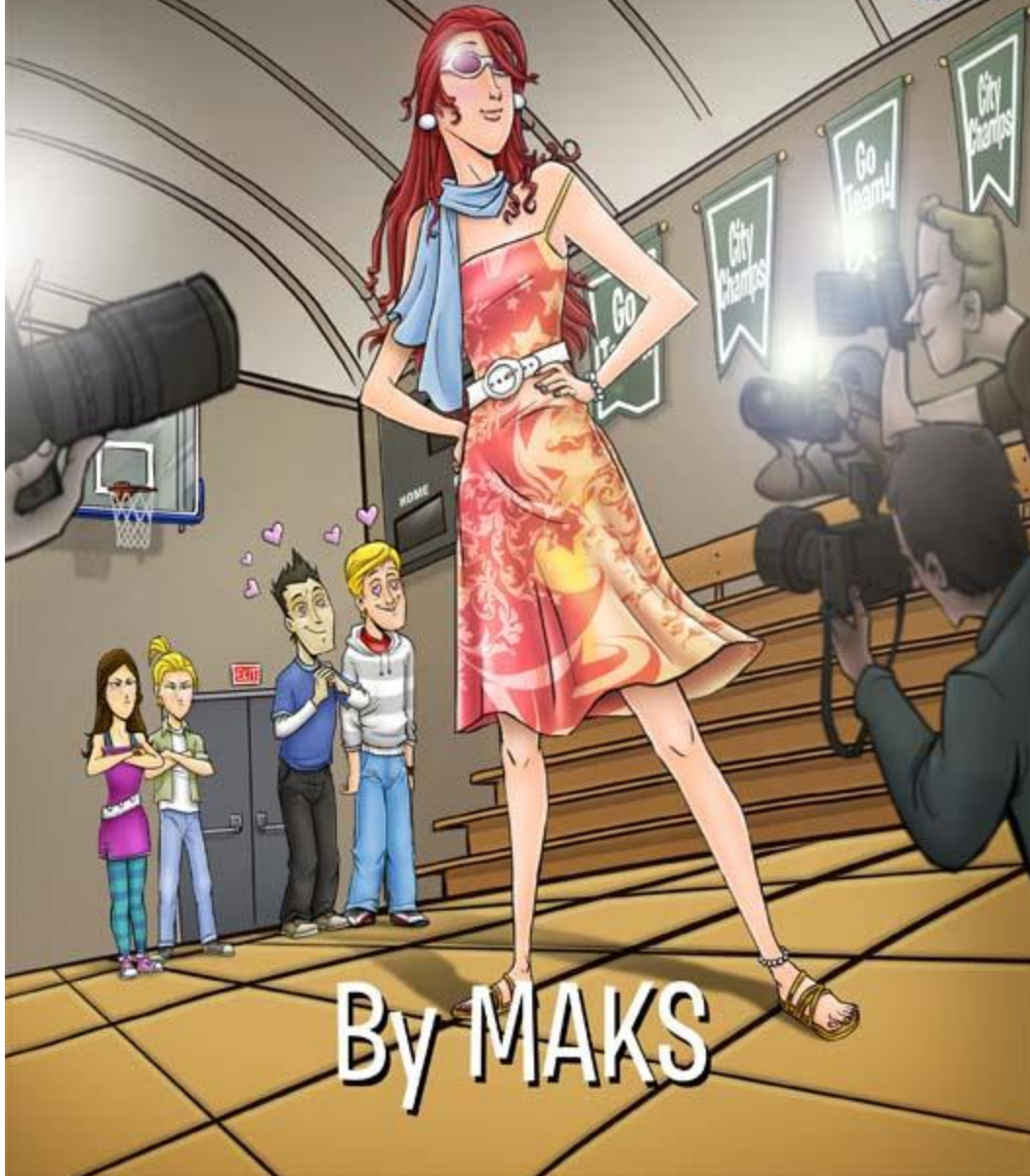


A Kids Opinions Count™ Book

What's The Skinny



By MAKs

What's the Skinny



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

Written by **MAKS**

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Chapter One



It was Monday morning, three days after Scott, Kim, Alex and Amy, blew the lid off organized crime in Center City. Spring Valley School had the day off. Alex and Amy were both out of town with their parents. Alex was at his cottage in the lake district, and Amy was in Northville at the factory outlet malls.

