they rejoined Chris.

## Chapter Thirty-Two



"I'm on my way up," Danny informed the gang. "There's his air bubbles," Scott exclaimed.

A few minutes passed. "Where is he?" Chris asked impatiently. "Danny, where are you?" There was no answer. "Make my day, and say something," Chris nervously joked. A few more minutes passed and still no Danny.

"Dad, maybe you'd better go down there and see what's happening," Scott suggested. "Maybe he got stung by a jellyfish. Maybe he's caught on something!"

"Danny, quit fooling around and answer me! Where are you?" Chris spoke sternly into the communication device.

"Harrrr, Matie," Danny said in his best pirate's voice. "Just digging up the buried treasure."

The kids' eyes opened wide. "What treasure?" Scott yelled.

A few more seconds passed before Danny surfaced and tossed his flippers over the side of the boat.

The kids ran over to Danny. "What treasure!?"

"This treasure!" he said, as he hauled himself up the ladder and onto the deck. The kids imagined he'd found gold doubloons and jewels and pirate paraphernalia.

"Where is it?" Alex demanded.

Danny took off his helmet, tank and weight-belt, and handed them to Chris.

"So, where is it?" Chris now asked.

"It's right here in my little bag." There was a small pouch hanging from his diver's belt.

"Find me a plastic bucket and fill it with water," Danny directed. "I need to put these artifacts in water to keep them out of the air."

Scott did as he was asked and returned with a bucket of water.

Danny emptied out his pouch. It looked like there were gemstones, bits of pottery and some round flat things that might be coins.

"That doesn't look like a treasure!" Alex exclaimed. He was disappointed.

"They're treasures to an archeologist," Danny explained. "Is this stuff from a pirate ship?" Scott asked.

"Maybe," Danny replied. "Come on. Let's head back to shore. I have to file a report on these tunnels tonight."

"Aye, Captain," Chris replied.

Chris headed the boat back to the docks while Danny got changed. He then printed off the map of the entire area they charted. The kids looked over the map as Danny explained what the different shadings and numbers meant. It was clear to all of them that there was a tunnel system leading from the harbor to the shore that exited somewhere near the Boarders and BMX Park.

“This is so awesome!” Amy exclaimed. She wished she could talk to her friends about what this meant, but they all had to keep their secret.

As they discussed what had happened on the water, it dawned on Chris that he didn’t know why the kids weren’t in school.

“So, how come I didn’t know you had the afternoon off? You didn’t bring home any memo about that.”

“We just got the afternoon off this afternoon,” Alex explained. “How did that come about?” Danny asked.

“A glitch in the school’s computer system,” Kim replied. “Alarms and sprinklers and lights and stuff just kept going off. They couldn’t figure out why, so they had to let us go home.”

“How fortunate for you,” Danny laughed. “Sounds like an inside job to me.”

The kids looked nervous.

“I’ll bet one of the teachers did it. Today’s a great day to go golfing!” Danny commented.

“Funny,” Alex said. “As if a teacher could figure that system out. I…”

Scott elbowed Alex and stopped him in mid-sentence. “What were you going to say?” Chris asked.

“I don’t remember,” Alex replied.

Lucky for Alex, the cruiser was approaching the dock and all of Danny and Chris’s attention was on the docking procedure.

“Alex, do you ever know when to shut-up!” Amy lectured. “Sometimes it’s better to just do something because it’s the right thing to do and not worry about taking credit for it.”

Alex looked confused.

“Amy, get serious. You can’t reason with him,” Kim scoffed.

“I guess you’re right. But he did do some pretty cool stuff today.” Alex heard them speaking. “So, you girls DO like me!”

Before the girls could come back with a sarcastic reply, Chris interjected, “Okay kids, out of the boat. Our van’s parked right over there,” he said, pointing to the van. They said good-bye to Danny and walked toward their vehicle.

About half way to the van, Kim asked Chris, “Can we get rid of Alex, first?”

“Just get in the van.”

Chris unlocked the doors and the kids piled in.

All four kids sat on the back two benches. No one sat up front with Chris.

“Do I have B.O.?” Chris asked. “Daaaad,” Kim replied.

“We’ve got important things to talk about, Mr. Campbell,” Alex declared.

Chris put one of his CDs into the player and enjoyed the ride home – leaving the kids to enjoy their privacy.

“So, do you think your dad will take down the Men Of Business tonight?” Amy asked Alex. “I hope he makes sure my dad gets to report it.”



“I think your dads have it all under control,” Scott suggested. “That’s why they didn’t react when either of you told them where you were. They already knew.”

“How could they?”

“I have a theory,” Scott confessed. “Out with it,” Kim insisted.

“Well, I think that Bruce was spying on the university cruiser. I’ll bet he works for Mr. Black.”

The kids didn’t take long to process this idea.

