

A Kids Opinions Count™ Book

What Goes Around



By MAKS

What Goes Around



Book Five 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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Prologue – What’s Been Happening



It’s been weeks, since Scott and Kim rescued Melissa from the world of lollipop heads. Melissa was now happy, healthy and settled in with her grandmother, Mrs. McDuffy. Melissa was busy with school, basketball and her new, best friends, Kim and Amy. Who’d have thought that a famous teen actress would give it all up, just to be one of the girls?

Huckster still favoured his right butt cheek and had a major hate on for Tommie and the kids. He still didn’t realize they were actually the people behind KidsOpinionsCount.

Tommie was still helping with the web site and providing her consulting services to the biggies like ReallySoft, MogulChip and O’Dinkle’s.

The no-speak trial was a week away. RL Bailey had been assisting the Federal Prosecutor to prepare. Tommie had been helping RL Bailey prepare her legal case. Sometimes, Tommie’s efforts were actually contributing to the no-speak case work. The kids were disappointed, that with all the work that had to be done on the no-speak and Tommie’s case, there was nothing they could do to help.

Mrs. Hardy had arranged for the kids’ class to attend the trial. The kids and Mrs. Hardy were still planning to write a play about it.

Chuck Reimer finished editing the final cut of What’s the Skinny, and the infomercials and advertisements for Magic Meals. He had had it with Hollywood and The Conglomerate and decided to retire. He settled down in Center City and renewed an old friendship with Mrs. Hardy... and Mrs. McDuffy. Chuck promised Mrs. Hardy he’d help the kids write and produce their play.

Chris’s computer business was growing exponentially.

The kids’ grandparents, Erin and Lanny, had only contacted their family by postcard. They’d disappeared for weeks before, but never this mysteriously.

Mac had decided to take a semester break and do a research project for Better Health, a large pharmaceutical company. Natalie went with him. They were already three weeks into the project.

Max, the Campbell’s dog, was soon to be having the time of his life.

Mr. Klein was still out of town.

Alex’s dad had finally retired from The Company. As it turned out, he and Mr. Montgomery knew all about Nash’s bust. It had been carefully planned to exclude them on purpose. Mr. Black and Mr. Montgomery were now busy running their media empires.

The basketball playoffs were underway. It was Spring Valley versus Terra Nova.

Danny was still working on identifying those artifacts he found at the underwater tunnels.

The old man was still trying to spy on the Campbells. He'd found out about the KidsOpinionsCount web site and he was addicted. His grandson was even more frustrated than before.

Spring Valley School had returned to normal after the fiasco with the movie shoot. The Conglomerate was not pleased with the Campbells' efforts to expose their skinny scheme. The kids were certain that The Conglomerate would try to even the score, but so far, things had been surprisingly quiet.

The Conglomerate was about to launch the movie and the Magic Meals. The kids had given up on trying to stop them. They were concentrating their efforts on educating their members about the dangers of these kinds of products.

Chapter One



“Well, today’s the day,” Scott grumbled.

“What day?” Tommie asked.

“The day that The Skinny Scheme is being launched.”

“Today?” Kim interjected. “We need to tune into The Entertainment Channel and see what they’re saying.” She walked over to the television in the family room and turned it on, just in time to hear Giovanni Imahotta report.

Imahotta: Good Morning world! I’m hear in the studio today with the famous... the legendary... the omnipotent producer of teen movies... Mr. Dick Vertola. Dick, thanks for giving The Entertainment Channel the exclusive first announcement of Dream Destroyer’s fabulous, thumbs-up, five star, best movie of the year, best movie of the decade, What’s the Skinny.

Vertola: Thanks for having me, Giovanni. And thanks to your network for all of its support in this venture.

Imahotta: Dick, tell our viewers about What’s the Skinny... AND about these fabulous new Magic Meals. “I tried them today, and they’re Da Bomb! You need to order! Order! Order! these meals!”

“Da Bomb!?” Kim blasted. “What millennium does Imahotta think we’re in?”

“Da Bomb... all right,” Scott added. “More like a Weapon of Mass Destruction. They’re ordering us to our death!”

“Shush, you two. I want to hear what THEY’RE saying... not you,” Tommie urged.

Vertola: Magic Meals was developed right here in the greatest nation on earth and we grow every single ingredient in our space-aged hydroponics garden... right next to Three Mile Island. We’ve even been environmentally conscious, and with the help, support and guidance of the Pentagon, we’ve manufactured our products in refurbished abandoned military base and chemical weapons facilities. We don’t do those things anymore. So Magic Meals moved in and took over, saving many jobs and towns in this great nation.

“What?” Scott shouted at the television. “You mean the Pentagon is supporting this? How far do the tentacles of The Conglomerate reach?”

“Right down our throats... and into our gullet apparently,” Tommie replied sarcastically.

Vertola: Why don't we play the promo and we'll let the entire world see what fabulous products we're bringing to them. These will have a global impact. These will help every single person on this planet and maybe even beyond. We're launching this product line today... along with the movie, so that everyone who sees the movie and loves the movie and wishes they could be just like the stars of the movie... can. That's right. Everyone can be as healthy, happy, lovely, skinny, brilliant, energetic, athletic and even academic as the kids in the movie AND our new starlet, Eliza!

Imahotta: Wow! It sounds like every single person on the face of the earth will want to see this movie to find out the secret and want to order these meals!

Vertola: Yes. But it doesn't stop there. If you show your movie ticket, you can get a fifty-percent discount on your first purchase of our Magic Meals.

Imahotta: Now, that's cross promotion at its finest. So, if someone is crazy and doesn't see the movie, but still wants the benefits of the Magic Meals' food and vitamins, can they still buy it?

Vertola: They sure can. These products are available in every store in North America, and you can also order online and by phone, order anytime, anyplace, and have it delivered right to your door! Friendly, helpful and efficient operators at HucksterCo, our logistics partner, are standing by waiting for your order. Don't disappoint these people. They've been trained and know everything there is to know about Magic Meals. Did you know HucksterCo is an equal rights employer?"

The phone numbers were now front and center on the television screen.

“Man! They HAVE to be under the law,” Tommie barked. “And the law didn't mean for them to treat everyone equally BADLY!”

Imahotta: Wow! That's amazing. Your partners thought of everything.

Vertola: Let's show the rest of the world what we're talking about. Let's roll a clip of 'What's the Skinny', which by the way was based on a true story.

And, like I said, we just happen to have some product right here in our studio and I actually had some for breakfast. Absolutely the best food I've ever tasted, and the vitamin supplements have turned me into a new person... in no time at all.

The television screen is now filled, pixel to pixel of Magic Meals in their red, white and blue packaging.

“Hey, I recognize that music. It was from that war movie, Acapulco Now,” Scott announced.

Imahotta: Sure, Dick. Let's roll the clip.

The TV lit up. The pixels began to flicker across the screen.

“Look!” Kim shouted.

Chapter Two



“They’re showing those darn clips of us. We’re so gross looking! They’re doing close-ups of me and Amy! That’s not fair!”

“Calm down Kim,” Scott replied. “Wait, now they’re showing the stuff they shot on the weekend. We look happy and healthy and athletic and ... all the things they claim their Magic Meals can do.”

“This is nothing new,” Kim whined. “We knew they were going to do this. They did it the day we tried to blow the whistle on them. So, what can we do about it? Nothing!”

“Hey, there’s Mr. Wagner and the band. We didn’t see that before. It’s the same music as the Magic Meal Commercial.”

“They sound fantastic!” Tommie announced. She started to laugh. “That Mr. Wagner. He’s a sneaky guy. And it wasn’t Acapulco Now, it’s Apocalypse Now.”

“What are you talking about?” Kim asked.

“He’s playing Wagner!”

“No, HE’S Wagner.”

“No, the music. It’s Wagner.”

“He wrote it?”

“No, it was written by Richard Wagner, the composer I told you about. The one that got blackballed in Germany.”

“The one that used his freedom of speech and got screwed by the music industry?” Scott asked.

“That’s not what I said,” Tommie lectured. “I told you to do your own research and form your own opinion on this issue.”

Elsewhere,

“Chuck, I don’t know what to say. This is got to be an international story — and you’re giving it to me. How come?”

“Lasowich, I like what I hear from you. You’ve got a soul. Now let’s rock and roll!”

“Mr. Montgomery, are we ready to go?” Alan asked.

“We’re ready. Let’s make a difference.”

Back at the Campbells. “Look! It’s Alan Lasowich!” Scott shouted. “What’s HE doing on ETE?”

Lasowich: Hello everyone in TV land... and possibly beyond. For those of you who don't know me, my name is Alan Lasowich, and I'm an investigative reporter in Center City for CCTV.

I'm here to report that What's the Skinny and Magic Meals will have to be yanked from the marketplace. Industry self-censorship will be forced to ban both the movie and the product advertisements from the airwaves, theaters and the retail industry.

You're probably wondering why.

"Yeah! Why and why didn't we know about this?" Scott whined.

"Shut – UP!"

Lasowich: Senior Executives at Dream Destroyer Productions, challenged industry sensitivities and sensibilities by using music that has been banned from use in the entertainment industry for over fifty years. I would like these executives from Dream Destroyer to explain why they used Richard Wagner's music.

"Mom! You were right!"

"Shush, let's hear what they say."

Lasowich: For those of you who have no idea who Wagner is, and for those of you who just might care to see the irony in this situation, I'll fill you in.

Wagner was blackballed by the music industry in the 1800's because he didn't agree with what the people who controlled the industry were doing. He felt that they were promoting and selling sub-optimal art, just for a profit, and pandering to the basest of public desires.

He suffered financially because of the industry's opinion of his writings. Now it looks like the industry is going to suffer financially because of their opinion of him.

Ironic, isn't it? Truly, what goes around comes around.

ETE went off the air and a Magnum re-run now appeared on the screen.

"Whoa... this is going to raise more than a few eyebrows," Tommie concluded. "This is one hot potato and The Conglomerate must be experiencing its own Apocalypse," Tommie laughed.

Meanwhile, The Conglomerate members were gathered to celebrate the launch of the movie and the Magic Meals. The celebration was short-lived. The questions, comments, concerns and curses were flying. The Conglomerate had been had. They'd lost control.

"What the heck is going on? Who's this Lasowich guy and how did he get on national television?"

"What's he talking about?"

"How did Wagner's music get into the movie? He's banned. Doesn't that idiot Vertola know that?"

"What can we do about this?"

"I know what I'd like to do — whack someone."

"We don't do that anymore."

"So what ARE we going to do?"

“We have no choice! We can’t afford to alienate the anti-Wagnerists. They’re too powerful. Those kids are to blame. We have to put the kibosh on the movie and the Magic Meal commercials for now. We need to pull them and edit the music out of everything.”

“No Way! We’re too invested.”

“We’ll launch them under another name — down the road. It just means we’ll delay reaping in the profits.”

“Who’s responsible for this Chaos?”

“Vertola.”

“Get rid of Vertola.”

“Let me do it!”

“And while you’re at it, make sure that Chuck Reimer never works again.”

“He’s long gone anyway. He retired.”

A phone was dialed.

RING... RING...

“Vertola speaking.”

“You’re fired. You and that darn Reimer will never work in this country again!” The phone was slammed down on its cradle.

“Now we need to get rid of those kids!”

“Don’t be stupid. We just need to figure out some way to discredit them.”

“The less I hear about those kids, the better, unless it’s somehow to use them to our advantage!”

“I’m way ahead of you guys! I’ll soon OWN them! They’ll be following our orders... and they won’t even know it.”

Scott, Tommie and Kim were oblivious to the conversation of The Conglomerate, and were ecstatic about Lasowich’s report.

“The Conglomerate — one... KidsOpinionsCount — two!” Scott exclaimed.

“I don’t think we can take credit for this,” Kim lectured.

“Why not?” Scott asked. “Who’s it gonna hurt?”

Tommie and Kim looked at each other and both shook their heads. There was no reasoning with Scott. “Scott, you’re not the center of the Universe, you know,” Kim announced.

“No, not center, but I am one of the most important elements.”

Kim looked puzzled.

“Chaos! I’m chaos. I keep everything interesting.”

“In the van you two, ... you’ve got school,” Tommie ordered.

Kim and Scott’s KidsOpinionsCount.com web site had made them celebrities. Just last week, the two appeared on the cover of Teen Kids. Kim handled the success and attention well. Scott however, let it go to his head. He started to believe that he was as great as the publicity made him out to be. He took on a whole new personality. Scott became a stuck-up jerk. It was like he morphed into Alex. Even Alex didn’t like him. The kids all wanted the real Scott back — and Alex decided to make it happen. He had a plan.

Chapter Three



It was late in the day on Wednesday and the economics class was coming to an end.

“And therefore, equilibrium is possible only where the aggregate demand curve crosses the forty-five degree line. Any questions?” Mr. Somerville asked.

Scott looked up at the clock at the front of the classroom. ‘Right, there’s a few seconds to go and someone’s going to ask a question,’ Scott thought. ‘Three, two one.’

BZZZZ...

The books slammed shut, the backpacks were flung over shoulders and the exodus began. It was a long weekend. The students got Thursday and Friday off for in-service, and Monday was a holiday.

“Before you go,” Mr. Somerville shouted over the commotion, “I want to hand back your tests.”

This was the toughest economics test they’d had this year. The moans and groans were drowning him out as he began to give a breakdown of their marks. “As usual, there were no surprises. We had a ten percent failure rate. Over half of you got C’s and D’s. Fifteen percent got B’s and there was a smattering of A’s.”

‘What, no A pluses?’ Scott thought.

“Highest marks went to Kim and Scott,” Somerville said matter-of-factly.

Suddenly, blaring over the school’s intercom, “Scott Campbell, report to the boys’ gymnasium — immediately. Scott, report to the gym,” Meredith announced.

“Kim, get my test will you? I gotta split,” Scott ordered and bolted for the door. Kim knew about Alex’s plan. As soon as she got their tests, she followed Scott to the gym. She wasn’t going to miss this for all the tea in China. While Kim scampered down the hallway, Scott was already standing in the middle of the gym. There was no one else there. He wondered why he was summoned.

Kim arrived shortly after him and snuck behind the bleachers. She didn’t want to miss this. Scott was still standing in the middle of the gym... Suddenly, the doors blew open and the varsity boys’ basketball team exploded into the gym.

“Hey guys... surprise practice tonight?” Scott asked.

“Surprise all right... but not a practice... the real thing.”

“A game?” Scott asked innocently?

The entire team laughed hysterically and one of the guys yelled out, “Game ON!” The team advanced on Scott like bears to honey. The guys mauled poor Scott... stripping

him of his clothes... all the way down to his Moe Boxers. They then put him in a bear hug and hauled him off to the south end of the gym. He fought them all the way.

“Hey, guys, what gives? Let me go!” When Scott figured out what was next, he bellowed, “No, not the POOOOL!” He squirmed as hard as he could to free himself from their grip.

Alex was supervising the whole thing. Scott spotted him and cried out, “Alex! Buddy! Pal! Hey, help me out! Get these guys to put me down!”

“Sorry Scott, old buddy, old pal. It’s for your own good!”

“What is?” Scott cried out.

“They’re going to perform an exorcism on you!” Alex explained. “Well, actually, an exoswim. I want my nice, sucky, friend back. We’re stuck in each other’s bodies, and I want out of yours and back into mine!”

“Alex are you nuts?” Scott screamed. He continued to struggle, but it was useless. The rest of the team was as big as he was, and eighteen hands had him locked down like a maximum-security prison.

“Speaking of nuts and butts you putz, this’ll cut you down to size. You’ve become a conceited, arrogant jerk and we’re gonna wash that man right out of our hair. Men... to the POOOOL!” Alex ordered.

“Alex, NOOOO!” Scott shrieked, as Alex opened the doors onto the pool. By now, the varsity girls’ swim team was doing their warm-up laps. The stands were filled. Every girl in the school was there. Scott was set-up... big time!

One of the guys pulled off Scott’s boxers and they chucked him into the pool, buck-naked. The guys bowed and left. Alex yelled out, “The Big Kahuna’s now the California Raisin Man!”

The girls picked up on the joke and started chanting, “Raisin Man, Raisin Man...”

There was Scott, now standing in lane three of the pool, ten feet away from the end. So close, but yet so far. The swim team gathered around quickly.

Kim kept out of view. She let Scott experience a little humility before she threw him a towel, which he quickly grabbed and strategically position for his exit.

‘He owes me, now,’ Kim thought, hoping that Alex’s plan worked.

“Kim, you’re a lifesaver,” Scott exclaimed, as he hauled himself out of the pool. “What’s up with Alex?”

All eyes remained on Scott, who, now protected by the towel, was soaking it all in. He gave the swim team and the fans a few bows, just short of mooning them, and then strutted toward the doors. They jeered and cheered. They had mixed feelings about Scott. Of course, Scott’s rather biased and self-absorbed perception was that they loved him and this just egged him on to be more of a show off.

Kim rolled her eyes and sighed. It looked like the plan didn’t work. Scott was still acting like Alex.

“Get you butt out of here! Now!” the swim coach yelled. The coach had déjà vu – it was just a few weeks earlier he had to kick Alex out of the pool. Scott got the message and headed toward the doors between the gym and the pool... from whence he came... in the first place. Kim had beaten him through and was waiting on the other side. Scott sauntered back through the doors. He realized that the junior girls were now practicing in the boys’ gym. ‘More fem fans,’ he thought. As the big glass doors closed behind Scott... they caught the corner of his towel... and Scott got his second surprise... He was naked

again. This time, he was a fish out of water so to speak, and in the middle of the junior girls' basketball practice.

"Oh man!" Scott shouted out in embarrassment. This just attracted more attention. He now had two audiences... the girls in the gym and the swimmers and fans in the pool area. What should he do?

Scott figured he had two options. He could try to free the towel or he could run for his clothes. The second option didn't look that attractive. The guys had chucked his clothes all over the bleachers. It would take a minute to gather them up.

He decided to try and free the towel.

By this time, the basketball drills ceased and the giggling and pointing started. The basketball coach, 'Cranky' Cramer, wasn't amused.

"Get your stuff and get the heck out of here!" Cranky screamed. "You've got one minute before I kick your rear end all the way to Principal Toole's office! I don't care who you are! I'll have you suspended!"

Scott ripped the towel from the door, flung it around himself and ran for the locker room. Kim had already done a second good deed and gathered up his clothes from the bleachers. Kim stood by the door and Scott grabbed his clothes on the way in.

"Where's Alex? I'm gonna make him pay for this one!" Scott threatened.

"He did it for your own good," Kim replied. "You've BECOME Alex!"

"Thanks for being the arm chair Pschyo-Anal Sis. But I don't need it. I'm the same guy I always was... only more people RESPECT me now."

"Respect?... More like RE-ject, RE-sent, RE-pulse, RE-tard... do I need to RE-iterate?"

"Take a pill," Scott mumbled.

"Scott... I'm serious... Alex just tried to bring you back down to earth. You owe him – big time – for caring so much."

"What? Now you've got the hots for Alex? You LIKE him? What gives?" Scott rebuked.

"See... I told you... you've changed. You're like Alex was and he's like you were. It's creepy. I want the real Scott back. You were a jerk... but at least you were bearable."

Kim was amazed herself that she was supporting Alex. The boys really did trade headspaces.

"Kim, you're just jealous that I'm getting all the attention," Scott declared, as he walked into the locker room.

Kim gave up. There was no reasoning with him. She stomped out of the gym and down the hallway. "Kim, wait up!" a voice called out from behind her. She turned her head toward the voice. It was Amy. Kim stopped and waited for Amy to catch-up.

"Who's guesting on the chat room?" Amy asked.

"Heaves, he's pushing Latex II," Kim replied. "As if one movie about espionage in the high tech world of paint, paint colors and paint supplies wasn't enough."

"He's eye candy," Amy laughed. "Got a problem with that?"

"You're right. He is easy to look at, and I did learn a lot about faux finishes in the last movie."

"What else can they do in the next movie?" Amy wondered out loud.

"Well, I understand that color blocking is big now," Kim offered. "So, maybe there's some story that totally blows away the color wheel concept. Puts red and orange together.

Something totally outrageous like that.”

“Kim, you’re funny!” Amy replied.

“Maybe Keaau becomes like a chameleon and can blend into any room — matches the paint color like Home Paint Depot...”

“Stop it, Kim! I’m going to pee my pants. You’re just too silly,” Amy blurted out. “What’s got you in such a weird mood?”