The Campbells were sitting at the kitchen table. They were eating breakfast and discussing last week's arrest of Mr. Smith. The TV was on in the family room. It was tuned to Center City News.

“Look!” Chris exclaimed. “It’s John Smith on TV.”

“What’s he doing out of jail?” Scott replied.

“Shush. Listen and we might find out,” Tommie said.

The Campbells watched as Alan Lasowich of CCTV reported:

Lasowich: This is Alan Lasowich of CCTV, reporting live from the Center City Fund Raiser’s Pancake Breakfast at the Center City Zoo. I’m speaking with Mr. John Smith, who just last week, was arrested on suspicion of being The Ring Master of the East Coast Crime Syndicate. We understand, Mr. Smith, that you were falsely accused, and released from jail late last evening.

Smith: Yes, that’s true. I’m back doing what I love — my charity work.

Lasowich: Mr. Smith, my sources tell me that Alex Black, who’s father runs the Center City Communicator, actually sprayed you with ant attractant, and then refused to give you the antidote until you confessed to being The Ring Master. We’d like to hear what happened — directly from you. Please tell us why you confessed to being The Ring Master.

Smith: It’s simple! I have a phobia of ants. I’m scared to death of them.

Lasowich: So, are you’re saying you confessed to something you had nothing to do with, just so you could get away from the ants?

Smith: I most certainly did. That Black kid who poured the ant attractant on me, had no idea what he was doing. Somehow, he and his friends got it into their silly little heads, that the Ring Master of the Circus must be The Ring Master of organized crime. That is

pretty simplistic thinking. I can't fault them for it. They're just kids, and this was nothing more than a childish prank. I've decided not to press any charges.

Lasowich: So you're saying you think the kids did this on purpose?

Smith: I'm saying, this whole thing was childish, and that even though kids say they want to be taken seriously by adults, let's face it — that really isn't a good idea. These kids are just not respectful of authority. But how can they be, if they don't have good role models at home or at school.

“How dare he!” Tommie exclaimed.

In the background of the television picture, you could see some people struggling with each other. It was distracting.

“What's going on behind them?” Scott asked.

“It looks like the police are trying to keep some people back,” Tommie replied.

“Shush,” Chris advised. “Smith is speaking again.”

Smith: I was simply the victim of some young people's over-active imaginations. You know the old saying, 'kids should be seen and not heard'.

Lasowich: Are you saying that the parents and school haven't done their job, and that's why the kids don't know their place?

Smith: I'm not saying they have bad parents. I'm not saying the education system is too liberal. I'm just saying that kids must know their place. They must respect adults, and they can't go running around talking about things they don't know anything about.

Lasowich: What are you saying about the education system?

Smith: I'm glad you asked me that. I've been doing some research on the Performing Arts people in Spring Valley School. You may not realize this, but their English teacher was arrested in the sixties. I think she was some kind of radical back then. Who knows how she's negatively influencing her students.

Lasowich looked stunned. Smith wasn't finished.

Smith: And my son, John Junior, tells me that the bandmaster is a dissident.

Lasowich: Dissident?

For an investigative reporter, Lasowich was at a loss for words. Mr. Smith wasn't. He was totally prepared to diss' the Campbells and their school.

Smith: You see, my son attends Terra Nova School, my own almamater, and he knows these trouble makers at Spring Valley. My son and his peers are all good kids. There's no punk or heavy metal or other anti-social music in our house or our school.

Lasowich: Music?

Smith: It's all tied together. The other night at the outdoor Spring Valley Band concert, the one that I was wrongfully arrested at, John Junior told me, before he went to go to his Young Republicans meeting, that the band was actually playing that dreadful Political Punk Rock music.

Lasowich: How would your son know if he never listened to it?.

Kim and Scott shouted at the television. “Go get him Lasowich!”

Tommie added, “What the heck is this guy saying?”

“We'll never know if you guys don't be quiet and listen,” Chris scolded.

Smith ignored Lasowich's question.

Smith: Have you ever listened to the lyrics of Political Punk music? It is totally anti-social. It is totally anti-business, anti-adult, anti-everything that has to do with an ordered society. That's what my son tells me. I think the Parent Council should take a close look at the kinds of people at Spring Valley who are teaching the kids. I think the parents should take responsibility, too. I certainly know who's influencing my children.