“You might be right!” Amy declared. “He was really interested in the radar equipment.”

Alex added, “And he was so excited to get a copy of the map – he almost pee’d himself.”

“Alex, you’re a rude, crude, lude, dude,” Amy lectured. “What about it?” Alex rebutted.

“So, it looks like you guys helped your parents today,” Scott said. “Now, Kim and I have to help our mom.”

“We’re not finished,” Alex added. “We still have to help figure out who The Ring Master is, right Amy?”

Amy was caught up in the moment. “Sure!” she shouted. “And Kim,” she continued, “Alex and I want to help you and Scott stick it to Huckster, right, Alex?”

“Whatever we can do to help. You just have to ask,” Alex agreed. As Chris pulled into Alex’s driveway, he announced, “By the way, kids, I set up your scorch mail by remote access today. You’ve got your own personal, private and secure network.”

“Man, that’s awesome, Mr. Campbell. Thanks!” Alex exclaimed. “Yeah, thanks, Mr. Campbell,” Amy added.

Chris stopped the van and Alex jumped out. “See you guys tomorrow!” he shouted.

Chris drove Amy home next and then headed to their own place. As they pulled into their driveway, Kim said out loud, what they were all thinking. “Mom’s going to blow a gasket when she hears we took the boat out.”

“No kidding,” Chris replied. “So, what should we tell her?”

“The truth, what else?”

“All of it?”

“Sure, all of it.”

Chris pushed the garage door opener.

They spotted Tommie’s van parked inside. It was 7:00. Tommie had arrived home just a few minutes before them. She’d had a long, exhausting, frustrating day with O’Dinkle. She had fed Max and the two of them were curled up on the couch, waiting for the family to come home.

Tommie knew the kids had a basketball practice after school and assumed that Chris had gone to pick them up.

SLAM...

The family was in the house. Max bounded to the door to greet them. Tommie remained seated.

As Chris and the kids walked into the family room, Tommie stood up and extended her arms toward them, saying, “I really need a hug.”

## Chapter Thirty-Three



Kim ran over to Tommie and announced, "I love you, Mom."

"I feel two hundred percent better," Tommie said. "I can always count on you guys to make my day."

"I guess the meeting with Huckster didn't go well," Chris said. "You guessed right. It didn't happen at all," Tommie replied. "And to top it all off, Cheryl, in Human Resources, sold me out! She lost my personnel file and refused to give me anything that might help."

"Traitor!" Kim exclaimed.

"Not only that, but she gave me a bunch of documents to sign before they'll pay me my salary."

"What kind of documents?" Chris asked.

"Ones they said I signed before," Tommie answered. "But I didn't."

"Can I see them?"

Tommie thought this was a strange request. "Why do you want to see them, Scott?"

"They're probably interesting."

"I want to see them, too!" Kim declared.

Both Tommie and Chris wondered what this was all about. Chris was particularly curious why the kids weren't bursting at the seams to tell Tommie what happened on the water.

"You kids must be starved," Tommie said. "Forget about the documents. They're not important. What do you want for supper?" Scott and Kim were too excited about the documents to worry about eating. They thought they had a chance to help Tommie. "We're not hungry," Scott replied. "We just want to see the documents."

"Not hungry? You two are always hungry!" Chris declared. "What's up?"

"Nothing," Kim said. "We just took some stuff in class today about situations like this – and we want to see the documents."

Tommie was tired and didn't feel like arguing. "I'll get them," she said, as she walked to her office and grabbed her briefcase. She brought it back into the family room and laid it on the coffee table. She opened it up and pulled out the folder.

"I haven't even looked at these," Tommie admitted.

"Let me and Kim read them. We'll tell you if you should sign them or not," Scott said.

"So, you two are attorneys now, are you?" Tommie laughed. "My other attorney said

they're standard business documents."

Chris was sitting, watching and listening. He didn't understand the kids' interest in the papers.

"Okay," Chris asked. "What gives? What the heck is with these documents?"

Scott decided to apply what he really did learn in class that morning. "Well, not everything is what it seems. You should know that, Mom and Dad. We learned that in school, today. There's always a reason why people do things and it's not always for other people's benefit."

"That's pretty negative thinking, Scott," Tommie commented. "It's reality, Mom. If Buck Huckster wants you to sign these, it's for his benefit, not yours."

"You're probably right," Tommie said. "Maybe I do need to look at these carefully."

"And, Mom," Kim added, "just because everyone else signs them, doesn't make it right. You're always telling us – if everyone else jumps off a bridge – that doesn't mean we should."

"Got me again," Tommie said. "Chris, let's all go through them together. But first, we do need to do something about supper."

"How about O'Dinkle's?" Scott asked.

Tommie laughed. "If I hear that name one more time, I think I'll scream."

"Okay, I'll make supper and you and the kids can review the papers," Chris offered.