“Scott is still an idiot and we’re still doing useless, dumb chat rooms with useless, dumb celebrities. We’re supposed to be doing something that matters.”

“Hey, you’re doing what the kids want. You can’t help it if we’re not all as enlightened as you are.”

Kim could hear someone coming up behind her and Amy. She could see from her peripheral vision, that it was Scott. Kim pretended she didn’t notice him.

“Hear what just happened to Scott?” Kim asked Amy. “Little brother was caught TWICE with his pants down. Scott’s been acting like an imbecile and now the whole female population of the school’s seen it, first hand.”

“Right! I had a front row seat!” Amy laughed. “It was a dinky show — nothing to get excited about!”

“That cold water sure melted his Popsicle,” Kim replied. “The California Raisin Man chant was brilliant!”

“Sure painted a good picture,” Amy replied and changed the subject to something much more important. “So is Keaau on the chat room or not?”

“Now who’s the funny one. Paint... good segue.”

Scott overheard their entire conversation and was embarrassed, humiliated, and actually did get the picture. They drove their point home... right down the middle of the paint to the can... to put it in basketball lingo. He’d seen the light. Scott took off to find Alex and thank him. He caught up with him in front of the school. “Alex! Wait up!” Scott shouted.

Alex turned around and saw Scott running toward him. He wasn’t sure what to expect.

“Alex, I’m baaaack!” Scott exclaimed.

“Finally!” Alex replied. “What kept you?”

“Why didn’t you tell me everyone hated me?”

“I tried to, but you were so full of yourself, you wouldn’t listen. You know it was just so weird. You were acting like me and I didn’t like you! Scott, how did you ever put up with me?”

“You’ve always been like that Alex. I just got used to it.”

“Not any more. I’ve seen the light.”

“So, you’re going to be nice from now on?”

“NO! I’m going to be the same... only better... It’s the second coming... of Alex!”

“Same old Alex,” Scott replied. “Are you coming to the chat room tonight?”

“No, actually my dad and I are going to the cabin!” Alex announced.

“What about the three-on-three on Saturday?” Scott asked.

HONK... HONK...

“Alex, move it, Bud.”

Alex and Scott looked toward the shouting. It was Mr. Black.

“There’s my dad. We’re heading out now, but I’ll be back for Saturday.”

“Have fun! See you then,” Scott said. He waved good-bye as Alex jumped into his dad’s sedan. Scott noticed Kim and Amy and decided to catch up to them for the walk home.

As he ran up behind them, Scott declared, “I have an announcement to make.”

Chapter Four



“We’re all ears,” Kim replied.

“No, Kim, just like Scott... we’re all rears!” Amy added and wiggled her butt.

“Ha ha,” Scott replied. The girls were expecting a real nasty come back. Instead, Scott declared, “Alex’s exoswim was a success. The old Scott... the old boring Scott... the old goody two-shoes Scott. It’s me! Let’s get going so we can make sure the chat room set-up is perfect for tonight. We don’t want to disappoint any of our KidsOpinionsCount.com Contributors or Members.”

Kim looked relieved. “It’s good to have you back... Let’s get going.” The kids hurried off to the Campbells’

Scott and Kim’s site had grown into the biggest teen Internet site in the world. The survey business was going great. The issues pages were booming and relevant, and the kids were doing the best they could to satisfy the needs and wants of their members.

The chat room with Melissa was such a success that they organized a celebrity chat every week since. As a perk, Scott and Kim would invite some of The Contributors over to the office and let them go one-on-one with the guests before they opened the site to the entire KidsOpinionsCount membership. The Contributors really appreciated it. Kim had hoped for more relevant guests, but their membership was interested in the irrelevant, or at least that was Kim’s opinion.

Scott wasn’t really interested in chatting with Keau Heaves, so he helped Kim, and then retreated to the game room to finish up his review on the new Latex II game. It was going to be released simultaneously with the movie. He passed by Tommie and Chris on his way to the room.

“Going somewhere Scott?” Chris asked.

“I’m not interested in talking to Heaves... besides, I’ve got the Latex game to finish up.”

“Jealous of all the attention Heaves will be getting from the girls... right?” Tommie teased.

“Girls, schmirls... who cares?” Scott rebuked and walked off.

“What got into him?” Chris asked.

“Better question... what got outta him,” Kim interjected.

Tommie and Chris looked puzzled. Kim and Amy explained the entire exoswim. "That Alex is full of surprises," Tommie commented. "So, let's get this chat going. I'm keen to see what Heaves says about the paint wars that his movies have created."

The four of them readied for the chat.

The games review was one of KOC's most popular services. In no time at all, Scott had become a global game guru. A thumbs-down from Scott could mean that millions of dollars in revenue would be lost to the developers. The Campbells had negotiated review contracts with computer and video games people like VidGames, Addictive Games and ReallySoft. Scott never sold out, but he sure pumped up the ones he liked.

The Campbells had a special arrangement with Addictive Games. Addictive established secure access to their prototypes so that Scott could review them at his leisure. They set up sophisticated tracking devices to monitor his play and rate the level of difficulty and interest. Scott wasn't the only kid that they used, but he was the only one with real influence in the marketplace, and Addictive Games knew it.

The web site was already buzzing with anticipation. Most of their local Contributors were female and they were really excited about Keauu being the guest tonight. Ten minutes to go and they'd be live with Keauu.

Kim declared, "It's time." They all logged on.

"Oh my stars!" Amy cried out. "Who did this? Whose is it?"

A naked male body, with the head of a chimp, was staring back at them from the monitor. Kim immediately knew it was Scott. It was pretty hard to miss his bizarre birthmark on his right buttock.

"Maybe we should run a contest on our site. Whose Hinie is it Anyway?" Kim declared.

"How about..." Amy was about to say something when Chris realized it was Scott's private parts being exposed. He cut her off.

"How could this have happened? Who authorized this?"

Tommie also recognized the cheeks and demanded, "Purge this immediately!"

"I think it's kind of cute Mrs. Campbell," Amy said.

Chris quickly shut down the site, purged the pic and re-booted. The home page had returned to normal, and as far as they knew, only the family knew it was Scott. The situation was under control.

Chris got the chat session back on track. Kim called Keauu and walked him through the chat room process, helped him sign on and made the introductions.

Chris monitored the hits and the demographics. Just as he expected, the site was overloaded with females. Kim stayed online with Amy and the others. It was hugely successful and over before they knew it.

"Wow!" Amy declared. "He's hot. I didn't know he was so into the environment."

"Neither did I!" Kim announced. "It wasn't a waste of time after all. Who'd have thought he was really into setting up special drop off centers for people to get rid of old paint and paint products. They really ARE a big hazard and threat to the environment. Some good might actually come out of Latex II."

RING... RING...

It was Amy's cell phone. She looked down at the caller ID. "It's my mom. She must

be waiting for me in the driveway.” Amy answered the phone. “Be right out,” she replied and hung up. “See you at school tomorrow,” Amy said and ran upstairs.

Kim couldn’t wait to tell Scott that his butt was plastered across the screen. She headed for the game room.

Scott had just finished publishing his review of Latex II on the web site. There was an interesting response... somewhere... an old man was reading Scott’s review.

“Ahhhh, so Scott Campbell likes the Latex Game. I must acquire it. I must beat it.”

“Gramps, you’ve become so obsessed with these computer and video games — I think you’re cracking up!” the grandson said. “Maybe you should just go back to spying on the family and forget about their Internet site.”

Suddenly the computer screen flickered and the old man’s head fell back. His eyes gazed up at the ceiling and then rolled back in their sockets.

“Oh, not again!” the grandson complained. “This happens all the time. The old man falls asleep with his eyes open. Gramps, wake-up. Wake-up you mental case.”

The old man didn’t respond for almost two minutes. When he awoke, he was disoriented. “What just happened?”

“You fell asleep in your chair... again. Go to bed. You’re tired!” the grandson ordered.

“I am not! I did not fall asleep. I am as awake as you are!” declared the old man as he returned to the computer game he had been playing.

The grandson mumbled under his breath. “It’s time for the loony bin for him. I can’t take it anymore. Where are those useless servants of his anyway?”

The old man still had good hearing and retorted, “You will see the light when I reveal the secret to you.”

“Gramps, sometimes I think your lights are on but there’s no one home.”

“You light weight! You don’t know what you’re saying. The games! The games are key. It is all about the light... and the games... and the message.”

“Beam me up, Scotty,” the grandson said sarcastically. “I’m out of here.” AS he walked away, he thought, ‘I’ve got my business to run. I can’t keep babysitting this old coot. I need to figure out a way to get rid of him for good. I need to get control of his money... but how?’

As the grandson exited the house and approached his car, he pulled out his autostart and pressed the button. The headlights flashed on and off. The answer was staring him in the face.

“The lights!” he shouted out loud. “All I have to do is show the mental and legal authorities how crazy the old man is when he’s playing the games. They’ll have to commit him to a mental institution or at least to an old folk’s home AND finally give me the power of attorney over his estate. I’m freaking brilliant... So, how can I set him up?”

Chapter Five



It was 9:00 p.m. Scott was now reviewing a new game from VidGames, when he heard over his computer speakers, “Another job well done, Scott.”

It was Jack, the Addictive Games representative. He had just read Scott’s Latex II review.

“Thanks,” Scott replied.

“I see these games don’t seem to be much of a challenge to you.”

“They haven’t been for some time now. Everyone seems to follow the same format. Pretty much cookie cutter.”

“Things are about to change,” Jack announced. “I have a special game and player for you to review. You’re the one and only beta. Stakes are high. Investment is significant.”

“COOOOL!” Scott remarked.

“You wanted something different. Well, this it is.”

“So, what is it?” Scott asked. “Role play? Fantasy? Sport? Virtual? What?”

“I haven’t even seen it yet,” Jack replied. “The game incorporates a new VR visor and body skin, voice recognition software and a sophisticated environmental control that connects the whole thing.”

“I’ve seen and played stuff like this before,” Scott grumbled. He was clearly disappointed.

“Not like this, you haven’t,” Jack declared. “You’ll be immersed in the game — senses and all.”

“Now you’re talking!” Scott’s mood did a one-eighty. “This sounds sweeeet! It’s about time.”

“Splendida Sweeeet!” Jack laughed. “The peripherals are bleeding edge and Addictive Games wants a launch very soon. You and Kim are the only people outside of Addictive Games’ exclusive R&D facility in San Antonio to have the equipment.”

“How do the peripherals work?” Scott asked.

“There’s no keyboard, joystick or controller,” Jack replied. “The thing works on voice recognition and physiological indicators through a bio-med feedback process. What you say, how you move, where you look, your body temperature, heart rate, breathing; it will all interface with the game player.”

Kim had been standing in the doorway and listening in on Scott and Jack’s conversation. “We’re not going to get sucked into some virtual world, are we?” She’d

have to wait with the butt story.

“No, that only happens in movies,” Jack laughed.

DING... DONG...

“You better get that, Kim. It’s the equipment,” Jack directed.

“Freaky,” commented Scott.

Kim went to the door, and sure enough, there was a delivery guy. But this was no ordinary deliveryman. This guy was eye candy. Better than Heaves. He was tall, blonde, buff and had beautiful blue eyes.

‘Wow!’ Kim thought.

“Kim, I assume?” the guy said.

The voice was familiar. “Jack?” Kim guessed.

“In the flesh!”

‘And what flesh,’ Kim thought, looking him over – head to toe.

“You didn’t think we’d trust something this important to Federal UP&S, did you?”

Jack asked.

Kim was stunned. “Scott, come here, quick! Mom, Dad!”

Chris, Scott and Tommie bolted up the stairs to the foyer.

“What is all this?” Tommie asked.

Jack extended his hand. “Mr. and Mrs. Campbell, I presume. I’m pleased to finally meet you in person. Allow me to introduce myself.”

“No need,” Tommie replied. She moved toward Jack, shook his hand, and like daughter like mother, looked him over, toe to head. “I recognized your voice. Come on in, Jack.”

Kim couldn’t believe it. Tommie was totally checking Jack out. How embarrassing.

Chris noticed too, but thought it was just payback for the attention he gave Natalie a few weeks ago.

Scott didn’t notice anything out of the ordinary... yet.

“I’m here to set-up the kids for the next game,” Jack explained.

‘Kids!’ Kim thought. She was crushed. ‘He can’t be any more than ten years older than me. That hardly makes him an old guy. Maybe it’s the clothes I’m wearing. Baggy jeans and sweatshirt... yeah... that’s the problem. Wait a minute. Why should I care? He’s just a guy. Back to business.’

“I’ve got a new game player and peripherals,” Jack said. “It’s pretty exciting stuff — top secret.”

“Why didn’t you tell us you were coming?” Chris asked. “We might not have been home.”

“I was monitoring the chat room and Scott’s play on Latex II. I knew you were home. I need some help with the equipment. Would you guys mind?”

“No problemo,” Kim said, rushing out the door to his vehicle.

‘No problemo! What the heck was that?’ Kim silently chastised himself. ‘What a stupid thing to say.’

Scott followed Kim outside. The kids helped Jack with the boxes. They carried them into the house and put them on the floor in the foyer, beside the stairs that went down to the game room.

When everyone was back inside, Tommie played hostess. “Jack, can I get you anything? Beer, wine, soft drink?”

“Nothing for me, thanks,” Jack replied. “I’d like to get the kids set-up.”

‘Kids — there’s that four-letter word again,’ Kim whined in silence. She decided to do something about it. “Excuse me for a minute,” she said and headed upstairs to her bedroom. Kim figured a change was in order. She put on her cords, tight blue T-shirt, lipstick and stuck a few clips in her hair.

Kim looked in the mirror and liked what she saw. “NOW see if he calls me KID,” she said and bolted down the stairs to the family room.

The change didn’t go unnoticed. Scott was the first to comment. “Hot date tonight, Kim?”

Kim turned beet red.

“You look really nice, Dear,” Tommie said. “Are you going out? It’s a little late, isn’t it?” Tommie was on to Kim. She knew Kim changed for Jack. She actually wished she could do the same... but that would just be too obvious.

“Uh, yeah, Mom, I was heading over to Amy’s. But, you’re right. I should hang around, since Jack’s here.”

Scott rolled his eyes. He knew what was going on. “Kim, we’re even.”

“Right, Scott. Even,” Kim reluctantly replied.

Tommie and Chris looked at the two of them. “Even for what?” Tommie asked.

Scott changed the subject. He didn’t want them knowing about his skinny dipping... even though Kim had already spilled the beans. Scott thought he was still covered. “So, how come Addictive wants Kim to test the game, too?”

“Orders. There’s a requirement for a female tester — you know — different approach, reaction, thought process, physical limitations,” Jack explained.

‘At least he acknowledges I’m a girl,’ Kim thought. But she didn’t like the physical limitation stuff. ‘He hasn’t seen me on the basketball court.’

Tommie and Chris were surprised by Jack’s sexist comment — and even more surprised that Kim didn’t react negatively to it.

“Kim, you don’t mind helping, do you?” asked Jack.

Kim wanted to impress Jack so badly, she’d have agreed to anything. “No, I don’t mind.”

‘What a lame response,’ she thought.

“Are you going to take that crack about physical limitations?” Chris joked. He then turned to Jack and bragged, “Kim can take on any guy.” Turning to Kim he continued, “Tell him about the one-on-one tournaments, Kim. You smoke the boys!”

Kim sighed and stared off into space, thinking, ‘Oh great. Not only am I a kid, but I’m butch. Thanks, Dad. Remind me to never bring home a boyfriend, if I ever decide I want one.’

Tommie came to Kim’s rescue. “Chris, you’re making our daughter sound like a tomboy. I don’t think that’s the image she’s going for here.”

Chris was totally clued out. “But she IS!”

This had been the worst five minutes of Kim’s life. Now she knew how humiliated Scott must have felt at school. She felt she’d been stripped naked and was on display for all to see.

Tommie could see how uncomfortable Kim seemed. Like a good mom, she got the conversation back on to the game. “Jack, about this new game, you do know that we won’t compromise the integrity of our site. If this stuff stinks, that’s the report you’ll

receive.”

Jack was quick to respond. “And that’s precisely why Scott and Kim were chosen. The KidsOpinionsCount site is respected by their peers. If you approve, we launch this baby.”

“And if we don’t like it?” asked Scott.

“If you don’t like it... it’s back to the drawing board. We’ll never release sub-optimal product.”

“When can we get started?” Kim asked.

“Is now okay?”

“Awesome!” Scott exclaimed. “Let’s get the equipment hooked-up.”

Scott jumped up from the couch and the rest followed. They all picked up a box and headed down to the game room.

This was Jack’s first time in the game room and he was blown away. “Let me catch my breath! You’ve got every toy imaginable down here!”

The Campbells had converted their entire basement into the KidsOpinionsCount workroom. Sometimes local Contributors would drop by to talk, hangout, or try out the latest technology.

They had created a stimulating environment for the kids and they kept on top of all the new trends, products and developments. There were computers, game players, games, a huge stereo system, monster TV, pool table, stacks of teen and technology magazines and a few arcade and pinball games, just for winding down.

“How many Contributors do you have on board?” Jack asked.

“Two hundred, last count. It could be higher now,” Scott replied.

“You kids have got it going on!” Jack exclaimed.

“Do you want to see our server and security room? That’s where I do my game reviews.”

“You bet!”

Scott led Jack to a separate room that was dedicated to game reviewing. Tommie, Chris and Kim followed, helping with the boxes. They were all excited to try out the new system. Would it be as great as Jack’s hype?

Chapter Six



The Campbells unpacked the boxes and Jack assembled the system. When it was all together, Jack began instructing Scott and Kim on how to use it. The first step was to put on the “skin”, as Jack called it, which was like a wetsuit with fiber optics attached to sensors and wireless transmitters.

“You guys have to strip down to your undies before you put these on.”

“What?” Kim replied.

“Just kidding. They work over clothes. They’re just easier to put on the less you already have on.”

Jack was right. The suits were tough to squeeze into. The kids looked like worms wriggling their extremities through the tight holes and down the long tunnels that were the arms and legs.

When they had the suits on, Jack handed them a cool pair of glasses. “This is your visor.” They were slick, but they couldn’t see a thing with them on.

“Before we start the feature presentation,” Jack announced. “I’m going to acclimatize you and the skin by playing another game. This is a simple exercise to get you used to the equipment and how it works.” He placed two chairs behind the kids and explained, “I put a chair behind you to sit on. You can’t drive standing up.”

The kids felt behind them for their chair and sat down.

“Are you two okay so far? We’re still all here. Your parents and I will be monitoring your vitals on the PC,” Jack explained.

Tommie and Chris sat close to Jack and the monitors. Tommie was almost on Jack’s lap. Chris was a bit annoyed.

Kim sneakily lifted up the visor and saw Tommie and Jack... Chris was out of her line of sight. Now Kim was a lot annoyed, and not really listening to what Jack was saying.

“Drive? Drive what?” Scott asked.

“Your Indy car. I hope you both know how to drive a stick,” Jack replied.

He had Kim’s full attention again. “Drive a stick? You’re talking about a joy stick, right?” Kim answered.

“No, a stick shift. Have you driven an ATV?”

“Sure, I have!” Scott replied.

“Not much difference,” Jack assured them. “Kim, the joy stick and the controls you

had with your other racing games are pretty similar. It won't take long for you to get the hang of it."

"This should be fun!" Scott exclaimed. He loved the racing games.

Kim was nervous, not just about the game, but about Tommie's flirting with Jack. Kim only had seconds to obsess...

...Jack started the program. Immediately, their senses were bombarded with light and sound and... the smell of exhaust and hot dogs!

With her visor back in place, and her attention and senses fully deployed on the game, Kim found herself sitting behind the wheel of a Formula One Race Car. She could see what must have been her pit crew scurrying around the car. When Kim looked in the rearview mirror she saw the number thirteen on her helmet. "That's my basketball number!" she declared.

"It's time, Kimberly. Good luck," a male voice encouraged. Kim looked out the side window toward the voice and saw the word 'Coach' embroidered on a uniform. She looked up at the face and realized he looked exactly like her basketball coach.

"Remember you have to watch out for Scott," Coach directed. "He's in car thirty-three. Don't take any unnecessary chances."

Wanting badly to beat Scott and show off to Jack, Kim declared with conviction, "Coach, I play to win."

She shook her head and thought, 'Hey, I'm really getting into to this.'

Without warning,

RRRRRRVVVVV...

Kim jumped in her seat. It was the engines revving. But it wasn't only the sound of the engines of her car that startled her, but the vibration of the seat she was sitting in. 'How could this be?' she wondered.

Scott wasn't questioning a thing. He was fully engaged. He was ready to take flight while Kim was wondering how the system worked. She would have to put her questions on hold, as she felt the car pull out on its own. It was driving itself. It felt so real. The track came alive.

Kim heard Coach yell out, "Take control once the checkered flag drops. Remember, you've got the pole... so keep it."

"Huh?" Kim replied out loud, as if she expected an answer.

Then, blaring from the speakers in her visor, she and Scott heard, "Welcome to the Indianapolis 500. Kim Campbell has the pole with her brother Scott in the number two position. One more warm-up lap and we'll have the checkered flag. This is a beautiful day. Conditions on the track are perfect and we expect this race to be one of the fastest in the history of this track."

The cars were now slowly lapping the track. Kim could see the checkered flag in the air. Suddenly, it dropped. The car jerked forward. Kim's head snapped back and hit the head rest. The race was on. Kim felt herself take-off. The force of the acceleration pushed her back in her chair, just like when a plane takes off. She could see and feel her car veering to the right. She had to take control. Kim grabbed the wheel and cranked it to the left, just in time to avoid a collision with the wall. She put her foot on the breaks and was hit from behind. This time, she was thrown forward in her car straight toward the windshield. In a split second she thought she might die, but in that same split second, she was engulfed by her protective restraints in the car. The force of the blow to her body

when the restraints grabbed her tightly, knocked some of the wind out of her. She gasped for air. Kim felt her heart pound. Kim was no longer wondering how all of this was happening... she was now, in the moment, and fighting to keep her car on the track and out of the way of the others.

Coach's voice came over the radio. "What the heck was that? Are you trying to give me a heart attack?"

"Get me out of here!" Kim cried out. "I'm scared."

"Hang in there," Coach said. "You'll be fine. You're a good driver. Put your pedal to the metal and stay out in front."

Kim pulled herself together, found the accelerator and got back into the race. The next thing Kim knew, she wasn't fighting the VR, Kim was living it.

"Sweet!" was all Scott said as he began the game.

Tommie, Chris and Jack watched the kids and their vitals as they operated their virtual cars. Kim and Scott were steering a virtual wheel, pushing a virtual gas pedal and break, talking to themselves and yelling at other drivers. Sweat was dripping from underneath both their visors. Tommie noticed that Kim's knuckles were white. Chris was concerned that this game was too stressful and reasoned, "Jack, I think they've had enough of this."

"As a matter of fact, I was just about to end the game. I got all the data I need for the set-up."

"NOOOO!" Scott screamed.

Jack shut the game down, just as Scott was crashing.

"Man, that was a rush!" exclaimed Scott. "Does this thing measure adrenaline? Mine must have been off the charts!"

"Yeah, that was fun," Kim said, trying to convince herself. She took off her visor and was back in the game room and her own reality. "Mom, you don't need to sit so close to Jack, now," Kim instructed.

"Oh, you're right," Tommie said. "Was I crowding you Jack? I'm sorry."

Jack didn't know how to respond. He picked up on Kim's flirting... but never thought that a woman ten years old than him would flirt too. He decided to quickly change the subject and get back to the matter at hand. "You guys did well. I got all the data I need. Now, on to the real reason I'm here, the new game."

"Tell us about it," Kim asked.

"All I know is, it's WAY different from the stuff you usually get."

"I can beat anything," Scott announced.

"You don't beat the new game, you play it," Jack explained. "It's experiential and surreal. Those were the adjectives used by Mr. Vega himself to describe it. No one else can see it, hear it, or experience it. No one else can use the skin."

"How are you going to know if someone else uses the skin?" Chris asked.

"The racing exercise calibrated the skin to your particular physiological markers and relevant parameters," Jack explained. "Any deviation from your norm will disable the skin. As a matter of fact, the technology is so advanced, that even identical twins wouldn't be able to activate each other's skin."

"Great marketing scheme," Tommie announced. "Get one kid hooked and everyone will want one, or should I say NEED one?"

"Do we get the new game tonight?" Scott asked.

“No, not tonight,” Jack replied.

The kids were disappointed.

“When then?” Kim asked.

“I have to run a complete analysis of the data we collected and send a report back to head office. I’ll be back tomorrow night, say around seven, if that’s acceptable to you, Mrs. Campbell. I’ll initialize the new game at that time.”

“That’s fine with us,” Tommie replied. “And it’s Tommie.”

Jack turned a little red again and announced, “Well, I better get going.”

“We’ll walk you to the door,” Chris said.

The entire family walked Jack to the door. As soon as the door closed, Kim barked at Tommie. “Why were you all over the guy? It was embarrassing. You’re an old lady!”

“I don’t know, Kim. Maybe it WAS his pheromones.”

“Right, blame it on...” Kim stopped and thought for a second. Kim and Tommie were both attracted to Jack... immediately. Maybe it was the pheromones.

The two looked at each other and decided to drop the topic. “Let’s check out those suits,” Tommie proposed.

The four of them raced back downstairs. No sooner had Jack pulled out of the driveway than Tommie and Chris were struggling to put on the skins. When they’d squeezed their final bulges into place, Kim and Scott activated the race game. As soon as the game showed up on the computer screen,

ZAAAAP...

Chapter Seven



“YOOOWWW!” Tommie yelped.

“YIIKES!” Chris harmonized.

A weak electrical impulse surged through the suits — the screen went black. The visors had no visual or audio. Jack was right. One skin, one owner.

It was now 10:30 and the family was too excited to go to bed. Tommie suggested, “Let’s call Mac! He’ll get a real kick out of this.”

Mac had decided to take a break from his medical degree and work on a great research opportunity. He moved from the University to a hi-tech, high-security research facility. Natalie chose to go with him. Mac and Natalie were on the verge of discovering what predisposes a person to an epileptic seizure.

Mac and Tommie were very familiar with the disease. Mac’s twin brother, Tim, was epileptic. Tommie was half-sister to the twins, and no one was sure where the epilepsy came from. No one other than Tim, as far as they knew, had epilepsy. It could strike at any age, so they constantly watched for symptoms in Scott and Kim.

The kids were also interested in Mac’s work. They had found out that epilepsy was a lot more common than most people thought. They even started a new information page on their KidsOpinionsCount.com web site.

Tommie called Mac on their speakerphone so everyone could participate. It was no surprise that he was home.

RING... RING...

“Hello?” answered Mac.

“Mac, you won’t believe what just happened! Jack, the Addictive Games guy was just here,” Kim gushed. “He brought us this new game. It’s awesome!”

“Tell me about it!”

The Campbells took turns describing the new game player, the skin, and of course, their first meeting with Jack.

“That does sound awesome!” Mac declared.

“Do you want to see it?” Scott asked.

“Sounds cool! I’d love to.”

“Jack is coming by tomorrow night,” Kim said. “He’s bringing the new game and

setting it up.”

“I’ll be there,” Mac insisted. “I want to meet him. More importantly though, we have to make sure this technology doesn’t initiate seizures.”

“We’re all right,” Scott announced.

“We monitor the kids pretty closely,” Tommie said. “I haven’t seen any symptoms.”

“Yeah, Mom monitored Jack even closer,” Kim complained.

Mac laughed, “Still after the boys, eh Sis?”

“It was his pheromones,” Scott announced.

“Right...” Chris teased. “And she doesn’t like mine anymore.”

“Well, that happens,” Mac announced. “As the body ages, it’s...”

Scott wasn’t interested in his mom’s aging pheromones, but he WAS interested in Mac’s. “How’s Natalie?” Scott asked. “Are you guys making any progress?”

Mac was uneasy with this question. He suspected Scott wanted to know about his personal relationship, not his working relationship with Natalie. He decided to take control. “We changed from a chemical to an electromagnetic fix... light to be more precise,” Mac explained.

Still on the attack, Scott asked, “Are you dating her yet?”

Mac ignored him... again. “Natalie and I are confident we’ll be able to figure out how to control seizures without the use of drugs.”

“So, are you dating her yet?” Chris asked.

“What’s with you guys?”

“I think my boys have the hots for Natalie. But that’s only fair because Kim and I have the hots for Jack. Am I right Kimmie?”

Kim was mad, embarrassed, shocked and desperate to change the subject.

“Isn’t your sponsor a pharmaceutical company?” Kim asked. “Do you expect them to keep funding you?”

“Better Health is part of a huge conglomerate,” Chris interjected. “They own O’Dinkle’s, MogulChip, Collective Electric...”

“Your dad’s right,” Mac replied. “No matter what we come up with, one of the companies is positioned to take financial advantage.”

“Are they part of THE Conglomerate?” Kim asked.

“I don’t know,” Mac admitted. “They’re funding my research and that’s all I’m concerned about at the moment.”

Knowing that Kim could make a huge issue about Mac not caring about who’s paying for his research, Scott got them onto another topic. “I don’t know if you noticed,” Scott said, “but we have an information page. I’ve been reading the submissions and I’ve seen some kids describe their auras and seizures in computer lingo.”

“How so?” Mac asked.

“One of the kids compared a seizure to computer development and design tools that audit firmware for cross-talk and provides alternative routing to eliminate the problems.”

“Whoa, that’s pretty interesting.”

Scott added, “This one kid said that when the brain overloads or something disrupts the electrochemical balance, then cross-talk occurs. He figured that this is when his epileptic seizures happen. He thinks that the seizure inhibits the cross-talk and helps the brain resume its orderly communications.”

“I have never heard that theory before,” Mac admitted. “This is the first time anyone

has suggested that the seizure is a GOOD thing.”

“So, what’s your new light approach all about, Mac?” Scott asked.

“Natalie and I have been experimenting with light and how it affects the epileptic’s seizures. We’ve projected different light intensities onto the retina to see if light starts or stops seizures. The objective is to predict and interrupt the onset of a seizure and their physiological reaction through varying the light stimuli.”

“Wow!” Scott exclaimed. “Cool idea.”

“You didn’t understand a word he said. Admit it!” Kim declared.

“I did so!”

“You did not!”

“I did so!”

“What did he say then?”

“He’s shining lights in their eyes to see what they’ll do or not do. So there. Do you get it now, Kim?”

“I got it before.”

Mac decided to intervene. “Both you kids got it. Now, do you want to argue or hear what we’ve been doing?”

Kim felt dumb. “Sorry Mac.”

“Okay. Anyway, we’ve been working with human subjects for a few weeks. As the attacks take place, the camera remains focused and records activity in the subject’s retinas. We’re getting some interesting results.”

“Like what?” Kim asked.

“We’ve recorded light emanating from the back of the eye. It looked like the source was the optic nerve,” Mac explained.

“Are you saying the body is creating the light, or is it just reflecting light that’s coming into the eye?” Kim asked.

Mac continued, “The light was coming from within the brain. Even if all the lights were out, we still recorded internal light at the time of an aura. The light seems to take form and we’ve captured these projections on a medium, so that they can be viewed and analyzed.”

“Sounds psychedelic!” Tommie observed. “They’re tripping! Timothy Leary would love this!”

“Mom and her old hippie talk,” Scott teased.

Mac ignored the jibe and also missed Tommie’s legitimate observation, as he went on to explain, “Sometimes the light would bring on an aura with no seizure. Other times a seizure would happen, and yet other times the light might just put the subject into a trance, kinda like an absence seizure. One lumen in particular always did this.”

“So you’re creating cross-talk in the brain,” Scott suggested. “Maybe that’s what those cartoons in Japan were doing and setting off epileptic attacks.”

“If that kid’s hypothesis is true, then that IS what we’re doing,” Mac replied. “Now we need to figure out how to predict it and stop it.”

“You should check out our epilepsy site,” Scott suggested. “You might get some ideas.”

“I’m surprised I missed that one,” Mac admitted. He was a great fan of the kids’ site, but it was really the game information and reviews that caught his attention.

Tommie and Chris were in awe of their kids. They really were insightful, imaginative, creative... all those attributes that the two of them felt they'd lost with the years of existing in a conservative... corporate... passionless world. They continued to listen and learn.

"Kim and I checked out the information The Contributor presented before we posted it. We think it's factual."

"I'll take a look at it tonight," Mac offered. "Natalie and I are going to study the images tomorrow."

"Kim and I have the day off school. Can we visit?" Scott begged. "We'd love to see your lab and these recordings."

"Sure. I don't have a problem with that. You kids stop by tomorrow around noon. Is that okay with you, Tommie?"

"That's fine with me, but are you sure they won't be interfering with your work?"

"No. Besides, these two are about as technology literate as they come. They may be able to help Natalie and I out. The fact that they don't have any preconceived hypotheses could work to our advantage."

"Great!" Scott exclaimed. "See you tomorrow, Mac."

"I'll bring them by at noon," Tommie committed.

"See you then," Mac said and hung up the phone. Tommie shut off the speakerphone.

It was late, but with no school in the morning and their minds racing with the possibilities that tomorrow held, Scott and Kim decided to do a little research before they hit the sack.

"Kim, who's this Timothy Leary guy?" Scott asked, as they headed up to their bedrooms.

"Some professor from Harvard I think. He got into a lot of trouble in the sixties because he experimented with drugs. I saw a show on him on LifeTimeBio."

"Let's see what we can find out about him on the Internet," Scott suggested.

"Why?"

"I don't know. I just have a feeling it's important."

Scott, Kim and Tommie had 'feelings' that they couldn't explain. They knew they should pay attention to them even though they didn't understand them. The Leary feeling was no exception. Kim and Scott got on the Internet and looked for sites on Timothy Leary. They got really lucky and found an amazing interview. They planned to share it with Mac, the next day.

Chapter Eight



That night, Mac decided to do some research of his own. When he got off the phone, he took a look at the KOC Epilepsy page. Mac concluded that the young Contributor had written a great article. It generated a lot of follow-on questions and The Contributor was good enough to answer most of them. Mac read:

Dear KidsOpinionsCount.com

My name is Brent. I'm fifteen years old and I'm an epileptic. I'm tired of people not understanding my disorder and treating me like a freak.

I would like you to create a new page devoted to epilepsy and maybe it will help other kids understand what epilepsy is and that we kids who have it are as normal as they are... we just get our wires crossed sometimes. At least that's what I think.

Could you please post this introduction to epilepsy on your site and set up a chat room for us if you get enough hits on this page.

I figured the best way to deal with people's ignorance is to show them the light.

Over 40 million people have epilepsy. Many famous dead people had epilepsy, such as: Julius Caesar, Alexander the Great, Agatha Christie, Edward Lear, Socrates, Ludwig van Beethoven, Napoleon Bonaparte, Vincent Van Gogh, Charles Dickens, Richard Burton, Alfred Nobel, Gary Howatt, Mohammed, Czar Peter the Great of Russia, Fedor Dostoevsky, Lord Byron, and others.

Epilepsy is a physical condition that is characterized by sudden and brief changes in how the brain works. It is NOT contagious. The cause of epilepsy is mostly unknown.

Epilepsy has been identified as a disorder since 2000 BC. Back then they thought the human brain was invaded by a God and that the God was making the person have seizures. The word epilepsy comes from the Greek word epilepsia which means to take hold of or to seize. In 5th century BC, Hippocrates suggested that the seizures were caused by a disorder in the brain, but his theory was ignored for centuries, until the 18th century when people realized it was a brain malfunction and not related to the Gods. In fact, it is the result of sudden brief electro-chemical discharges of energy in the brain. Different patterns of brainwave discharges are associated with different types of seizures.

Scientists have developed drugs to inhibit the electrochemical activity and stop or control seizures. People take drugs to treat their epilepsy but it is not a cure and they have bad side effects. If you have any questions, please post them here.

Q&A's

I have prepared answers to some of your questions and I hope if you have any others, or if you just want to share your own experiences, please post to this page. We are not alone!

Q. Who are these dead people? It sounds like no one famous has epilepsy today.

A. People don't want to admit they have epilepsy. I did some more research and found a few other people you might know who are said to be epileptic, such as, like Margaux Hemingway the actress, Danny Glover the actor, Leon Bender, the football player who died from a seizure, Neil Young the rock musician and grandfather of grunge. If anyone knows about any other famous people let me know.

Q. Is it true that an epileptic can swallow their tongue if they have an attack?

A. No, it is physically impossible for anyone to swallow their tongue.

Q. I heard that only kids get epilepsy.

A. Epilepsy can happen in kids and if it doesn't happen to a person when they are under ten years old, it can start when people are old. Epilepsy happens to people over the age of 65 almost as often as it does to children.

Q. Can you work if you have epilepsy?

A. Yes, you can. People who have epilepsy are the same as people who don't, except they can sometimes have seizures. Obviously there are some careers that a person who might have a seizure, shouldn't do, like being an airplane pilot.

Q. Can I catch epilepsy from someone?

A. Epilepsy is not contagious. You cannot catch epilepsy from someone else. But epilepsy is hereditary. That means that if you have it, you could pass it on to your offspring.

Q. If someone is having a bad seizure and they are screaming and squirming and stuff, should I try to stop them?

A. No! Just leave them alone and make sure there isn't anything around them that they could hurt themselves on.

Q. Is there any international organizations that help people with epilepsy?

A. There are a lot of web sites and organizations out there to support epileptics and to educate people. Just check out the Internet!

Q. What are the different kinds of seizures?

A. I'm working on this answer for you. It's pretty complicated.

Mac was very impressed with the information on the site and decided to add a little excerpt from a medical resource. He thought that the kids were ready for a little more technical discussion of the condition.

A. I am a medical researcher and my twin brother is an epileptic. I am doing some special research on epilepsy and I'd like to help answer this question.

Epilepsy is a neurological condition that predisposes the brain to bursts of abnormal electrical activity.

Brain cells should communicate in an orderly manner by means of electrochemical signals. Neurochemicals control the messages, stopping some and allowing others through. This avoids cross talk or nerve-message overload. Occasionally a group of

brain cells fire at the same time and send out too many electrical signals. This produces an increase in electrical activity in certain parts of the brain and can result in an epileptic seizure.

There are four stages of an epileptic seizure:

1. The prodrome is the first stage and shows itself as an altered sensation which could occur hours before the actual seizure. In many cases these are confused with the second stage, the aura, which occurs right before the seizure.

2. The aura is the second stage and it alters sensations which can take many forms, including: a breeze or coldness passing over the body, strange smells, abdominal flutters, hallucinations, illusions, musical sounds, a sense of dread, feelings of tension or anxiety, dreamlike experiences, floating sensation, distortion of time, space, memory (deja vu) experiences.

3. The aura is followed directly by the third stage, the ictus which is the actual seizure.

4. The ictus is followed by the fourth stage, the postictus state which is often associated with confusion and lack of energy.

There are different types of seizures.

1. The simple partial seizure. This may involve strange or unusual sensations, such as sudden jerky movements of one body part, distortions in hearing or sight, stomach upset or a sudden sense of fear. Consciousness is not impaired. If no seizure follows, these sensations may simply be called an aura.

2. The complex partial seizure. These are characterized by complicated 'automaton-like' actions and altered consciousness. In this type of seizure, memory usually fades, there's a loss of awareness and some impairment of learning and perception. Typically the person seems dazed and confused, appears irritable and edgy, with glassy eyes and ceaseless fidgeting. They often perform purposeless actions such as random walking, mumbling, head-turning or pulling at clothing. During this seizure some experience numbness of hands or feet, a choking sensation, sweating, strange déjà vu dreams or visions. After the episode, the person often has no memory of it and is usually sleepy.

Someone with complex partial epilepsy may struggle or fight if held during a seizure. The person has no awareness of what happens during the seizure. Some people use this form of epilepsy as a defense for criminal actions. Most people with this form of epilepsy are not violent and during a seizure can not perform complicated actions such as robbing, hitting or killing.

3. Absence seizure. These are characterized by lapses in consciousness, during which a person stares mindlessly into space with their eyes rolling upwards. These are most common in children aged four to twelve. The child cannot be aroused during the seizure. Some children have several such brief seizures during the course of a day, without knowing it, with total amnesia afterwards. One-third of childhood absence seizures stop in adolescence.

4. The tonic-clonic seizure. In these, the brain is swamped with 'electrical overload,' and have two phases. In the first phase, the tonic phase, the individual loses consciousness, goes stiff and falls. The muscles go into spasm and the body becomes rigid.

In the clonic state, the limbs jerk repeatedly and twitch. The person may cry out (not

in fear or pain but as a reflex reaction when air is forced out of the lungs), contort the face, lose consciousness and fall to the ground. The person may briefly stop breathing and go blue. There may be some drooling, biting of cheeks or tongue and possibly a loss of bladder and bowel control. Tonic-clonic seizures are usually preceded by an aura. Tonic-clonic seizures rarely last longer than a minute and, although frightening to watch, generally pass without inflicting any harm. After the seizure, consciousness slowly returns and the person may become limp and confused. They usually fall into a deep sleep.