"What are YOU going to cook, Dad?" Kim challenged. "It has to be something I can just heat up and serve."

"There's a lasagna in the freezer," Tommie said. "Read the instructions. You can handle it."

"Yes, I guess I can," Chris said, as he headed to the kitchen. When he got there, he looked outside and saw that their boat had been delivered. He then focused on the task at hand – supper.

"So, you two really want to read these," Tommie said to the kids. "Bring them on!" Scott replied.

"Okay. Here's the first one. It's called an at-will employment agreement."

One by one, Scott, Kim and Tommie went through the documents. Scott and Kim sounded like attorneys as they explained the consequences of signing each of them. The kids were making lots of sense.

"I think we have a couple of F. Lee Baileys on our hands here," Tommie said. "I'm meeting with RL tomorrow. He thought these were standard. However, after what I've just heard, I'm starting to think that even if they are, I shouldn't sign them."

Chris put the lasagna on the kitchen table and announced, "Dinner's served."

Tommie, Kim and Scott joined Chris in the kitchen. "I think the kids might have just saved my case. If I had signed these, Huckster would use them against me, and I'd lose for sure!"

"And make sure you tell RL about our right to Freedom of Speech," Scott insisted. "It's our opinion that these documents undermine the First Amendment."

"And, Mom," Kim added. "They probably suborn perjury too, if you think about it."

Tommie and Chris were both overwhelmed by the kids' analysis. Tommie thought, 'There might be a bigger battle to wage – than the one for my commissions. These documents seem to be instruments of deception, larceny, witness tampering, white-collar crime and who knows what else.'

“Make sure you keep us in the loop on this,” Kim insisted.

“I certainly will,” Tommie replied. Then she looked at them both, smiling and slightly shaking her head. “You kids never fail to amaze me.”

“And our opinions count, right, Mom?” Scott asked. “Yes. Your opinions count – big time.”

As the family wolfed down the lasagna, Tommie finally got around to asking about their day. But, before anyone could answer, RING... RING...

Tommie’s cell phone rang. She didn’t recognize the caller ID. “Hello. Tommie Campbell speaking.”

“Tommie, my name is Matt Molina. Perhaps you’ve heard of me around the office.”

“Yes, certainly. You’re in business development, right?”

“Right. And I’m having problems getting paid. I heard you’re in the same boat. Are you planning legal proceedings against the company?”

“Yes, I am.”

“I’ve been talking to Ben Arnold.”

“I’ve heard his name,” Tommie said.

“We’d both like to meet with you. If we pool our documentation together we might have stronger cases,” Matt explained.

“That’s a great idea!” Tommie exclaimed.

“How’s noon, tomorrow, at The Steak House?” Matt suggested. “I’ll be there. Oh, by the way, did you just receive some documents to sign?”

“Yes, I did. But I haven’t signed them, yet.”

“Don’t!” Tommie said. “I’ll tell you why, tomorrow.”

“I’m looking forward to it,” Matt said and hung up.

Tommie turned to the family to fill them in. “You’re not going to believe this. That was Matt Molina, another guy at HucksterCo. He’s having problems too, and he wants to meet with me tomorrow. He and another guy, Ben Arnold, are thinking of taking legal action.”

“Ben Arnold?” Scott inquired. “I wouldn’t trust the guy.”

“Why would you say that?”

“Ben... Benedict... Benedict Arnold... Get it?”

“You kids can be such goofs,” Tommie laughed.

The family finished dinner without any other interruptions. “Is there any dessert?” Kim asked.

“The cheesecake!” Scott exclaimed.

“Cheesecake for chat. I still haven’t heard how your day went!” Tommie announced.

Tommie stood up from the table and walked over to the fridge. She pulled out the cheesecake, cut it into slabs, and dished them out onto plates. “Okay you two, your turn.”

For the next thirty minutes, Chris, Kim and Scott amazed Tommie with their story. Kim and Scott knew she would have been even more astonished if they had told the whole story – but they were sworn to secrecy. It was ten o’clock and time for bed when the nightly news on CCTV caught their attention.

## Chapter Thirty-Four



“Look! It’s you kids!” Tommie exclaimed.

They watched Alan Lasowich’s afternoon report from Spring Valley School. As he spoke, clips of the school and some of the students flashed up on the screen.

Lasowich: I’m here today at Spring Valley School. As you can see, the students aren’t in class today. The systems that control the computers, the security and the environmental controls went on the fritz right before lunch. According to the students, the school heated up, the lights flashed on and off, and the fire alarm blasted through the school. Principal Toole said that the sprinklers went off automatically, but only in the hallway. He says this was very fortunate because otherwise, the computers and library could have been ruined. There is no explanation of these occurrences, other than computer glitches.