5.The status seizure. The most dangerous is the status seizure. It is a serial seizure. The person has one after another without recovery in-between. This is an emergency situation that risks permanent brain injury or death, and the person must promptly receive medical attention.

6.Procursive seizure. This is a complex-partial form with a curious swift running behavior.

7.Photogenic seizure. This is triggered by flickering lights such as strobe lights, television or video games.

8.Musicogenic seizure. This is set off by certain types of music.¹

I hope this answers your question. If you would like more, please check out the following book from your library.

¹ June Engel, Ph.D., The Complete Canadian Health Guide, (University of Toronto, Faculty of Medicine, Key Porter Books Limited, 1993 p. 452)

Chapter Nine



Thursday morning came too soon.

“Kim! Scott! It’s already ten-thirty,” Tommie shouted. “You two should get up. I’d like to drop you off at Mac’s by noon. You need to clean up and eat before you go.”

The kids struggled out of bed. Scott had all the blinds closed in his room. It was pitch black. He forgot that he left a bundle of dirty clothes in the middle of the floor. When he got out of bed, he tripped over it, fell, and knocked his head on the leg of his desk. He was unconscious for at least thirty seconds. When he awoke, he wasn’t sure what had happened.

Rubbing his head and looking for an answer, he shouted. “Kim! Come here!”

Kim heard Scott holler. She ran to his room, opened the door, turned on the light, and saw him lying on the floor. “What are you doing down there?” she asked.

“I fell and bumped my head! I saw them!” Scott exclaimed, as he pushed himself up off the floor.

“Saw what?” Kim asked.

“Them... you know... the faces. The ones that you see. I just saw them!”

Kim knew exactly what he was talking about. They sat down on the end of his bed and Scott went on to describe his experience. “There were hundreds of faces flashing before my eyes, one bleeding into the other.”

Kim had seen the same thing. As a matter of fact, she could actually make the same thing happen. She could close her eyes, let her mind wander, and in seconds she would see faces of people she’d never met before. One after another they would appear.

“We’d better tell Mom,” Kim directed.

“No way. She’ll make me get checked out by the doctor. I don’t want to miss the day at Mac’s. Besides, you see them all the time. So, maybe the bump on my head just turned on some light or opened up some kind of pathway, like what Leary said in that interview we read last night.”

“Leary talked about light, not darkness,” Kim replied.

“Well, Mac is talking about light coming from inside the brain. Maybe they’re both right!”

“I just lost you there.”

“Me too. I’m not sure what I’m saying. Just don’t tell Mom. I’m fine. If I start to freak out, THEN you can tell her.”

Kim agreed and they headed down to the kitchen for breakfast.

Scott and Kim weren't the only ones to get the day off to a weird start. Mac spent the morning editing the digital images he told the Campbells about. He finished one of the subjects by noon, and impatiently waited for the kids and Natalie to arrive.

Tommie dropped the kids off, just as Natalie was entering the research facility.

"Perfect timing!" Tommie said and rolled down the window and called out to Natalie. "Natalie, can you get these two in through security with you?"

"Sure!" Natalie replied.

"Thanks, Nat."

Tommie turned her attention to the kids. As they got out of the van, Tommie ordered, "I expect you and Mac back at our place by 6:00, okay? Make sure he remembers!"

"Right Mom. See you," Kim said, as she and Scott took off and caught up to Natalie.

Natalie and the kids entered the building, went through security and walked down the long hallway to the research lab. As they entered the room, they saw Mac sitting at his computer.

"Have you looked at them yet?" Natalie asked.

"No, I was waiting for you guys to get here. I'm all set up and ready to go. Sit down here," he directed. Mac had four chairs set up in front of the television. It was hooked up to the DVD. "Did anyone bring popcorn?"

Natalie was excited and ignored his joking. She exclaimed, "Let's see!"

Mac pushed the play button on the DVD. The screen lit up with a colorful projection of light.

"Are these the auras of the epileptics or the recordings from the control groups?" Natalie asked.

"An epileptic," Mac replied.

"Wow!" Kim said. "You mean we're seeing inside their brain?"

"Yes, we're watching a home movie, kind of," Mac replied.

"Sweet," Scott added. All eyes were glued to the screen, as they watched a big blurry blob appear and then disappear.

"What was that?" Scott asked.

"I don't know. It looks like a big blur to me," Mac replied.

"It looked like a huge really old building to me! Play it again and slow it down, Mac," Kim requested. "Enhance it as much as you can."

Mac adjusted the clarity. The frames moved by, one by one, until a large object appeared in the middle of the screen.

"Freeze frame!" Natalie directed. Mac followed orders.

"Mac, can you make this image clearer?" Scott asked.

"I'll try, but this equipment isn't that sophisticated."

Mac fidgetted with some controls, hit frame advance and explained, "And while this image was being generated, the blind spot of her eye enlarged to three times its normal size."

Kim got excited. "Are you thinking what I'm thinking, Mac?"

"Probably not Kim. What are you thinking?"

"That the blind spot is like a screen and images from the mind are projected on to it," Kim replied. "The projector is the optic nerve."

“Kim, the blind spot is just where the nerves pass through to the brain,” Mac reasoned.

“Excuse me Mac. I think I know where Kim’s coming from.” Natalie went on to explain, “It would be similar to the way the proprioceptors — the specialized sensory nerve endings — send messages internally in the body to tell it what’s happening inside. Maybe the same thing happens with memories and the receiver is in the blind spot.”

“You think these images are projections from her memory?” Mac asked.

Scott had been mulling the hypothesis over, and blurted out, “Good idea Natalie! I think you’re right!”

“Scott, you didn’t understand a word she just said, did you?” Mac challenged.

“Yes, I did! Kim and I both understood it. We did some research ourselves last night. Now it’s all making sense!”

“Okay, now I’m really confused,” Mac admitted.

“Mac, I agree with Scott and Natalie. We all think that these images are really memories. Scott banged his head this morning and he started to see things.”

“What kind of things?” Mac asked.

“Faces. Like those Mom and Kim see,” Scott explained.

“It’s genetic,” Kim added.

Mac thought about the memory hypothesis for a minute. He might have a way to test it. “We used the same light intensity more than once. Let’s see if it brings on the same image.”

Mac continued the DVD. The same blur appeared. Mac was in shock.

“This is amazing!” exclaimed Natalie. “The same light intensity triggers the same aura. It has to be accessing something from memory, otherwise how could it bring the same image back?”

“Either that or it’s just a coincidence,” Mac suggested. “We’ll take a look at the next image. We modified the intensity for that one.”

The next image was different.

“What did she do when you brought on this memory?” Kim asked.

“Well, first of all, we haven’t established it IS a memory.”

“What did she do?” Scott inquired this time.

“She glazed over as if she wasn’t seeing anything from outside stimulus, and when she came out of it, when I took the lights away, she really didn’t remember anything,” Mac explained.

“Like an absence seizure?” Natalie asked.

“Yes, as a matter of fact.”

“I really do think we’re watching memories. Maybe they’re from past lives,” Natalie offered. “You believe that we have some connection to the past, don’t you?”

“Sure, DNA is passed on from generation to generation,” Mac replied. “Some speculate that there’s limited memory in the DNA. There just isn’t enough capacity to transfer all of a person’s memory through sperm and eggs along with all of the genetic information. I don’t think past lives is part of that information. They can’t possibly be.”

“Have you ever heard of Timothy Leary?” Kim asked.

“Sure! Who hasn’t?” Mac admitted. “But I can’t say I’m an expert on the guy.”

“Leary had some very interesting theories about how a person could connect with their past,” Kim explained. “As a matter of fact, what you’re doing with light is similar to

what he accomplished with psychedelic drugs. Which I should say at the time he was doing controlled trips, LSD was legal.”

“Okay kids. You’re weirding me and Natalie out!” Mac exclaimed. “Why would you two know anything about Leary. You better not be experimenting with drugs!”

“No, we’re not,” Scott replied. He went on to explain, “Last night when Mom mentioned the hippies and Leary, Kim and I decided to look him up.”

“Did you know that he thought that light acts like a drug?” Kim interjected.

Scott butted in. “According to Leary, light has always been used to affect human behavior, like a drug. Let me get you into a web site and you can read his theories yourself.” Scott sat down at Mac’s PC and connected to the Internet.

“This line of thought is intriguing. Natalie, let’s read over what the kids have found,” Mac suggested. “Maybe a little lateral thinking is what we need.”

“A little lighter thinking, you mean,” Natalie joked.

“Will Uncle Mac see the light?” Scott asked.

Little did he know...

Chapter Ten



“We’re no experts on Leary, but his ideas are neat,” Scott announced. “And no, we’ll never take drugs... that’s just plain dumb. But it sure is cool that what he thought the future would hold, is coming true, and we’re in the middle of it.”

Kim explained, “Did you know that the reason he took LSD was so that he could access parts of his memory that otherwise couldn’t be reached?”

“I knew that,” Natalie replied. “He thought that the LSD enabled his neurons to travel off the beaten path to information that was archived but not easily accessible.”

“Right,” Scott said. “Leary figured the LSD worked like a neurotransmitter and he actually thought he visited memories from the past. He said that LSD was being replaced by computers and light and that through these new developments, people would be able to reach further into their mind and enhance its utilization and well-being.”

Mac was skeptical. “Drugs, like LSD, are hallucinogens. They DON’T enhance memory.”

Scott was quick to rebuke Mac’s narrow-mindedness. “According to Leary, that’s what the medical community and the government want you to think. They want you to think that hallucinations aren’t real — that they aren’t based on real things, but Leary was convinced his visions were.”

Scott keyed in the url, <http://www.fargonebooks.com/leary.html> Up popped Timothy Leary: The Far Gone Interviews by Todd Brendan Fahey, Salt Lake City, Utah, September 28, 1992. He scrolled down to a paragraph. “Here, start reading,” Scott said. The screen illuminated the following text:

Leary: There’s an external reality and internal reality. Inner reality is certainly more important than the outer reality. It is the outer reality that we have to talk about, agree upon, fight over and organize in order to survive.

Unless you have some way of really activating the brain, people are going to use electrons as simply external devices for power, control and money. So, yes unless someone has had psychedelic experiences, they simply don’t understand how to operate or use electronic devices except for materialistic reasons. It’s no accident that the people who popularized the personal computer were Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak, both barefoot, longhaired acid-freaks. It’s no accident that most of the people in the software computer industry have had very thoughtful, very profitable and creative psychedelic

experiences. Bill Gates, rumor has it, was a very active psychedelic proponent when he was at Harvard, before he, uhh...

Fahey: Founded Microsoft.

Leary: Yeah. So you could go right down the line of the people who are the... it's well-known that the software, not the hardware, but the software so-called industry is saturated with people who have been turned on profitably, respectably and creatively by LSD.

Fahey: Is there any future for the psychedelics, in either medical research or social applications? Or do you see any in the future?

Leary: Well, I think the medical profession, we all know that, is totally corrupt. Every doctor now is a corporation. And medical research in this country is government-sponsored and government-funded or funded by large drug companies. I think that government corporations should keep their hands off the brain change substances. The idea of a government-sponsored, authorized, doctor giving LSD to mess around with people's brains is the ultimate Orwellian nightmare. The operational access to and use of your own mind and brain is a highly individual choice. Just as the right-wing government and politician's religions want to control women's reproductive organs, they want to control brains. The key, here, is that... the adult American should be able to do with their mind or their body what she or he wants to.

Fahey: Where are we in the process of expanding our horizons? What do you see as the next wave, or the current wave?

Leary: By "we" I assume you mean the human race; which always means individuals. The use of multimedia electronic software -- CD-ROM discs, audiovisual disks -- will put into the hands of every Third World kid, every inner-city kid in America the ability to boot up, activate, turn on their right brain, to reprogram their left brain. The use of electrons for brain-change and for brain-reprogramming has been perfected in the form of the television commercial. And I totally admire a thousand years of the Catholic Church, using jewels, organs, rose windows and that sort of stuff to, uhh. What we're understanding now is that the human brain is a photovore. That means that the human brain lives on light.

Fahey: How so? Explain that to someone having difficulty understanding the concept.

Leary: Every metaphor approximating the visionary experience is optical: illumination, revelation, insight, perspective, reflection. Right down the list. I'm too senile to remember all of them, but punch "illumination" up into your computer thesaurus, and you'll get it. Light has always been the statement of the ultimate brain experience: Tibetans talk about the White Light of the Void. Dante's Heaven was total white... the Egyptian religions, sun. These are primitive anticipations of what we now have available. The human brain is starved for electronic stimulation; the human brain is addicted to light. We can't control the sun, but through diamonds and rose windows...

We're now using electrons to create what's called "virtual reality," electronic realities, which mean brain realities of course, because for the brain to use the body to communicate in terms of words -- nine muscles of your vocal chords to create the words that I am now, or printing presses to print out book -- is extremely crude, when you consider the human brain can deal with 150 million signals a second. We use oral and hand tools, mechanical forms of communication, basically for material purposes; but

we're now into the concept of direct brain exchange or brain communication, on screens. I think perhaps as important as LSD is a new device called the video projector; and what this means is that you have a small hand-held device that you can plug in a videotape, anywhere you go -- which means you can bring one, I can bring one, and on our wall we can mix our electronic environments: you can have George Bush giving a speech on your projector, I can be putting in Madonna taking off her clothes. I'm kidding, of course.

The video projector is an extraordinary empowerment of the individual. We can no longer sit in front of the television screen like amoeboid, just sucking up what they're putting there. We can now move around and put on the walls what we have stored in our CD-ROM computers.

The empowerment of the individual implied in video projectors, of course, was not understood by the engineers who designed it; but it is thrilling. And in retrospect, you see, it was entirely predictable. Forty years ago, you had to go to a theater to see electrons sprayed on a big screen. Then you had television, and you could sit in your living room and you could have your own little screen. Now, with the multiplication of cable and the clicker, you can lie in bed and change your screen; now, with wall-sized screens, operating on a hand-held projector is just the ultimate empowerment of the individual to communicate brain-to-brain.²

² <http://www.fargonebooks.com/leary.html> Timothy Leary: The Far Gone Interviews by Todd Brendan Fahey Salt Lake City, Utah, September 28, 1992.

Chapter Eleven



When they all finished reading the article, Natalie proclaimed. “This is fascinating! Given the work we’re doing Mac, even though the interview took place years ago, it sure seems relevant today, don’t you think?”

“I do. But that stuff about the medical community is a little extreme, isn’t it?”

“Don’t be so naive, Mac,” Kim scolded. “You know darn well that money is everything!”

“Yeah, Mac. Don’t be so dumb,” Scott followed. “Why do you think that money started out as something really shinny, like gold and silver and then precious gemstones. It was all pleasing to the eye. It all glittered.”

“Yeah Mac,” Natalie added, imitating the kids.

“Okay, I’m enlightened now,” Mac laughed. He checked the clock on the wall and realized that it was now approaching 5:15 p.m..

“If I don’t want Sis to punch my lights out, we’ve got to head out now, or we’ll be late,” Mac said to Natalie.

“Natalie, do you want to come, too?” Kim asked.

“Thanks Kim, but I have to head to Scentorama tonight for the late shift.”

Mac and the kids got home by 6:00, just as Tommie requested. They stopped off on the way to pick up some ice cream for dessert.

The kids had such a busy and exciting day with Mac and Natalie, they forgot that they also had the evening to look forward to. Once home, the realization that they were going to get the new game, hit them like a bolt of lightning.

Remembering that Jack would soon be there, Kim rushed up to her bedroom to get ready.

“Mac, wait until you see this set-up! It’s unlike anything on the market today,” Scott said, as he and Mac rushed down to the game room.

As Mac looked over the equipment, he commented, “Man, I’m impressed. This is some piece of technology. And you say it works totally independent of a keyboard or joystick?”

“Yes, it really connects us to the game. Real sci-fi stuff... like Leary said.”

“Can you demonstrate it for me?”

“Kim, get your butt down here! Let’s show Mac how this skin works!”

Kim finished putting on her lipstick and headed to the game room.

Scott noticed the difference and couldn't pass up the opportunity to tease Kim. "All dressed up and nowhere to go? Is this for Jack?"

Kim was crushed.

"Jack the game guy?" Mac asked.

"Shut-up Scott!" Kim quickly came back with a reason for the change. "Amy and I are going out tonight."

"Where to?" Scott asked. He was confident she didn't have a legitimate answer.

"None of your business."

Mac knew a diversion was necessary.

"Kim, could you help Scott get this game going? I really want to see how it works."

Scott got into the skin and then Kim engaged the software. Suddenly, Scott's body moved erratically and he began to talk to himself.

"What the?" Mac pondered out loud.

Kim uncovered the mystery and explained to Mac, what Scott was probably experiencing at the time.

Scott had the game on Indy speed, and within a couple of minutes, he was thrown from the chair and onto the floor.

"What's happening now?" Mac shouted.

"I'm guessing he crashed."

"Crashed?"

"Yeah. You actually think you're in one. It's pretty scary," Kim explained and shut down the program.

"Holy exhaust smoke! That was intense!" Scott said, as he took his visor off and shook his head. He was a little dazed from the experience.

"Are you all right?" Mac asked, helping Scott get up and out of the skin.

"Maybe you shouldn't have done that since you hit your head on the floor this morning," Kim remarked.

"Too late now," Scott replied. "Don't tell Mom. She won't let me try the new game. Besides, Uncle Mac is here. He'll watch me. You are a doctor, aren't you?"

"Almost," Mac admitted. "But Kim is right. Maybe you shouldn't do this tonight."

"I'm fine!" Scott exclaimed. "Now don't say a word to Mom. You promised!"

"Supper's ready!" Tommie called out.

They headed upstairs to find Chris and Tommie waiting for them. Dinner was laid out on the kitchen table. Tommie had gone all out, serving roast beef and all the fixings. They were about ten minutes into supper, when the doorbell rang.

'Jack!' Kim thought. She kept her cool and let Scott get up from the table first. He rushed to the door and flung it open.

There stood Jack. He was wearing a T-shirt with a picture of a naked guy on it.

Kim started to laugh. She couldn't contain herself. She'd know that tush anywhere. It was Scott. 'Jack must have printed it off the Internet last night. There's more to Jack than just his great looks,' Kim thought.

With all the excitement of the previous night, no one had told Scott what had happened. "Hey, where'd you get that?" he asked.

"I see the camera likes you, Scott," Mac said, as he, Tommie and Chris strolled over to the entrance to greet Jack. All eyes were fixed on the T-shirt.

"I thought you guys would like the T-shirt," Jack offered.

Tommie didn't look all that pleased. The pheromones didn't seem to be working for her today. Jack got the unspoken message and stripped the shirt off his back. Chris and Mac immediately sucked in their guts. The pheromones had now fully and completely kicked in, and Tommie and Kim's eyes almost popped out of their heads. The show was soon over, as Jack pulled out another T-shirt that had been hanging out of his back pocket. He yanked it over his head and covered up his perfect pecks.

'Shows over,' Tommie thought.

Now that the shirt and the pecks were no longer the center of attention, Mac and Chris were able to exhale. Mac finally looked up and recognized the stranger's face. "Jack! For crying out loud. I had no idea you were the 'games' guy. I thought you were in San Diego at the Marine Institute. What the heck brought you back here?"

"It's a long boring story, Mac. And you? I thought once you finished your undergrad you were on your way to..." Jack started to say something, but Mac cut him off.

"Never got there. Changed direction. I'm doing medical research now. I'm working for Better Health."

Jack got the message, realized the topic was off limits, and clammed up. The Campbells were so excited that Jack and Mac knew each other; they didn't pick up on what had just happened.

"Jack, have you eaten?" asked Tommie. "Join us."

"I'd love to Mrs. Campbell."

"Please, I told you before, call me Tommie. I'm too young to be called Mrs. Anything."

'Great, now Mom is flirting with Jack... again,' Kim thought.

Jack noticed Kim and commented. "Kim, you look different tonight."

'Different. Yesterday I was a kid, and today, I'm different. What am I doing wrong here? Maybe I should just give it up.'

"It's an optical illusion," Scott announced.

Kim wanted to kill him.

"I'm only going to say this once. Act civilized or take a long walk," Tommie interjected. "Now, let's get back to dinner." The family returned to the kitchen, sat down and ate. Dinner was fun and full of reminiscing. The family was surprised at some of Jack's stories about Mac. They were certain that Jack was really thinking of Uncle Tim, but he assured them, that Mac was a wild man on campus.

'What happened?' they all wondered.

It was going on 7:30 p.m. by the time supper was finished.

"Are you ready?" Jack asked, referring to setting up the new game.

"Yeah!" Kim and Scott both shouted.

"Okay! To the game room!" Jack announced.

Like lemmings off a cliff, the Campbells and their guests scurried downstairs. Jack immediately began the process of setting up the new game and Kim and Scott put on the skin.

The anticipation was killing them.

Chapter Twelve



“Jack, did you get any relevant information on the game or the developers?” Scott asked. He always liked to know about the people behind the games. It was helpful to compare to other games they’d designed, what their style was, etc.

“Sorry, but there doesn’t seem to be a game history or manual. This one is a mystery. We usually don’t do business this way. Frankly, I don’t even know where this game was developed. Not even the continent!”

“You mean you don’t even have an instruction book... no cheat sheets?” Mac observed. “That’s a little odd, isn’t it?”

“No sweat,” replied Scott. “I’ll figure it out as I play.”

“Okay, here goes,” Jack said, as he started the game and engaged Kim and Scott.

The visual screen on the visor went from black to red. Some odd images flashed before the kids’ eyes.

“Jack, there are some symbols on the screen,” Kim announced.

“Really? What kind of symbols?”

“I don’t know, but they look Asian. Kinda like Scott’s birthmark,” Kim replied.

“What is this obsession with sacroiliacs?” Mac asked.

“Sack of maniacs?” Kim replied.

“Can it, Kim,” Scott barked. “Like yours isn’t weird, too? That’s what the symbol looked like. YOUR butt brand.”

Both Kim and Scott had odd shaped birthmarks on their posterior.

“Okay you two, enough, you promised,” Tommie said. “And if I hear one more reference to posteriors, you’ll be grounded for a week.”

Jack was curious about the game symbols AND the kids’ butt brands as Scott called them. He asked the kids, “Can you draw them?”

“They’re gone,” Scott remarked. “Start the game over and we’ll see if we can reproduce them.”

Mac found paper and pencils and handed them to the kids.

Jack restarted the game.

“Freeze frame!” Scott shouted.

Jack stopped the game, hoping the image would remain in the kids’ field of vision.

“They disappeared again! But I think I can draw it,” Kim announced.

Not to be outdone, Scott declared, “Me too!”

Scott and Kim took off their visors, closed their eyes to conjure up their particular image again, and drew the symbols as they remembered them. When they were finished, they compared drawings.

“Hey, these are quite different!” Scott exclaimed.

“Yours looks like my birthmark!” Kim shouted.

“Yours looks like mine!”

“That’s what’s on my T-shirt!” Jack declared.

“This is just weird,” Tommie mumbled. “I never thought about those birthmarks before today. Now it looks like everyone’s thinking about them. What gives?”

“Do you think they mean something? Are we special or something?” Kim inquired.

Chris replied, “They’re birthmarks. The resemblance to these symbols or whatever they are is simply coincidence. If you look at a cloud long enough you can see almost anything. That’s what you two are doing with this birthmark thing.”

His argument made sense, but the kids still had other ideas. “Let’s photocopy our butts and compare the symbols,” Scott suggested.

Mac started to laugh. He loved the way the kids thought. It reminded him of his own crazy days as a teen.

Tommie decided to stop the silliness. “Enough already. Aren’t we here to try a new game?”

Jack came to her rescue. “Oh my gosh. It is getting late. We need to get on with the game.”

The kids were persistent.

“Can we scan these and put them on our web site? Maybe someone can identify them,” Scott suggested.

In an attempt to meet his time table and satisfy Tommie, Jack quickly replied, “Good idea Scott. I’ll post a general query on the Internet tonight, too. Now, can we get back to the game!”

“Okay,” both Kim and Scott replied, sounding a bit disappointed... until...

As Jack re-booted the game, Chris leaned over to Tommie and whispered. “If I’m not mistaken, those symbols look like the ones on the coins that Danny pulled out of the harbor.”

Tommie shook her head in disbelief. “NOW who’s being ridiculous? Just drop it.”

“Okay, Kids. Game on,” Jack declared.

Scott and Kim both appeared in the game simultaneously. They were in a large room with a selection of doors. There was nothing to do in the room, so they both headed toward different doors.

Kim chose a door that had music coming from behind it. Once through, she began to feel extremely good but she didn’t know why. ‘This could be addictive,’ she thought. ‘I love this feeling!’

Then, out of nowhere, Jack appeared.

‘What kind of game is this?’ Kim wondered. ‘Can Mom and Dad see?’ Jack walked right up to her and laid a big kiss on her.

Kim became very self-conscious. She thought she should get out of there before something else happened. This was just too weird for a conservative girl like Kim. It’s one thing to think about something like this, but it’s quite another to have it actually happen.

“Jack, I want to get out of this!” Kim exclaimed, removing her visor.

“So, what’s the game like?” Jack asked.

Kim’s response wasn’t what they expected. “Could you guys see what I saw? Was the computer screen playing along?”

“No, this experience is all yours,” Jack declared. “There is no way anyone else can see or experience what you do. The game is completely customized to you.”

Kim was relieved and scared at the same time. She wondered how far this experience could go.

“Are you sure we don’t have any other information on the purpose of this game or the developers?” Kim asked.

“Scott’s enjoying it,” Tommie said. “Look at all the different emotions he seems to be going through. It must be a lot of fun! So what’s it like?”

Kim didn’t answer so they focused their attention on Scott. He was flailing his arms about, running on the spot, jumping, jerking his body and shouting for the ball.

“He must be in a basketball game!” Tommie guessed. Five minutes had passed when they realized that Scott was sweating profusely.

“We need to give him a break!” Tommie told Jack. “He’ll get dehydrated if he keeps this up.”

Before Jack could respond, Scott screamed, “Nooooo! Hey! Who turned the game off!” Scott took off his visor and looked around the room at everyone. He seemed very upset.

“The game shut itself down,” Jack replied. “I told you, it has an automatic end-game when the player’s vitals hit certain predetermined levels.”

“But I want to play more!” Scott exclaimed.

“Not right now. Your body needs to cool down. Like I said, this system is safe, it has to be.”

“So, what was your experience like?” Chris asked.

“If I didn’t know better I’d swear I was on the holo-deck of the USS Enterprise.”

“Everything has some Star Trek connection in Scott’s world,” Kim joked.

“Kapla!” Scott shouted.

Mac reacted to Jack’s statement, and had totally tuned out the kids’ banter. He turned to Jack, interrupted Scott’s attempt at swearing in Klingon and stated... somewhat cryptically, “Safe... that’s what Ares said about that...,” Mac said, stopping himself before he went any further.

“Did you get invited to his reception next week?” Jack asked.

“Yeah, did you?” Mac replied.

“Who are you guys talking about?” Scott asked.

“Ares from MogulChip,” Jack answered.

“Yeah, we all went to university together,” Mac admitted.

“Wow! You never told us that!” Scott shouted.

“Nothing to tell. I can’t stand the guy.”

“Me neither,” Jack confessed. “So why do you think we were invited?”

“To rub his success in our faces!” Mac exclaimed.

Scott started to strip off the skin. It was soaked.

“So how was the game?” Jack asked.

“Awesome! I was in a kick-butt game with Wilt Chamberlain, Larry Bird, Larry

Westlake, Dennis Rodman, Michael Jordan... Man, it was B Ball Nirvana!”

Tommie was concerned. “Scott are you okay? You look tired.”

“Now that you mention it, I am really thirsty and I think I need to sit down. My legs feel like rubber!” Scott replied. “Kim, what was your game like? Who did you play with?”

“Never mind,” Kim replied.

“You got stuck playing with a bunch of girls, didn’t you,” Scott reasoned.

“For your information, I wasn’t playing basketball. I was doing something else.”

“What?” Scott continued to dig.

“Never mind I said!” Kim was losing her patience with him.

“What’s the big mystery? Were you doing something you weren’t supposed to?”

Scott pushed.

Mac, Tommie and Chris were curious now. “Yeah, Kim, what were you doing?”

It was getting late. Jack didn’t have time for another round of ‘bug my sibling’. He could see that Kim was really uncomfortable and decided to bail her out. “I’ll try to find out something on those symbols. I’ll check in with you tomorrow night if that’s all right with your parents?”

“It’s fine with us,” Chris replied.

“Okay, tomorrow night it is then.”

They all headed upstairs and accompanied Jack to the foyer.

“See you tomorrow Jack,” Kim said, as she opened the door for him.

As Jack walked out, Scott, not so quietly, whispered in Kim’s ear. “See you tomorrow, honey.”

“Shut-up!” Kim scolded Scott.

“Make me!”

Jack was already out the door when Mac announced, “I’d love to stay and watch the fights, but I’ve got an early morning.”

“Sorry Mac,” Kim said. “Scott can be SO immature.”

Tommie and Chris shook their heads and rolled their eyes.

“See what you have to look forward to when you and Natalie have kids,” Tommie teased.

Mac laughed off his sister’s comments and quickly rushed out the open door. He’d had enough family for one night. With the guests gone, the Campbells headed to the kitchen to get the kids something to drink. They were back to normal, with no distractions, no one to impress, no pheromones, and no one’s attention or approval to compete for... back to being themselves.

When Jack got home, he scanned in the symbols and posted them on a number of different Internet sites, asking, “Does anyone out there know what this means? If so, please contact Jack-in-the-Box@AddictiveGames.Com. Urgent,” and waited.

Chapter Thirteen



Kim and Scott finished their snacks and drinks in a hurry. They still had work to do. They had overheard Chris's comments earlier and were determined to solve the mystery themselves. They decided the place to start was with Danny.

"Dad, let's see if Danny recognizes these symbols," Kim suggested.

"So, they DID hear you," Tommie said.

"As a matter of fact, I was thinking the same thing. I'll give him a call. If he's home we can email the drawings to him," Chris reasoned as he called Danny. Fortunately, Danny was home and was captivated as Chris described the strange symbols they encountered.

"Send me the email," Danny said. "I'll look at it right away."

The family hurried down to the game room and sent the symbols to Danny. Danny immediately pulled up the email while still talking on the phone.

"I've got a network of colleagues on the professional anthropological Xnet sites. Is it okay if I forward your email on?"

"Sure," Chris replied.

"I'll call you as soon as I know anything," Danny promised. He hung up the phone and sent out emails. No one expected a response, so Scott and Kim headed upstairs, Tommie pattered around the kitchen, while Chris sat down at the table and read the latest TechTime.

Within minutes Danny got a phone call. "Danny, these symbols are the mirror images of the coins you showed me."

"I thought they looked familiar. It's been a while since I even thought about those coins," Danny admitted.

"Well, I still haven't been able to determine their origin or a precise dating of their minting," his contact confessed. "I'm expecting some test results back from the European Space Agency."

"Man, you DO have connections," Danny said.

"I'll let you know as soon as I hear something."

Danny said good-bye and immediately called Chris.

RING... RING...

Chris recognized the caller ID and put the phone on speaker so Tommie could listen in.

“Danny how are you. What’s up?”

“It looks like we have another mystery,” Danny replied and proceeded to tell them about the response.

Chris and Tommie were disappointed that Danny didn’t have a definitive answer.

“You might as well tell the kids what we just heard,” Tommie directed.

Chris headed upstairs. When he got outside their bedroom doors, he could hear Kim and Scott talking in Scott’s bedroom. Chris opened the door and announced, “I just heard from Danny. He said the symbols look like the mirror images of the ones on the coins. Danny’s got some contact still checking them out.”

“Dad, do you think there’s some connection between the coins and the symbols and our tushes?” Scott asked.

“Your mom and I always did think you two were alien children. Maybe we’ll soon have the proof.”

“Funny,” Kim replied. “But seriously, Dad.”

“I AM being serious. And now I’m even more serious, time for bed.”

Kim got up and walked to her bedroom. The kids had already taken care of business and launched their own queries on their KidsOpinionsCount.com site. Maybe one of their members could help.

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

“What the?” Scott said. He opened his eyes and saw his computer screen flashing. He glanced at his clock. It was four in the morning. The light emanating from the monitor guided him to the computer. He managed to avoid the pile of clothes that were still lying in the middle of the floor. He sat down in his chair and pulled up the message. It was his scorch mail.

He wondered what was so important that Alex, Amy or Kim had to email him in the middle of the night. Scott got a big surprise when he saw that the email was from Mr. Klein.

“Why is he writing me? How did he get access to my scorch mail?” Scott wondered out loud and opened the attachment. He didn’t get much of an answer to his questions.

The message was short and didn’t make sense to Scott. He messaged Mr. Klein to ask him to explain it. When he didn’t get an immediate response, he decided to wake Kim up and see if she could figure it out. Scott stealthily made his way to her bedroom, opened the door and quietly crept to her bedside. He bent over Kim and whispered, “Kim, wake-up.” She bolted up and they banged heads.

“OOOOW!” Kim exclaimed. She opened her eyes and rubbed her forehead. The moonlight was shining through her window and she could clearly see Scott, right there, in her face. “Why did you hit me on the head?”

Scott was in pain, too. “I didn’t hit you. You hit me!”

“What are you doing here?”

“Come to my room. I got a really weird email. I can’t figure it out!”

“Get out of here. I’ll look at it in the morning.” Kim lied back down and pulled the covers up over her head.

Scott was persistent. He yanked the covers off of her bed and exclaimed, “Kim, it’s on our scorch mail, and it’s from Mr. Klein. Do I have your attention NOW?”

Kim leapt out of bed and headed to Scott’s room. “This I gotta see! What’s he want?”

“That’s why I got you up! I can’t figure out what he’s trying to tell me.”
Back in Scott’s room, they sat in front of the computer and read the message together.
It said,

Where is chaos? You must find chaos.

Kim scratched her head and confessed, “I have no idea what this means!”
“Do you think he replied to the query we posted on the symbols?”
“I don’t know. We posted two different symbols. Do you think the other two were for order and entropy? You know, the Laws of the Universe?” Kim suggested.
“Good question.”
“Email him back and ask?”
Scott pointed to his inbox. “Look. I tried to already. It came back, wrong address.”
“Should we tell Mom and Dad?” Kim wondered out loud.
“Do you think they want us to go looking for chaos?”
“Good point.”
“Maybe this is just one of those things we need to store away in our brains and it’ll all make sense later,” Scott offered.
“This is all just so bizarre. I think I’m still in that darned game,” Kim thought out loud.
“You never did tell me what your game was like. How come?” Scott asked.
“Because it was too embarrassing.”
“Tell me. No one else is here. I’ll keep your secret.”
“You absolutely promise?”
“Yes, I won’t tell anyone. I owe you for not telling Mom and Dad about Alex’s exoswim.”
Kim felt guilty, because she HAD told them, but she didn’t let on, and replied, “No Scotstortion?”
Scott laughed. “I won’t tell anyone and I won’t use it for blackmail.”
“Okay. I’ll tell you. But it’s weird. When I was in the game, I thought I’d like some hot guy in the room with me... and then Jack appeared. And then he kissed me. I got out of the room right away. It was like whatever I thought, I experienced! I’m not going back in there.”
“That was cuckoo. Your secret’s safe with me,” Scott replied. “I was thinking about the basketball playoffs and I guess that’s what triggered my experience.”
“You should try it again, Kim. You love white water rafting. Think about Kicking Horse River. That could be a real rush.”
“I don’t know Scott.”
“Look, give it a try.”
“Maybe I’ll try it again, next time Jack comes over,” Kim said.
“Try it now!” Scott insisted. “I’ll run the game. If you want out, I’ll shut it down, right away. What have you got to lose?”
“Maybe you’re right, Scott. Maybe it can be fun. Now that you mentioned it, I could be walking in the mountains, water skiing, snowboarding, shopping Rodeo Drive, anything I can put my mind to.” Kim was getting pumped to get back into the game.
They snuck downstairs and Scott helped her get the skin on. He started the game and

Kim walked through her first door. Kim soon began talking to herself, squealing in delight and jumping up and down and sideways in her seat... flailing her arms. Considerable time passed when Scott heard, "Ah Scott, did you have to do that? I was just in the middle of a class 4 rapid. It was kick-butt at Kicking Horse!"

"I didn't do anything. The game must have shut you down. You must have reached your limits, I guess."

"How long have I been playing this?" Kim asked.

"Over an hour," Scott replied.

"Man, I must have gone in and out of ten doors!"

"Ten?" Scott asked.

"Right. When I was finished with one experience, I left that room and went through another door. I'd think about something else and there I'd be. It was really easy to control and I even got to go to places I'd only read about in a book or seen on TV."

"This game will take over the world!" Scott exclaimed.

"It's pretty addictive. Maybe this is part of The Conglomerate's skinny scheme!" Kim announced.

"That's a little extreme, Kim. But with all the strange stuff going on, you might just be right. Maybe that's why they haven't taken any revenge on us. They're using us again," Scott proposed.

"Now who's being crazy," Kim barked.

"Think about it, Kim," Scott challenged.

"We can think about this in the morning. I'm brain dead," Kim admitted.

They went to bed and fell fast asleep. They were so tired they didn't even dream. This was odd, because they almost always dreamt.

Chapter Fourteen



Friday morning rolled around.

It was 7:00 a.m. and Jack headed for work. On his way, he stopped off at Moonbucks. He dropped in every day for a double shot of chocolate milk and a muffin.

As Jack took the last bite of his muffin, a voice behind him inquired, “Jack-in-the-box?”

Jack wheeled around quickly and almost spit his muffin out. There stood a tall, rugged young man, about his age. He was powerful-looking with dark penetrating eyes and long, dark hair. Under his black leather coat, he wore a large silver and turquoise belt which had a sheath attached. His physical presence was imposing. Jack felt a shiver run up and down his spine.

“Who are you?” Jack asked.

“We cannot speak freely in this place. Would you walk with me for a while?” the stranger asked.

“No! Who are you and what do you want?”

“Again, I would like to leave this place before I tell you that.”

Jack was an imposing figure himself, so he wasn’t frightened. He was curious though, and it got the better of him.

“I’m heading to my car. You can walk with me. Now, what do you want?”

As the two men exited Moonbucks, the stranger spoke. “You posted a query on the Internet. I am here to respond.”

“How did you find me?” Jack replied.

“You are predictable.”

“What’s your name?” asked Jack.

“Whatever you like it to be.”

“What kind of line is that?” Jack asked.

The stranger did not respond.

“Could you at least tell me what the symbols mean?” Jack asked.

The stranger replied. “This is an ancient script. It has been silent for millennia.”

“Can you tell me what the symbols mean?” Jack asked again.

“They simply mean order and entropy, two of the laws of the Universe,” explained the stranger.

“So why did you feel it was necessary to tell me this in person? No big deal,” Jack

said nonchalantly.

“On the contrary. It IS a, big deal, as you put it. Where did this script appear?” asked the stranger.

“It’s in the prologue of a video game,” Jack explained. “And, apparently a reasonable facsimile of them appear on the backend of a couple of teenagers I know.”

Jack bent over to pick up a quarter that was lying on the sidewalk. When he stood up, the stranger was gone.

“What a bizzaro!” Jack said to himself. “Order, entropy, secret ancient language. You never know what kind of nuts you’ll contact on the Internet.”

Jack headed off to work.

Meanwhile, at the Campbells,
RING... RING... RING...

“I’ll get it, Mom!” Kim shouted out.

The call was from a Eurasian computer manufacturer located in Hungary. They wanted the KidsOpinionsCount.com site to test and write a review on their new products. The KidsOpinionsCount’s European and Asian memberships were expanding rapidly with new languages coming on-line. Kim thought it was an excellent opportunity. She made an executive decision without consulting the others, and agreed to try the new equipment.

“Who was on the phone?” Tommie asked Kim.

“A new Eurasian computer supplier in Hungary. They promised to send their hardware and software for us to test.”

“What? You told them to send it?”

“Sure. Why not?”

“How did they find out about us?”

“I’ll bet it was Grandma and Grandpa. The last postcard we got from them was from Hungary, wasn’t it?”

“Yes, you’re right. But you should have consulted with the rest of us before you agreed. We need to call them back. We need more details than what you just told me.”

“I don’t know how to reach them,” Kim admitted.

“You didn’t get a name or number?”

“No. I was so excited to do something from Europe, I just figured you guys would be too. What’s the problem?”

“What’s the plan?” Tommie asked.