Amy and her dad watched the news, together. “Look, Amy. You’re on TV. I have to admit I helped out with the edit on this one – I got you on as much as I could.”

This had to be one of the best days she’d ever had. Not only did Amy help her dad without him knowing it, but he actually paid attention to her, without her asking for it.

Joel Black wasn’t sure how to respond to the report. He was experiencing *déjà vu*. He’d suspected that Alex had something to do with the school’s problems, but until he heard what the problems actually were, he wasn’t sure. Now he was. And he was also certain, the glitches that occurred during his meeting, had to have been because Alex had been fiddling with their home’s security and computer systems. Joel figured Alex was practicing so that he could do the same thing to the school. He didn’t know that Alex had practiced on the school so he could do the same thing at home. Alex was safe – for the moment.

“Hey, you kids are stars again. Another fifteen minutes of fame,” Tommie joked. “And I have a feeling there’s a lot more of that to come.”

Scott agreed and said, “There sure will be – when we tackle Huckster together.”

“We’ll make it the Campbell family project,” Chris laughed. “And should we tackle the First Amendment issues?” Kim asked.

“Maybe we need to leave that for the experts,” Tommie replied. “Mom, trust me when I tell you this,” Scott said. “The experts aren’t interested in fixing this problem. If it’s going to get done, it’s my opinion that we have to do it.”

“I second that,” Kim announced. Tommie smiled. “If you two say so.”

“We say so,” Scott replied.

“All right then,” Tommie said. “Then we’re in this together!” Her approval was punctuated by a loud, KABOOOOM...

An explosion rocked the house. “What was that?” Scott shouted.

“It sounded like a bomb!” Kim declared.

“Chris?” Tommie looked to her husband for his take on it.

He shook his head and offered, “Maybe it was a plane breaking the sound barrier.”

“That must be it,” Tommie said. “It’s late and you two have school tomorrow.” The kids stalled as long as they could before heading toward the stairs. On their way, KABOOOOM...

A second explosion happened about five minutes after the first, but this time they heard it from the television, as well.

“Look! It’s on the TV!” Scott announced.

The family turned their attention to a breaking CCTV news report. Like this morning, flames were shooting across the television screen. The kids recognized the cruise ship and pilot cruiser in the background. They looked at each other in disbelief.

Reporter: An explosion in the harbor occurred just seconds ago.

Fortunately, Alan Lasowich was on the scene with a camera crew taping a story on the Harbor Front Boarders and BMX Park. Alan and his crew are providing this live feed. Alan?

Lasowich: This is Alan Lasowich, live from the Boarders and BMX Park. We’re just waiting on a report from Center City Harbor Safety Patrol, but behind me, you can see flames out on the water. There was definitely some kind of explosion... What’s that? ... Yes, Harbor Safety Patrol has confirmed that Pilot Cruiser 145 has just exploded, but they can’t yet confirm if there are any survivors.

According to Harbor Safety Patrol, this appears to be a freak accident. Pilot Cruiser 140 reported that they communicated with their sister ship, minutes before the explosion, and were informed that a fire had started in the electrical system. The two-man crew was apparently attempting to put it out. A spokesperson from Pilot Cruiser 140 said – he suspected their colleagues had underestimated the extent of the fire and were likely still onboard when the fuel cells exploded.

We’ll keep abreast of this story and report any updates as soon as they become available.

The Campbells, Blacks and Montgomerys watched. Joel and Richard had a decision to make.

“That’s Bruce’s boat!” Scott shouted.

“That could have been us!” Alex screamed.

“He saved our lives today!” Amy cried. “Someone killed him!”

“Is he dead?” Kim asked herself.

The kids watched in disbelief. There was no way they could go to bed now. They wouldn’t be able to sleep a wink.

Joel and Richard knew what they had to do.

Within minutes, Alan Lasowich reported an update to the story. Lasowich: Harbor Safety Patrol and fire investigators are saying that the explosion of the Center City Harbor Pilot Boat 145 was most likely an accident. Harbor Safety reported that the boat was equipped with sophisticated radar and sonar technology and that the explosion was probably caused by a spark from a short in the electrical system. The Harbor Safety Patrol reports that their employees escaped the explosion.

Given that the explosion occurred close to the new skateboard and BMX park, the Grand Opening will be postponed indefinitely, pending a study of the foundations of the park.

“Thank goodness!” Alex exclaimed. “He’s safe. But the park won’t be opening!”

“That’s fantastic news!” Kim announced. “Too bad about the park, Scott.”

“Dad, we met one of those men today. I’m so happy he’s okay!” Amy reported.

“That’s the best news I’ve heard all day!” Scott declared. “Except for the part about the park.”

Elsewhere, however, the response wasn’t the same. “Those two are dead as door knobs and the turncoats know it,” declared The Ring Master.

**We hope you enjoy our next book  
Stupid Cupid**