“They said they’ll ship us a full set-up tomorrow. These guys are serious.”

“Okay, since we can’t do anything about it now. We’ll just wait until we see what comes. If their agreement, which I’m sure they’ll send along with the equipment, if it’s satisfactory, we’ll do it, otherwise, we just ship the stuff back. Agreed?”

“Agreed,” Kim returned.

Tommie was annoyed that Kim didn’t consult her, but she understood her logic. Tommie suspected that her parents probably put the company up to it as well. They had a habit of pulling strings behind the scenes and not taking credit.

“Kim, I need to head over to RL’s office. He and the Federal Prosecutor have some new discovery he needs me to look over.”

“Hey, Mom, did you and Mr. Molina ever get that Arnold guy to return your calls and

emails?”

“No. It’s the strangest thing. We thought he was going to sue HucksterCo, just like us, but it seemed that as soon as he spilled the beans to us, he changed his mind.”

“Why do you think he did that?”

“Don’t know, can’t say,” Tommie replied.

“I guess if he won’t talk to you, you’ll never know,” Kim said.

“I suspect he might have been paid off,” Tommie admitted.

“Really?”

“Yeah. There’s been a few witnesses who have decided not to testify for people suing HucksterCo.”

“Did Huckster use the no-speaks stop them?”

“I don’t know, no one will speak,” Tommie replied.

“When’s the trial?”

“Next week. I can’t believe it. RL says the Federal Prosecutor has a good case, but he just can’t find the smoking gun.”

Scott walked into the kitchen and over-heard the last part of the sentence. “Someone got shot?”

Chapter Fifteen



“No, it’s an expression. Where did you come from?”

“Downstairs. So what’s the gun bit?”

“The smoking gun? It’s evidence to put the icing on the cake, so to speak.”

“You’ll find it. I’m sure of it,” Scott added.

“The trial is next week. We need to pull a rabbit out of a hat, fast. According to RL, the case is good, but we really wish we could use Arnold somehow.”

“I can’t wait til the trial,” Kim announced.

“I’m glad Mrs. Hardy decided to take your whole class. The play idea is great. You never told me how that whole thing came about.”

“I hate to admit it, but it was actually Alex’s big mouth that did it.”

“No kidding. What’s he got to do with school plays?”

“Well, he was talking like an idiot one day,” Kim began.

“What’s new with that?” Tommie laughed.

“He was not,” Scott barked. “He was trying to avoid telling the truth about the ETE interview. He was distracting the class.”

“It started way before then, Scott. Remember when he was talking like he was from Shakespeare’s England and making fun of the school plays and Mrs. Hardy told him he’d have to be in the next one.”

“I wish I’d seen that,” Tommie said.

“Yeah, he never thought she was serious until the day that he met Melissa.”

Scott interrupted. “That’s when he covered for all of us and acted like an idiot so no one would ask more questions about the interview.”

“I was getting to that,” Kim said.

“I’ll bet you were,” Scott replied.

“Okay, so how did the play come about?” Tommie asked.

Before Scott could answer, Kim began. “Scott’s right. Alex was acting like an idiot to distract the kids. But he went way too far, and Mrs. Hardy took him seriously. He started to brag that he was going to be a big actor. Then she reminded him he was going to act in the school play. Then he told Mrs. Hardy that he wouldn’t act in a play unless it was relevant. So she told him he should write one. She nailed him.”

“So, Scott, is that what happened?” Tommie asked.

“Yup. That’s it. But Kim was the one that suggested what the topic was and that we

should go to the trial.”

“Thanks, Scott.”

“No thanks necessary. It was a great idea. And Chuck Reimer, you know the producer of the movie, well he’s going to help us.”

“This is news!” Tommie declared.

“Yeah, he retired and he’s hanging out with Mrs. Hardy.”

“No.”

“Yeah. They were friends in the sixties or something.”

“If I can help, just let me know.” Tommie looked at her watch. “I better skidaddle.”

“See you later, Mom,” Scott said and headed downstairs to play the new game and look for Chaos.

Kim headed upstairs to her bedroom to get away from Scott and check the KOC emails. She had a ton waiting for a response. So much for the day off. While Kim worked, Scott played.

It was approaching 2:00 p.m. and Kim still wasn’t finished the last of the emails. “Scott!” she hollered from her bedroom, “There’s work to do on the site! You need to help!”

Scott didn’t reply.

“I’m going to drag him away from that game,” she declared. Kim marched downstairs to the game room. Before she got to the bottom of the stairs, she shouted again, “Are you deaf! I said there’s work to do.”

When she reached the bottom of the stairs and looked into the game room, she noticed Scott, laying face down on the floor with the visor still on his head. Kim assumed he was immersed in some strange situation. He was flitching and twitching and jerking around. He was also making strange noises.

“Scott, get up!” Kim barked as she shook him.

Scott suddenly became rigid. He was like a statue.

Kim rolled him over on his back and removed the visor. His eyes were wide open. He stared up at her but didn’t acknowledge her presence.

“What did this game do to you? Are you having an epileptic attack? Scott wake up!”

DING... DONG...

The doorbell rang, but Kim didn’t acknowledge it. She was too wrapped up in Scott’s predicament.

As it turned out, the ringer was Amy, and when no one answered, she opened the door and let herself in. She knew Kim was expecting her. When Amy reached the top of the stairs, she called out, “Kim! It’s me! Are you here?”

Kim yelled back. “Amy! I’m down here! Something’s wrong with Scott!”

“So what’s new?” Amy laughed and headed downstairs.

“No, really! I think I have to call 911! Amy, hurry up!”

When Amy reached the bottom of the stairs, she saw Kim kneeling down on the floor, crouched over Scott’s motionless body. “Is he breathing?” Amy asked. “Does he need CPR?”

“I don’t know. He’s just staring up into space. He’s freaking me out. It’s like he’s in a trance.”

“He’s probably faking it,” Amy replied, confident that Scott was pulling an Alex.

“No! He really might be having an absence seizure,” Kim countered.

“Huh?”

Kim explained. “It’s a kind of epileptic attack. Epilepsy runs in our family.”

“Oh,” Amy replied. “You never told me”

“It’s not something we announce to the world.”

Out of the corner of her eye, Amy saw Scott smirk. She knew he was fooling now, and acted accordingly. “Maybe you need to slap his face to bring him around. Or pound him on the chest like they do on those E R shows. Or put his finger in an electrical socket and shock him back to life!”

“No! We need to get an ambulance! Stay here with him while I call,” Kim directed. She got up and scurried toward the phone.

Amy figured now was the time to give the chest thump a try, and see how far Scott was willing to take his little act. Amy clasped her hands in front of her, made a double fist, and raised her arms high above Scott’s chest. As she started to swing downward... miracle of miracles.

“Stop!” Scott screamed, as he grabbed Amy’s arms. “Why didn’t you try the mouth-to-mouth first?”

Kim realized Scott was fine and hung up the phone.

“You freak! I knew known nothing was wrong with you,” Amy shouted. “Kim, he’s fine, he’s just being a jerk!”

Scott was still lying on the floor. But now he was grinning ear to ear. “Gotcha!” he said.

“What? You scared me to death, you twit,” Kim exclaimed as she hovered over him. “Now you’re gonna pay!”

“What are you going to do? Nag me to death?” Scott said as he began to push himself up off the floor.

“I’ve got a better idea.” Amy pushed Scott back down to the floor. “Let’s tickle him til he cries Uncle!”

Scott remained on his back. “Bring it on girls!” he taunted them.

Chapter Sixteen



“You’re in for it now!” Kim announced.

Meanwhile, Melissa had also walked into the house. She heard the skirmish downstairs and decided to investigate. “Kim! Amy! Is that you guys?”

“Down here, Melissa,” Kim answered.

Melissa rushed downstairs to find Kim and Amy perched on top of Scott.

“I don’t know what’s going on here, but count me in,” Melissa said, plunking herself on top of him as well. “So what are we doing?”

“Tickling him til he pees in his pants!” Amy shouted.

“All right!” Melissa replied.

By now the girls had positioned themselves strategically so that, Kim was sitting on Scott’s legs and had his feet, Amy was sitting on his chest and had his armpits, and Melissa had his knees. They were on him like white on rice.

“Uncle!” Scott cried for mercy, as he squirmed to escape their grip. Whatever you guys want! Stop it!”

Tommie and Chris arrived home from work, just in time to hear all the commotion. They ran downstairs to see what was happening. Chris was the first to react. “Three on one! That’s not very good odds, Scott,” he laughed. “What did you do to get into this mess?”

Tommie decided to join in on the fun and insisted, “Hold him still girls! I want a piece of him!”

“Dad! Help!” Scott blurted out.

“Okay, okay, fun’s over, Ladies,” Chris said, as he moved in to pull the girls, including Tommie, off of Scott. “Don’t you girls have some practicing to do?”

“Okay, Mr. Campbell,” Amy replied. “We do have more important things to do. Let’s go girls.”

Amy, Melissa and Kim were playing in Saturday’s big three-on-three tournament. They headed out to the driveway to shoot hoops. On the way out, Amy asked Kim, “Where’s Max?”

“He’s on the job,” Kim said.

“What?” Melissa asked.

“He’s doing the deed,” Kim returned.

“Kim are you on drugs? Where’s Max?” Amy asked again.

“He’s making babies! Don’t you guys get it?”

“I get that you’re uptight talking about sex,” Amy said. “But I still don’t know where Max is.”

“He’s breeding. He’s…”

“Oh, I get it. He’s a doggie gigolo,” Melissa teased.

Kim was very uncomfortable with the conversation. The girls had their fun and decided to drop it.

The rest of the afternoon, Melissa, Amy and Kim, worked on their plays and strategized about how they’d crush each of the teams they were playing against Saturday.

Scott did some KidsOpinionsCount work, while Tommie and Chris left to do some grocery shopping. By the time Chris and Tommie returned, the girls were chowing down energy bars and chatting about shoes. Chris and Tommie walked into the kitchen carrying their groceries and two large pizzas.

Tommie overheard the girls’ conversation. “They say there’s some fabulous new street-ball shoes being released today! Maybe you kids should get them and do a review.”

“Great idea, Mom,” Kim replied.

“I’d like to get myself some,” Tommie commented. “I think they’d be great on the tennis court. Do you girls want to go to the mall tonight?”

“Amy’s mom is already taking us tonight,” Kim replied.

“I’ll just go myself,” Tommie said a little sulkily. “Do you girls want some pizza?”

“No thanks, Mrs. C,” Amy replied. “I need to head home for supper.”

“Me too,” Melissa added. “We’ll see you later Kim.”

As Amy and Melissa left, the smell of the pizza reached the game room Scott rushed upstairs to find Tommie and Chris putting away the groceries.

“Za! All right!” Scott said, as he grabbed one of the boxes and headed for the family room.

“On NO you don’t. You’re eating in the kitchen and you’re NOT getting that whole pizza to yourself.”

Scott returned the pizza and sat down at the table with the rest of the family. They talked about the day’s activities and Kim and Tommie explained that the Eurasian computer was going to be delivered the next day.

Chris and Scott were perturbed that Kim didn’t get their opinions before she agreed with the manufacturer to test them. On the other hand though, they were excited about the opportunity to finally see something from a new supplier.

When supper was finished, Kim and Tommie got ready to go to the mall. Chris went down to the game room to make room for the new test computer, while Scott headed over to Alex’s to practice for the tournament.

HONK... HONK...

“My ride’s here,” Kim called out, as she put on her shoes and headed outside. “See you guys. I’ll be home around ten.”

Amy’s mom drove the girls to the mall and promised to pick them up again at 9:00. Tonight was their lucky night. They found the shoes they wanted right away. The three of them then decided to look for matching sports tops for the tournament.

The girls checked out the gear in the sporting goods store and found the perfect tops. As they finished paying for them at the check out counter, Amy caught sight of a really cute guy. She pointed him out to her friends.

The girls' eyes popped out of their heads.

Chapter Seventeen



“WOW! He’s hot!” Melissa exclaimed. “Better than any movie star I’ve worked with.”

The stranger had his arms full of clothes. It looked like he was buying an entire wardrobe. He was tall, dark and handsome, with great assets. The girls knew quality when they saw it. Amy, Melissa and Kim followed him around, pretending to be looking at the same stuff he was.

As they peeked around the mannequins and peered through the racks of clothing, Amy spotted her older cousin Chesaree. Chez for short. She worked in the store.

“Great!” Amy said to the girls. “If he goes into the change room, Chez will let us check him out on the security cam.”

“What?” Melissa asked. This was news to her.

“We can check him out on the store’s security cameras,” Amy repeated.

“I thought that’s what you said,” Kim replied.

“It’s harmless,” Amy admitted. “It’s not like they’re naked. No difference than being in a swim suit. So, what do you say? Wanna check him out?”

“Sure!” Melissa said. “I’m in for some excitement.”

Kim wasn’t so sure. “Isn’t that like invading his privacy?”

“Come on, Kim.”

Amy and Melissa headed for Chez and the change room. Kim reluctantly followed.

The handsome guy approached Chez and asked if he could try on the clothes. She took him to the change room. The girls headed to the room with the security monitors.

“Is he anyone we know?” Chez asked.

“No, never saw him before. But man, is he amazing or what!” Amy gushed.

The girls watched as he took off his street clothes. They were shocked and embarrassed.

“He doesn’t have any underwear on!” Kim exclaimed. “Don’t look! Close your eyes!”

“Kim, check out the birthmark on his assets. It looks like yours!” Amy exclaimed.

Kim couldn’t look... she just was too polite a girl to do that. As the girls giggled and chatted amongst themselves, Kim stood there, looking the other way. She watched the door to make sure no one would come in a see what they were up to. “Let’s go, you guys,” she insisted.

“Kim, what’s the big deal?” Amy chuckled.

The girls weren’t as quiet as they should have been. Their voices could be heard outside of the change room area... and were recognized...

“Kim, are you back here?” It was the sound a familiar voice... Tommie.

“We’re busted!” Kim exclaimed. “Turn off the monitors!”

“I can’t,” Chez replied.

“Then let’s get out of here,” Kim directed her friends. The girls bolted out of the security room, red-faced and breathing hard. They bumped, one after the other, right into Tommie.

“Where are you girls going in such a hurry? What are you girls up to? What’s in that room?” Tommie asked.

“What’s with the fifty questions, Mom?” Kim sputtered out... trying desperately to sound cool, calm and collected.

Tommie thought otherwise. She opened the door to the security room. The girls watched the watcher. They were a little amused themselves at Tommie’s hypocrisy... do as I say... not as I do...

“Girls... now how immature is this...” she lectured. “You’re invading people’s privacy. These cameras are only supposed to be for stopping thieves... not entertaining you...” Tommie didn’t want to admit it to herself, but in the few seconds she spent glancing quickly at the various monitors... she was a little entertained. There were people in there trying on the most unsuitable styles and colors, and more importantly sizes. She giggled, as she caught Mrs. Black trying to wriggle into a track suit that was at least two sizes to small. The Lycra allowed her entry, so to speak, but her cellulite was trying to burst through the seams.

“Can’t fit ten pounds of potatoes into a five pound sack, Mrs. Black,” Tommie quipped to herself. As she turned around to leave, she caught a glimpse of the backside of the stranger on the monitor. Now Tommie had a better idea of what the girls were doing in there. She was about to leave and lay one on the girls when, the stranger turned around and looked directly into the monitor... almost as if he knew he was being watched.

Tommie’s eyes met the stranger’s. She felt an odd sensation and fainted... dead away...

Kim’s first reaction was self-preservation... “I’m dead!” Her second reaction was concern for her mom, as she rushed to Tommie... who was sprawled out on the floor, face up. “Mom! Mom! Are you all right Mom? Speak to me!”

Amy, Melissa and Chez joined Kim. They checked to make sure she was breathing. When they were sure she was alive... they began to fan her face. When they didn’t get a reaction, they started to shake her a bit. When that wasn’t getting a response, they started to pinch her.

“Come on Mrs. C Wake up,” Chez insisted. She knew if a customer died on her watch, she’d probably be fired.

“Come on Mrs. C like Chez said, get up,” Amy ordered. She knew that if Mrs. C croaked, than Mr. C would probably banish her from the Campbell residence for good.

“Up and at em’, Mrs. C,” Melissa directed. She was worried that if this hit the news... the media might start to hound her, and call her a murderer, and who knows what else they’d make up.

“Mom!” Kim cried. “We need to call 911!” Kim pulled out her cell, but the call

wasn't placed.

Tommie opened her eyes. She was surprised to find herself on the floor. "What happened?"

"You don't know?" Kim asked.

"No, I looked into the room... saw what you peeping Toms... oh, that's kinda funny... I'm calling you kids peeping Toms and my name is..."

"We get it Mom."

"Well, anyway, I remember getting a little chuckle at Mrs. Black's size selection, and the next thing I know, I'm laying on the floor."

"That's about all I know too, Mom. We should go now," Kim suggested.

Kim held out her hand to Tommie. She grabbed Kim's hand tightly and with Kim's help, hauled herself up off of the floor. By now, a crowd had gathered.

"What's happening here?" Mrs. Black asked. "Can I be of assistance?"

Tommie knew she's couldn't chastise the girls at this time... not with Mrs. Black there... and certainly since she was as guilty as them. She decided to tell a little white lie. "Oh, thank you for asking Mrs. Black. I'm fine. I just seemed to have slipped on the carpet... and went down like a ton of Lycra... I mean... bricks." She quickly changed the subject, before her foot got any further down her throat. "Did you find what you girls were looking for?"

"Yeah, we did Mom."

"Yeah, did we ever!" Amy announced. "Did you get what you were looking for?"

Tommie chuckled. "I got an eyeful... if you know what I mean."

The girls thought she'd seen the stranger and that they were talking about the same thing. Kim became even more embarrassed. First her mom was all over Jack, and now she was acting stupid over the stranger. What was with her? She couldn't blame the pheromones... through the security monitor!

"Mom, we were wrong and we shouldn't have been spying on the..."

But before Kim could finish her sentence, Tommie decided to let the girls off the hook. "Show me what you bought!" Tommie asked.

Kim breathed a major sigh of relief. The girls dumped out their bags on the counter and showed Tommie how they contributed to the recovery of their country's economy.

"Love the top, girls. Maybe I should pick up one for myself..."

Kim thought, 'No way!' and insisted, "Mom, I'm tired can we go home now?"

"Good idea, I feel fine now," Tommie admitted.

Kim turned to her friends and declared, "We're out of here. See you tomorrow."

The girls reciprocated. Kim and Tommie left the store, walked into the mall, and toward Tommie's van.

Amy, Melissa and Chez, headed back to the security room. The stranger was gone. The girls were disappointed, but like most teenagers, they soon forgot about the mystery man and were on to more pressing issues, like the B Ball tournament on the weekend.

On their way out of the mall, Kim and Tommie passed by a used book sale. A picture on a cover caught Tommie's attention.

"Kim, hang on. I just want to buy this book."

Kim waited as Tommie made the purchase. Tommie and Kim drove home and discussed the new shoes, the great matching tops, their game plan... everything but the naked man in the change room.

Tommie and Kim arrived home to find Chris sleeping, and Scott complaining about some software he'd just downloaded onto his PC. "This stuff is c-rap!" Scott declared. "I need to call their help desk."

Scott called the 1-800 number and was put on hold. The message talked about the product, how great their service was, and that the call would be recorded for quality assurance and other purposes. He waited and waited.

"Answer, you twits. I hope you're recording this! This is the worst service I've ever had. There IS no service!"

Kim and Tommie heard Scott's comments and opened the door to his bedroom. "What's the problem?" Tommie asked.

"It's this new software I just bought. It's not loading right. The help desk is asleep."

"Then who were you talking to?"

"I was hoping their automatic recording thingy was recording my complaints."

"All call centers say they record the conversations. Do they actually do anything with it?" Kim asked, looking at Tommie.

"They're supposed to be auditing a percentage of the calls to make sure that the customer service people are handling the calls correctly. Most companies record the calls, but very few of them actually do any real quality check. At least not as much as they should."

"Mom, does HucksterCo record their calls?" Kim asked.

"Yeah. Why?"

"Do they record other calls, like ones you might make from the office?"

"I don't think so. But we're all on the same system. It's possible. Why do you ask?"

"Didn't Mr. Molina and you talk on the HucksterCo Internet network?" Kim inquired.

"No, but we would have if it was long distance."

"Where are you going with this, Kim?" Scott asked.

"Mom told me that Mr. Arnold wasn't returning any calls. He was supposed to be a witness for her and Mr. Molina in their cases, AND would have been a great witness for the Federal Prosecutor in the no-speak trial."

"So?"

"Well, if Mom can't find Mr. Arnold, then maybe the conversations between her and Mr. Molina and Mr. Arnold were recorded," Kim suggested. "They do travel out of town, don't they?"

Tommie was ecstatic with Kim's logic. "Yes, you're right. I remember Mr. Molina mentioning how they used the company Internet long distance capability. You might have the answer we were looking for! I need to contact Molina and get him to check with a friend of ours in the quality assurance department. He'd help us, if we asked. It's too late tonight, but tomorrow morning I'll be on it like white on rice."

"What's that mean? There's brown rice too?" Scott asked.

Tommie shook her head. "It's too late. I can't think. I'm going to bed. You kids should too. And Scott, I'm sure you can get your dad to help you with that software glitch in the morning."

"Okay Mom."

The kids went to bed and quickly fell asleep. Tommie couldn't. She kept thinking about what Kim had suggested. "I can't do anything about this tonight," she said to herself. "Maybe I'll read the book I just bought." Tommie went downstairs to the family

room, sat herself down on the big comfy couch, opened the book, and began to read.

Chapter Eighteen



He was powerful in body, a fine physique, wide-shouldered, long-limbed. His head was large and splendidly poised – a high forehead and full dark eyes that moved slowly and looked directly at a man. He had the broad cheekbones and wide sensitive mouth of his race, evidence of the vitality in him. The energy in him was a little less than ferocious. A youth of few words, a deep and penetrating voice. He had no love of foolery and in all his life he never appreciated a jest.¹

No squire of Christendom rode clad in soft shagreen boots and a high crowned white felt hat, bordered with sable, and a coat-robe dressed horsehide with wide flaps over the shoulders, girdled with a heavy leather belt ornamented with silver work and turquoise. And few youths were so utterly alone as Timur, his mother dead, his father in a monastery and his kinsmen more than ready to become his enemies.²

“Erein mor nigen bui” – Tamerlane heard this phrase often. “A man’s path is only one.” He did not bother his head about it much – or the gravely intoned verses from the Koran. The words of the elder men were law, but the boys liked to watch their weapons, and speculate upon the cutting edge of a sheathed tulwar, or the meaning of a broken spear shaft.

These boys grew up among horses, and matched their steeds in the clover meadows across the Samarkand road. With their bows they hunted quail and foxes, and their trophies they kept in a castle of their own among rocks beneath the overhang of a cliff. Here they played at siege, while their dogs slept and the horses grazed. Tamerlane was the leader – he had no more than three or four companions – in this game of mimic war.

He was gravely purposeful in play, and he never laughed. Although his horses were not as good as some of the others, he was the best rider of his troupe. And when they were old enough to be given hunting swords, he soon established his mastery with the weapons.

Perhaps this seriousness was bred of his near-solitude. His mother died while he was young, and his father, a chieftain of the Barlas Tatars spent most of his hours in talk with the green turbaned holy men who had visited the shrines of Islam and gained sanctity thereby.

The son had his falcons, his dogs and his companions. But there were only two servitors in the house, and the horses did not fill half the stable. The father was not a reigning chieftain; he came of a line of men distinguished in war, but he was poor.

The boy rode afield and sat much in his eyrie, looking at the Samarkand road. Down this highway rode cavalcades of wealthy Persians, with armed guards about their veiled women – the Tatar women did not veil. Lean Arab traders escorted horse trains, with loads of brocades from Cathay and raw silk and rugs from the northern looms. Moving through the yellow dust came also slave caravans, and beggars with staff and bowl, and holy men looking for disciples.

At times there appeared a Jew with his mules or a slender Hindu voicing tales of Afghan robbers. At the hour of dusk they raised their tents among the animals and the cook fires that smelled of dung and wormwood. And, kneeling and sitting back on his heels outside their circle, Tamerlane listened to their talk of princes and the world of Samarkand. When his father scolded him for sitting with the caravan men, he made answer. “A man’s path is only one.”³

What path did the fates have in store for him I wondered.

Five hundred and fifty years ago a man tried to make himself master of the world. In everything he undertook he was successful. We call him Tamerlane.

In the beginning he was a gentleman of little consequence – master of no more than some cattle and land in that breeding ground of conquerors, Central Asia. Not the son of a king, as Alexander was, or the heir of a chieftain, like Genghis Khan. The victorious Alexander had at the outset his people, the Macedonians, and Genghis Khan had his Mongols. But Tamerlane gathered together a people.

One after the other, he overcame the armies of more than half the world. He tore down cities, and rebuilt them in the way he wished. Over his roads the caravan trade of two continents passed. Under his hands he gathered the wealth of empires, and spent it as he fancied. Out of mountain summits he made pleasure palaces – in a month. More perhaps than any human being within a life he attempted “To grasp this sorry Scheme of Things entire... and then, Remold it nearer to the heart’s desire.”

Tamerlane he was, and only as Tamerlane is he known to us today. In our general histories his empires called only Tamerlane’s – although our ancestors of five centuries ago spoke of it as Tatory. Vaguely they knew him as a dominant and merciless figure, moving beyond the gates of Europe among golden tents and towers built of human skulls lighted at night by spirit beacons.

Asia knew him well – both to its pride and its sorrow. And there his enemies said that he was a great gray wolf eating the earth; while his followers called him lion and conqueror.

The blind Milton, pondering the legends of Tamerlane, seems to have drawn from them the somber colors with which he painted the magnificence of his Satan.

And the fantasies of the poets have been followed by the silence of the historians. Tamerlane could not be easily classified. He was part of no dynasty – he founded one; he was not, like Attila, one of the barbarians who harried Rome – out there in the limbo of things he built a Rome of his own in the desert. He made a throne for himself, but he spent most of his years in the saddle of a horse. And when he built he used no previous pattern of architecture; he made a new one according to his own inclination, out of cliffs and mountain peaks and a solitary dome that he saw in Damascus before he burned that city. This swelling dome of Tamerlane’s fancy has become the motif of Russian design, and is the crown of the Taj Mahal. And the Taj Mahal was built by one of the Moghuls – Tamerlane’s great-grandchildren.

“Why have I never heard of this man before,” Tommie, a history buff, asked herself. She looked over the map published in the book. It put things in perspective. “This would make a great project for the kids in school.” She continued to devour the book. Tommie felt like she was actually expanding her horizons. The book captivated her and clearly demonstrated that she needed to read a lot more, and stop depending on what’s communicated to her on the tube... She continued to read, and thanks to an enlightened author’s perspective... understand...

Chapter Nineteen



History has dealt fully with the Europe of his day. We know how Venice was dominated by the Council of Ten and how Riezi became the Mussolini of that time, a generation after the death of Dante. Petrarch was writing then, and in France the Hundred Years War was dragging through its sterile course, while Orleanists and Burgundians wrangled with the butchers in Paris, under the indifferent eyes of the half-mad Charles the Sixth. Europe was young then, rousing from the darkness of the middle ages. Not yet had the fire of the Renaissance given it brilliance.

And Europe looked to the east for the luxuries of civilization – for linen and buckram and spice, for silk and iron and steel and china ware. Silver and gold and precious stones came out of the east. By this overland trade Venice and Genoa had grown great; Cordova and Seville in Spain had been built by the Arabs, and the palaces of Granada. Constantinople was half oriental.

There is today near a junction of the Trans-Siberian railway a stone obelisk bearing on one side the word Europe and on the other Asia. In Tamerlane's day this stone would have been placed some fifty degrees of longitude farther west, about in the suburbs of Venice. Europe proper would have been no more than a province of Asia. A province of barons and serfs where the cities as a rule were no more than hamlets and life – so says the chronicler – an affair of murmuring and misery.

We know the setting of the European scene of that century, but not the man who rose to dominate the world. To those Europeans, Tamerlane's magnificence seemed unearthly and his power demonic. When he appeared at their threshold, their kings sent letters and envoys to "Tamburlan the Great, Lord of Tatar."

The taking of Herat added a great city to Timur's growing dominion, a true metropolis, nine thousand paces in circuit, housing a quarter million souls. The tally of the conquerors showed that there were in the city several hundred colleges, and three thousand bath houses, and nearly ten thousand shops. At this time London and Paris had certainly no more than sixty thousand inhabitants each, and while there were schools in Paris, history has no record of hot baths. But the Tartars were most astonished by the mills that were turned by wind instead of water.⁴

Clavijo, the chamberlain of the King of Castile, passed through Tabriz, and gave a full description of it. This is one of the few clear accounts of a city under Timur's rule – the Tatar conqueror first entered Tabriz fifteen years before Clavijo's visit.

Clavijo wrote of Tabriz, “From the hills on the right a great river descends to the city, and is divided into many channels which flow through the streets. The streets are well ordered, with very large buildings with many doors within which are shops guarded by officers. Here they sell many things – cloth, silk, cotton and other stuffs – and this city has a great trade.

In one place there are men who sell certain scents and coloring for women, and hither come the women to paint and anoint themselves. These women go about covered with a white sheet, a horse-hair net hanging over their eyes.

The grand edifices are ornamented very skillfully with mosaics and blue and gold work made in Greece. They say that these great works were made by very rich men, who were jealous of each other, and each strove to erect the most wonderful work and in this way they spent their wealth. Among these buildings is a great house, which was surrounded by a wall, very beautiful and rich, in which there are a multitude of chambers and apartments; and they say this house was built by Sultan Owais with the treasure that was paid him by the Sultan of Babylon.

The city of Tabriz is very rich by reason of the great quantity of merchandise that passes through it every day. They say in former days it was more populous; but even now there are more than two hundred thousand inhabited houses. There are also many market places in which they sell very clean and well-dressed meat, cooked in a variety of ways, and plenty of fruit.

In the streets and squares of this city there are many fountains and in summer they fill them with pieces of ice, and put brass and copper jugs near them, so that the people can come and drink. The magistrate of Tabriz, called the Darogah, received the ambassadors very honorably.

Here are many rich and beautiful mosques, and the finest baths that, I believe, can be seen in the whole world. When the ambassadors wished to depart, horses were provided for themselves and their retinue. From this place the ruler of the country had horses in readiness, that those who are coming to him might travel night and day, in relays, and thus the post is arranged all along the road as far as the city of Samarkand.”⁵

And Clavijo’s description is important, not only in revealing how one of the great cities of Asia impressed a European, but in showing that Timur was capable of preserving and improving a captured metropolis. European histories have mentioned in particular the burning of more than one building whose stones remain intact today without evidence of fire. Terrible as was the havoc wrought in his invasions it will be recalled that he retained unharmed the cities that submitted without resistance. In nearly every case he ordered the public buildings spared – the mosques, academies, water systems and schools and tombs. And in the majority of cases, he ordered the ruined places to be rebuilt. So we often find Asiatic travelers giving descriptions of cities populous and apparently little the worse for wear, after his death, while these same places are presented to us in European histories as no more than charred ruins.

There is a reason for this misunderstanding. European narrators were most familiar with the provinces most remote from Samarkand – southern Russia, western Asia Minor, the coast of Syria, the extreme south of Persia and India. Timur had little interest in repairing damages here. Instead he carried off whatever was most valuable to Samarkand. It was part of his policy to leave the frontiers a waste and build up within the empire. And this was the foundation of the splendor of the Shah Rukh’s empire, in Persia and

Samarkand, and what is now Afghanistan. It resulted in the golden age of Persian architecture, over the two thousand miles from Ghanzi to Tabriz – which is about the length of Europe proper. And this may be termed the area of Timur's building. Except for Tabriz it was an area almost unknown to the Europeans for centuries.⁶

The chronicle tells us of Timur's bride that her beauty was like the young moon, and her body graceful as the young cypress. She must have been about fifteen years of age, because she had been allowed to ride to the hunts with her father. Her name was hereafter, Algai Khatun Agha – the Lord's Lady Aljai.

She was a true grandchild of the King maker; she could laugh at adversity, even while her quick brain pondered its problems. She never complained of their hardships; and her high spirits banished Timur's moodiness.⁷

The wives were companions of warriors, their duty the care of their young children; they took their place at the banquets of rejoicing, and, if their lord's enemies prevailed over them, they were part of the spoils of defeat.⁸

Tommie was in awe... not only of the brilliance and insightfulness of Timur... but of the relevance of these actions in today's world, and its potential to further understanding between people in the third millennium. She fell asleep on the couch and dreamed she was Algai Khutan Agha...

3-8 Lamb, p. 30, 32, 22-23, 103, 296-97, 295-96, 51, 36

Chapter Twenty



DING... DONG...

The doorbell rang.

It was early Saturday morning, and Chris, Scott and Kim were just finishing breakfast in the kitchen. Tommie was already meeting with RL.

Kim ran to the door. She was expecting the delivery of the Eurasian computers. She flung open the door, and exclaimed, "Dad! They're here!" Kim signed for the boxes. The deliveryman brought them into the house, as Scott and Chris met her in the foyer. They looked over the boxes.

"Dad, can you set this up while Scott and I are at the tournament?" Kim asked.

"It looks like I have my work cut out for me today," Chris replied. "I guess we won't be going to your tournament, Kids."

"AAWWW," Scott replied.

Scott and Kim pretended to be disappointed.

"Can you drive us?" Scott asked.

"Of course."

On the way to the tournament, Chris picked up Melissa, Amy, Alex and Ryan. He dropped them off at the stadium entrance. "Good luck kids. Have fun!" Chris yelled out the window and drove off.

The girls and boys were playing on opposite sides of the stadium. The kids sought out the courts where they were playing their first games.

The girls' first two games went as expected. They defeated their rivals, twenty to six and eighteen to eight. Game three was in fifteen minutes. It was against Berta O'Dinkle's team. Her dad was a tournament sponsor.

Up until three weeks ago, Berta O'Dinkle and her brother J.R., attended Spring Valley School. With the addition of Melissa to the basketball line up, Berta didn't get much floor time. She moved to Terra Nova, and was now the enemy. After losing the election to Alex, Berta's brother J.R., changed schools, too.

The game had come down to the final seconds and Kim had possession of the ball. They were losing by two. Kim needed a three-point play and she wasn't going to risk it by taking an outside shot. Kim decided to drive hard to the basket and hopefully pick up a foul on the way in. Worst case scenario, she'd miss the lay-up but sink the two free throws for a tie. Losing wasn't an option.

Kim had possession and stalled until the final five seconds. Then she drove the paint hard. She protected the ball with her left arm. It was extended out a little. Berta was beside her, step for step, as Kim approached the basket. Then, as Kim picked up the ball to take it to the hoop, she stuck her elbow up. The force of her drive and elbow, caught Berta under the chin, and knocked her off balance. As Kim scored, Berta fell to the asphalt. She came down hard on her wrist.

SNAP...

BZZZZ...

TWEEET...

A whistle blew.

“Foul!” called the ref.

‘Who fouled who?’ Kim wondered.

The call went against Berta. Kim was ecstatic. The game was over and she had one chance to win. They cleared the court. The sidelines were packed. Kim was nervous and so were her team mates. They didn’t make a sound, as Kim twirled the ball on her finger, bounced it with her left hand five times, her right hand three times... picked up the ball, twirled it again... took the ball in her right hand, steadied it with her left... bent her knees and took the shot. Kim had perfect form. Her legs and arms extended concurrently. Her pointing finger traveled upwards and outwards and parallel with her nose. At the end of her body’s extension, her fingers pushed the ball toward the basket and just before she released it, her fingers moved down the ball so that it was now spinning as it flew through the air. It was a thing of beauty.

Berta O’Dinkle wailed in pain and defeat from the sideline, as Kim nailed her free throw and won the game.

“Game over,” the ref declared.

Melissa and Amy ran to Kim at the line and put her into a bear hug. They jumped up and down and whooped it up. When the celebrating was over, Kim tried to find Berta to see how she was. Berta was gone. The girls saw an ambulance pulling away from the court. Kim felt guilty. But injuries were common. Three-on-three street ball is tough.

The girls had a short break before their next game, and they discussed Berta’s injury. “Don’t feel guilty, Kim,” Melissa said.

“Yeah, she deserved it. She was all over you,” Amy added. “She wouldn’t give you your lane. It wasn’t your fault.”

“I’m going for some HuskieAid,” Amy declared. She took off and left Kim and Melissa. Upon returning, Amy excitedly exclaimed, “You’ll never guess who’s reffing one of the guys’ games!”

“I don’t know. Who?” Melissa asked.

“Look. Over there!” Amy said, pointing to the right. “It’s the guy from the mall last night!”

“What? The guy from the change room?” Kim asked.

“So, do we introduce ourselves or just drool from the sideline?” Amy asked.

“Amy, Scott’s gonna be jealous,” Melissa teased.

“Who cares? I’d do anything to meet this guy.”

“Dream on, Sister,” Melissa said. “The guy’s in a league of his own.”

“Someday you’ll fall in love and you’ll know how I feel,” Amy replied.

“You’re nuts,” Kim laughed.

“I’m joking!” Amy announced.

“That’s better,” Kim said. “For a moment there, I really thought you’d flipped out.”

“No way, we’ve got a game in fifteen minutes, let’s go warm up,” Amy directed.

Melissa and Kim agreed and they walked over to the practice court.

“We might have some trouble with the next three,” Kim admitted. “They’re physically stronger than us, and we need to make sure they don’t beat us up inside.”

“Kim, you need to stay out of the middle. Let Melissa get the rebounds. Oh, by the way Kim, I looked at the leaderboard and Scott’s team is kicking George UU Tush. It looks like they’ll win the tourney.”

“All the more reason for us to win,” Kim replied.

Suddenly a huge black cloud appeared overhead. Sheet lightning flashed against the sky and rain poured down over the tournament. The girls ran for shelter.

“The three-on-three tournament is cancelled for the day,” blasted loudly from the outdoor speakers.

“I’ll call Dad,” Kim said. She placed the call and Chris answered.

“Hello?”

“Dad, the tourney’s cancelled on account of rain. Can you come and get us?”

“Sure, you kids meet me the same place I dropped you off.”

“Okay,” Kim replied and hung up. Kim called Scott on his cell and told him where to meet Chris.

Chris soon pulled up in the van and the kids piled in. The van quickly filled with body odor... not to mention testosterone and hormones. Chris rolled down the windows and continued to drive. On the drive home, Chris asked, “So, tell me about the tourney?” He had opened a Pandora’s box.

Both teams bragged about their exploits and explained how they were on the brink of totally annihilating their competitors. If only it didn’t rain. Chris was on information overload and let them talk the talk, just because he was pretty sure they really did walk the walk...

He dropped off Amy, Alex, Ryan and Melissa and was now arriving home. As soon as the van was put in park, the kids jumped out, and raced into the house... pushing and shoving each other on the way to the stairs to the game room. They were dying to check out the Eurasian computer.

Tommie had been sitting quietly at one of the computers...

Chapter Twenty-One



“So how’s the Eurasian PC and its super chip, Mom?” Scott asked.

“I don’t know, I just got home from my meeting with RL.”

Tommie looked at the clock on the computer. “Why are you guys home now?” She quickly and mistakenly assumed, “Didn’t make the finals like you planned, eh?”

“NO! We were rained out,” Scott said, as he and Kim repeated their story. Chris shook his head when he heard how their victories had turned into blow-outs. The kids were exaggerating... just a bit more than they did on the ride home. The competition between Kim and Scott was heating up, and Chris decided to throw cold water on them before they reached the point of no return.

“Tommie, as you can tell, the kids played well today, and just might have won it all if it didn’t rain. But no use dwelling on what might have been kids... as long as you had fun... that’s all that counts... and NOW, I’d like to hear how your mom’s meeting with RL went.

The kids’ attention span could be very short. Kim, still in competitive mode, snapped out, “Any luck with the tapes?”

“What’s this about tapes?” Chris asked.

“You guys take a seat and I’ll tell you.”

They all sat down and got comfortable. Tommie filled Chris in on the conversation she and the kids had the previous night.

“Did your friend find any tapes?” Kim asked again.

“He sure did!” Tommie exclaimed.

“What was on them?”

“A lot of the conversations between Molina and Arnold.”

“Did you get them?”

“Yeah, our buddy transferred them to a CD and sent it to RL’s office. He already told the Federal Prosecutor, and he’s asked me to do a transcript. I got a copy of it.”

“You? Why not a secretary?” Chris asked.

“Because I can highlight what’s pertinent as I do it. There isn’t much time.”

“Oh, I see,” Chris replied.

“Cooool! Can we hear them?” Kim asked.

Tommie thought about the hundreds of episodes of Law and Order she had seen and decided to respond. “I don’t think so. I don’t think they’re public documents until they’re

submitted as evidence in court. That's how I understand it."

"What did RL say about the tapes?" Scott asked.

"We can't use them unless Arnold is a witness."

"But he won't answer your calls, so how can you get him as a witness?" Kim wondered out loud.

"Funny thing," Tommie replied. "We just found out today that he's HucksterCo's witness."

"He flipped!" Kim exclaimed.

"It looks that way."

"So, he WAS paid off," Scott added.

"It looks that way, but really, don't know, can't say."

"Who else is a witness for them?"

"No one. They're going to base their entire case on Arnold's testimony."

"So, he's going to lie then?" Kim assumed.

"Again, Kim, I don't know what they have planned, and sometimes the truth, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder. It's all up to subjective interpretation of the Judge, Jury or Arbitrator. It's very easy to justify a 'mistake' and that's what they'll say anything bad they did was... an unforeseeable, unintentional, regrettable mistake."

"Huh?"

"How will you prove he's lying?" Kim asked.

"RL's trying to figure that out as we speak."

"I know!" Scott shouted out.

"I'm all ears," Tommie replied.

Scott had a stream of thought. "If we listen to the tapes we can make-up questions based on what Arnold said in the tapes that you know that Arnold is going to lie about and then you can play what he really said right after he lies in court."

Kim, Tommie and Chris didn't know how to respond. They were all trying to make sense of what Scott proposed.

"Let me see if I understand you, Scott," Tommie said. "We need to listen to the tapes and figure out what questions RL can ask Arnold, that he's going to lie about the answer in court, and then RL can prove he's lying, by using the tapes."

"That's what I said!" Scott exclaimed.

"So you did," Chris confirmed.

"I'll phone RL right now and see what he thinks."

Tommie dialed the phone and put it on speaker.

RING... RING...

"Hello, Bailey here."

"RL, it's Tommie. I was telling the kids about the tapes, and Scott figured out a great way to use them."

"Let me hear it!" RL declared.

Tommie went on to explain Scott's idea.

RL was pleasantly surprised. "Excellent. The Federal Prosecutor needs to figure out what HucksterCo is going to ask Arnold in the direct examination, and then be prepared to ask him the same question in the cross and use the tape as rebuttal, if his answer is different than the tape, we got him," RL declared in his stream of consciousness.

"I think I understand," Tommie announced.

“It’s genius. Pure genius. This way, he doesn’t have to introduce the tapes into evidence. They’ll have no idea what hit them. I’ll talk to the Federal Prosecutor and we’ll probably send you the questions he thinks the defense attorney will ask, and how he expects Arnold will answer. Can you give me the tape rebuttal, if it exists?”

“Of course,” Tommie answered. “The kids want to help out. Is that okay?”

“Sure. These tapes aren’t confidential. Anyone using these communication networks know they might be taped. That’s what’s so darn beautiful about this whole thing. Everything is legal. I’ll get you my questions and the probable responses.”

“Great.”

The kids cheered on the phone.

“Sounds like they’re pumped.”

“You have no idea,” Tommie replied. “I’ll get the transcript done and await the questions.” She hung up the phone and was immediately challenged by Scott.

“So we CAN help afterall!”

“Looks like I was wrong. We have our work cut out for us.”

“Far out!” Scott declared.

“Like he said, he wants to use them as rebuttal in the trial,” Tommie explained.

“What’s that?” Kim asked. “I didn’t really understand.”

“It’s complicated,” Tommie replied.

“What, you don’t think we’re smart enough to understand?” Scott remarked.

“Okay, I’ll tell you,” Tommie returned. “The idea is, if the defense attorney gets Arnold to talk about something, RL gets to ask him questions about it. If we have tapes that contradict what Arnold says to the defense attorney, then RL can introduce it as rebuttal evidence. That means, evidence that proves the witness lied. This way, RL doesn’t have to introduce it as direct evidence and...”

“And the defense won’t know we have the tapes or we’re using them until it’s too late!” Kim exclaimed. “Genius!”

“I sure am,” Scott proclaimed.

“This IS complicated,” Chris said.

“Well, actually it’s not that bad. Like RL said, the Federal Prosecutor is going to give me a list of questions he thinks that the defense attorney is going to ask. He’ll guess at what Arnold’s answers will be. We just have to find parts of the tape that prove it’s a lie. He’ll send his questions and answers tonight.”

“Wow! Our play is going to kick-butt!” Scott exclaimed. “We’ll have secret tapes, and we’ll be trapping the witness, and we’ll be catching him perjuring himself. Man, this can be a Law and Order episode!”

“Don’t get TOO ahead of yourself,” Tommie warned. “We have a lot of work to do before RL will be ready. He’s counting on us. We can start...”

“Can I help? The review isn’t due for three weeks,” Chris said. He wanted in on the fun.

“The computer! I almost forgot,” Kim exclaimed.

“Thanks,” Chris whined. “I’ve been working on this all afternoon, while you kids were playing ball, and your Mom was playing Perry Mason.”

“Perry who?” Scott asked.

Kim felt sorry for her dad. “Dad, tell us all about it. Please.”

Chris was excited about what he’d found out so far. He started out strong, by saying,

“This product is better than anything on the market right now. But we have a lot of testing to do.”

Scott cut in. “That’s great, Dad. Can we get to the tapes now?”

The Eurasian PC was pretty mundane compared to the secret tapes... or so they thought... besides, Chris was as curious as Scott. “Sure. The computer can wait.”

“How about an early supper?” Tommie asked. “Then we can start working on the tapes.”

“I’ve got a better idea. You cook and we’ll all listen in the kitchen,” Scott suggested.

“Okay. Chris do you have that voice recognition software to make a word doc out of the tapes?” Tommie asked.

“Yeah, Scott bring your laptop to the kitchen. I’ll get the software, and we’ll all listen to the tapes while the software is making the transcript.”

“This should make our job a snap!” Tommie declared.

Scott ran upstairs for his laptop. Chris got the software. Tommie got dinner ready, and Kim cleared off the kitchen table so everything could be set up.

Scott and Chris soon returned to the kitchen and performed an install on the laptop. Before long, they had the tape and the voice recognition ready to go. “Let’s start!” Scott declared.

“Not until we’ve eaten. Now chow down,” Tommie directed.

Scott shoveled his food into his mouths.

“Don’t eat so fast or you’ll chuck like Melissa did,” Kim joked.

Scott eyes bugged out of his head. He looked right at Kim and opened his mouth.

Chapter Twenty-Two



“Chuck!” Scott shouted.

“Yeah, I said chuck. Big deal,” Kim replied.

“Mom, the courtroom is like a TV drama, isn’t it,” Scott said.

“I guess you could say that.”

“It’s kinda like the best script and the best actors win, right?” Scott suggested.

“Where are you going with this?” Chris asked.

“Why don’t we ask Chuck to help us?”

Kim finally figured out where Scott was coming from.

“He was a writer, an actor and a director. Maybe he can figure out what excerpts from the tape will be good for ‘wowing’ the jury,” Kim explained.

Scott was annoyed that Kim had stolen his thunder. He quickly added, “Yeah, Mom. That’s exactly what I was going to say, and he can figure out what order to put the questions for their best effect.”

“I think that’s the Federal Prosecutor’s job,” Tommie replied.

“But maybe Chuck can help,” Scott insisted.

“I guess it’s worth asking. But how will we find him?” Chris asked.

“I’ll call Melissa!” Kim offered. “She’ll know. Chuck hangs out with her and Mrs. McDuffy.”

“I thought he was Mrs. Hardy’s friend,” Tommie said.

“Can’t he have two friends?” Scott returned.

“I guess. Give her a call.”

Kim called Melissa.

Melissa answered.

“Melissa here.”

“Melissa, it’s Kim.”

“Hey Kim. What’s up?”

“My mom and us are helping her lawyer get ready for the trial Monday.”

“Cooool!” Melissa returned. “I sure hope they stick it to that Huckster guy.”

“Yeah, me too. We were wondering if you knew how to get hold of Chuck.”

“He’s right here. We’re just finishing up supper. Why?”

“We got some rebuttal evidence we want him to listen to,” Kim said.

“Listen to?”

“Yeah, it’s a bunch of taped conversations between the defense witness, Mr. Arnold, and Mr. Molina. We want to use it to prove Mr. Arnold’s lying on the witness stand.”

“How can you do that when he hasn’t even been questioned yet?”

“We’re guessing. We thought Chuck might be able to help.”

“Because you think court is nothing more than a big performance? No one tells the truth? Just what’s scripted for them by their lawyers?”

“You got it Melissa.”

“Give me a second and I’ll ask him. But can me and grandma come, too?”

“Sure!” Kim promised, without asking her parents for permission.

Melissa put down the phone and explained the situation to Chuck and her grandmother. She was sure of their response.

Chuck and Mrs. McDuffy were both excited. Chuck was particularly pumped about being able to use his years of script and play writing experience to help stage a real life the courtroom drama. “I’ll DO it!” he shouted.

Melissa picked up the phone. “We’ll be over in a couple of minutes,” Melissa told Kim.

“I heard!” Kim admitted.

“I’d really like to stick it to these people and to that darn no-speak agreement. It’s stopped me from telling the truth a gazillion times,” Melissa explained and then hung up the phone.

“Well?” Scott asked. “Is he coming?”

“Yeah, all three of them are.”

The Campbells scarfed down the rest of their dinner, quickly cleared the plates from the table, and waited for their guests.

DING... DONG...

Kim ran to the door to greet the visitors. She led Chuck, Melissa and Mrs. Hardy to the kitchen, where they saw the equipment set out.

Chuck looked it over. “Voice recognition software, editing capability on your laptop, CD burner... It looks like we’re all set.”

“We’re so glad you could help,” Tommie said.

“So tell me more about this trial. I know that the kids are attending Monday, and that Mrs. Hardy wants them to write a play about their experience. I don’t have a lot of background on the whole thing,” Chuck admitted.

Tommie took a few minutes to fill them all in. When she was finished, Chuck was virtually glowing.

“Oh, this is going to be good. I’ve been waiting for someone to challenge those no-speaks for as long as I can remember,” he admitted.

“Really?” Chris said. “Why you?”

“Because they’re like a virus. They spread to every single aspect of business, in every single sector. I’m sure Mrs. Campbell’s industry is bad, but you should see the entertainment industry.”

“Yeah,” Melissa said.

The Campbells thought for a second. “How could we be so stupid!” Kim said. “You guys can’t say anything that isn’t written down for you by some scriptwriter.”

“That’s not the problem. The scriptwriters can’t write anything down that isn’t dictated to them by the producers, and they can’t do anything that isn’t dictated to them

by their sponsors, and they're all owned by big business.”

“It’s always been like that, hasn’t it? We know all about how the diamond industry paid off the studios to make diamonds a big part of the movies,” Scott exclaimed.

“You’re right, Scott. But things have gotten so bad now; even the independents can’t afford to be. And the music industry... it’s just as bad. There’s no stopping The Conglomerate and people like them. They’ve got their tentacles into everything.”

“We want to make this a Political Punk rock musical!” Kim bragged. “We’ll use Po Punk to help us get our message across. That should blow some of these guys out of the water.”

“I think that’s an excellent idea. I happen to have a few connections there. I might be able to help you get permission to use some of the artist’s music. I know their father’s and grandfathers. We were all...”

“All what?” Tommie asked. She was curious.

“Well, let’s just say that my name really isn’t Chuck Reimer. But that’s a story for another time. We’ve got work to do. Let’s get at those tapes.”

“I have to do something about the state my industry is in. There is no creation. It’s all dictation. We’re told what to do and usually it’s just to do what we did before, especially if it was successful. There is no art. It’s exactly what Wagner was complaining about. There’s been no change since his time. It’s gotten worse, especially since business has gotten even more control over arts and entertainment and now, what we laughably call NEWS.”

“That’s why Chuck helped Lasowich!” Melissa exclaimed.

“Chuck did?” Scott asked.

“You’re the person responsible for taking down the skinny scheme!” Kim exclaimed.

“I don’t want anyone knowing,” Chuck admitted. “I like that Lasowich kid. He’s trying to make a difference. I wanted to give his career a boost.”

“Well, you got him recognition, but now he’s on The Conglomerate’s radar,” Mrs. McDuffy lectured. “I warned you not to get that boy involved.”

Chuck looked a little guilty. He got the conversation back on track. “Let’s get at these tapes. I can’t wait to hear them.”

Chapter Twenty-Three



Conversation after conversation, they listened to the rantings and ravings and ragings of Ben Arnold. He had to have been the most abused employee on the face of the earth. He hated Buck Huckster passionately, and he swore that Huckster owed him millions of dollars. Over and over, the same story was told. He talked about David Goodman, another employee who Tommie had been aware of, and unbeknownst to her family, supported in his case against HucksterCo. Tommie knew that Ben was telling the truth, but never let on why. The rest of them heard Ben never waver in his sincerity, consistency and conviction that Huckster and HucksterCo should be held accountable for the hardships and anguish they'd caused him, Goodman and others.

They couldn't help but feel sorry for Arnold, despite the fact that he was going to testify for the defense.

"Do you think he's telling the truth?" Tommie asked everyone.

"Of course he is. Why would he lie to Mr. Molina?" Kim asked.

"Mr. Molina was having problems, too. Do you think Molina was gathering information on Arnold for Huckster?" Chuck suggested.

"I know Molina, and I know he's a stand-up guy. Probably one of the last," Tommie commented.

"And it's obvious Arnold's been ripped off, big time," Melissa added. "That stock option plan was a scam!"

"How do you know?"

"They keep doing that to me!"

"His story is so consistent," Mrs. McDuffy remarked. "It's hard to lie consistently."

"So, now that we've listened to the whole thing, and the software has made a word document for us, I think we can easily figure out what parts of it will probably make good rebuttal evidence," Chuck said. "Let's ask ourselves what questions the defense would ask to make The Conglomerate and Huckster look good. We can get a start at putting together the responses."

"Sure, Chuck. I bet the Federal Prosecutor will ask him if he liked the people at HucksterCo and if he was paid all he was owed, and if he knows of any other employees who were cheated, and that funny stuff about you, Mom. Did you really call him fifty times?"

"Yes, I did, and I have the phone records to prove it," Tommie said.

“And that stuff about the company survey... NFW, No Friggin Way,” Kim chuckled.

“I don’t want you repeating that NFW thing,” Chris demanded.

“Ah, Dad. It’s funny and no one will know what we mean,” Scott whined.

“Just don’t do it!” Tommie ordered.

“Okay, Mom. There’s NFW I’ll do it.”

“Scott!”

RING... RING...

“That’s my office phone. It must be RL,” Tommie said, and ran to her office. She came back in five minutes, holding some paper in her hand.

“Are those the questions?” Chuck asked excitedly.

“They sure are. And a lot of these are pretty close to the ones we guessed he’d ask.”

“We have a whole house of Perry Masons,” Chris declared.

“Okay, I take it Perry Mason must be some lawyer, right?” Scott added.

“Right,” Chris said.

The entire group worked diligently until midnight.

“I can’t believe it, but we did it!” Tommie declared. “We got rebuttal for all of the Federal Prosecutor’s questions.”

Chuck was equally as excited. “You couldn’t make up stuff better than this.”

“They always say truth is crazier than fiction, don’t they?” Mrs. McDuffy joked.

“Crazier, stranger... what’s the diff,” Chris said. “There’s only one conclusion a jury can reach with this evidence.”

“So, when do we give this stuff to RL?” Kim asked.

“If you don’t mind,” Chuck said, “I’d like to get these excerpts onto separate tapes. It’ll make the lawyer’s job a lot easier. Things don’t always go the way they’re planned.”

“We could tape them here,” Scott suggested.

“I think I can get Alan Lasowich to help out. Do you mind if I call?”

“At this time?” Mrs. McDuffy asked.

“He’s a reporter. He won’t mind.”

“Sure, why not,” Tommie said.

Chuck placed the call. Alan was happy to help. “Okay, I’ll meet you in fifteen minutes at the station,” Chuck said and hung up. He turned to Tommie and asked, “Would you mind if I call your attorney. I’d like to help him prep if he wants. I can also explain all the tapes to him.”

“I only have his office number. I’ll call and leave a message,” Tommie said.

She called and RL answered.

“RL? I thought you’d be home by now.”

“Tommie, I should be, but there’s so much to do. How’s the rebuttal evidence going?”

“Great. That’s why I’m calling. We have it all ready for you. And Chuck Reimer, a friend of ours, and a former employee of The Conglomerate, wants to help you prep if he can.”

“Can he testify?” RL asked.

“Guess what?”

“No-speak. Should have known. But I’ll bet he can help anyway.”

“Chuck said he’d drop off the tapes tomorrow. He’s going to get each of the rebuttal

responses on separate tapes so you can introduce them when you need them.”

“That’s fantastic. Give him my address and I’ll be in by seven tomorrow.”

“Chuck will be there. He wants a conviction. These no-speaks are killing his industry and the free will and expression of the artists.”

Chuck spent Sunday working with RL, while the rest of the gang waited impatiently for their time in court.

Finally Monday morning came. They sat in the courtroom. All in their places with sun-shiny faces, for this was the day, they’d put Huckster away... or so they hoped...

The day started out with a bang. They’d get some earth shattering news and some surprising revelations. It was like watching a soap opera, a comedy, a drama, an action movie and of course, a mystery.

The ride home on the bus was emotional.

Jeremy was crying.

“Jeremy, you’re taking this too seriously. What gives?” Scott asked.

“Nothing, I just can’t believe people lie like that. I wish I was never born.”

“But Jeremy, why are you taking this so personally?” Scott asked. He couldn’t believe Jeremy’s tearful response.

“Because Ben Arnold is my father!” Jeremy whispered to Scott.

Scott’s jaw dropped. “Did you know he was going to be there today?”

Jeremy shook his head and revealed, “No. I had no idea. He HATES those guys at HucksterCo. I wish I had the guts to stand up and say something to the judge. I should have told her my dad was lying. We just moved into a huge new house! I didn’t even have the guts to let my dad know I was there.”

“Man, Jeremy. I don’t know what I’d do in your place.”

“You’d never be in my place. You have great parents. My Dad’s nothing but a traitor. He’s Benedict Arnold, through and through.”

By this time, Mrs. Hardy was covertly listening in on the conversation. She was concerned about how this would affect Jeremy, especially his self-esteem. The entire class had seen his dad lie on the stand. The rebuttal evidence proved he was a perjurer.

The bus pulled into the school parking lot.

“Class, it’s four o’clock and you can all go directly home from here,” Mrs. Hardy announced. She was just about to ask Jeremy to stay behind so she could speak with him, when Cal shocked her with a question, “Can we stay and work on the play?”

Mrs. Hardy’s heart stopped for a second. “Cal? You WANT to get going on the play?”

“Sure I do. It’s going to be awesome. With the tapes and the transcripts that the Campbells have, we can start right now, while it’s fresh in our minds.”

Mrs. Hardy couldn’t argue with that logic. Tommie had taped the entire proceeding and had the tape directly hooked up to her laptop with the special software they’d used on the weekend.

“I don’t want to go home,” Jeremy admitted. “I’ll stay and work on it.”

Before she knew it, the entire class was begging to stay at school and work on the play. Alex wasn’t even a factor at this point. All twenty-five kids had taken on the project and challenge.

Chuck and Mr. Wagner were also on board. “We’ll stay. I think we got so much great

stuff today, it'll fall into place, no problem," Chuck said.

The kids piled into the school as the rest of the student body was piling out.

"Detention?" the kids shouted.

"IN-tentional," Amy quipped as she went in.

As the kids took their seats in the classroom, Mrs. Hardy took Chuck aside.

"Chuck, we didn't realize it, but Ben Arnold is actually Jeremy Arnold's father. He's very distraught. He finally broke down and told Scott on the way home. Is there anything you can do to help him though this?"

"We can let him work through his problems in the play."

"How?" Mrs. Hardy asked.

"Let me handle it," Chuck advised.

"He's all yours. Actually, if you want all twenty-five of them, you can have them," she laughed.

Every spare minute of every school day for the next week, they all worked on the play and rewrote a bit of history. The play was to be performed for the first time, tonight.

Chuck, Mrs. Hardy, Mrs. McDuffy, Mr. Wagner and the kids were committed to teach *The Conglomerate* and the rest of the world...

What Goes Around, SHOULD Come Around.

We hope you enjoy the next book!

No-Speak

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