Kim exclaimed, "How can he bad mouth Mrs. Hardy and Mr. Wagner?"

Smith: I'd just like to say, that kids are great. John Junior himself, is a basketball star and an A student. I am sure he will do impressive things in this world. I'm not saying all kids are immature and dull, but I am saying that we need to make sure that we adults don't lose control of the world. What kind of mess would the world be in if kids were allowed to say — whatever they want — whenever they want — wherever they want?

Lasowich: Mr. Smith, you might be making a few enemies today.

Smith: No, I think most adults watching will agree with me. Kids' opinions DON'T count... until they are adults.

"You mean until they have money in your darn bank!" Tommie shouted at the TV.

"What about the whales?" Kim asked. "We saved the whales! Doesn't anyone care about that?"

"That's yesterday's news, Kim," Chris replied. "The world only cares about what you do today. That's just the way it is."

The Campbells sat in relative silence as they ate their breakfast. The kids were deflated and defeated.

Tommie looked at Chris and asked, "Should we tell them?"

Chapter Two



“I guess now’s as good a time as any,” Chris replied.

“Tell us what?” Kim asked. She was hoping for some good news.

“We sold the diamond,” Tommie announced.

“What?” Scott shouted. “How much did you get for it?” He jumped out of his chair and did a little victory dance in the middle of the kitchen.

“Enough,” Chris replied. “Sit down before you break a leg.”

Scott was out of his slump.

Kim still didn’t look happy. “When did you sell it?” Kim asked.

“Your mother and I sold the diamond a few nights ago. We’re millionaires!”

“Sweeeeet!” Scott proclaimed, as he sat back down and grabbed his orange juice. He raised it in the air and said, “Take THAT Mr. Smith! Good wins over evil! To the Campbells!”

Tommie and Chris raised their juice glasses, and toasted, “To the Campbells!”

Kim still wasn’t celebrating. “We were supposed to discuss this. You said you wanted our opinion.”

“What’s with you Kim?” Scott barked. “We’re rich! What’s your problem?”

“We know where that diamond came from!” Kim declared. “We shouldn’t profit from other people’s misfortune.”

“We gave the LeHops money to Mr. Klein and Green Harmony,” Chris explained. “They’ll do a lot of good with it. Your mom and I thought our family could do something positive with this money.”

“Wow, I don’t believe this!” Kim exploded. “You guys are trying to rationalize what you did. I don’t think it’s right!”

“Get over it, Kim!” Scott demanded. “We’ve got tons of money now. Like Dad said, we can do a lot of good with it, if we want. Don’t you get it?” Scott couldn’t understand why Kim was being so stubborn. “Besides, you were the one that suggested we give Mr. Klein the check and keep the diamond for ourselves.”

“Yeah, but that was before we knew it was probably a conflict diamond, and that the people who mined it might have sold it to buy guns to kill their neighbors!”

“Kim, we don’t know that,” Tommie insisted. “Besides, sometimes we just have to

look past...”

DING... DONG...

Tommie was happy for the distraction. “Who could that be at this time of the morning?” Tommie said. She rushed to the door.

“Check the peephole first,” Chris shouted. “It could be reporters.”

Tommie took his advice and peered through the glass. “It’s Mr. Klein!” she announced and flung open the door to greet their neighbor.

“Mrs. Campbell,” Mr. Klein said.

“Mr. Klein, what a surprise. Come in. What can we do for you?”

“I would like to speak with your family.”

“We’re just having breakfast,” Tommie replied. “Please join us in the kitchen.”

“Thank you Mrs. Campbell.”

Tommie escorted Mr. Klein to the kitchen. They sat down at the table with the rest of the family.

“Mr. Klein, how are you?” Kim asked.

“I’m fine, Young Lady.”

“I got your mail,” Scott said. “It’s right there on the counter.”

“Thank you Scott. You’re right, I came over to collect my mail, but I also want to update you on the donation you made to Green Harmony. We have applied the resources to finance the monitoring of the whale population LeHops had been harvesting.”

“That’s fantastic!” Kim said.

Mr. Klein wasn’t finished, and added, “We also invested money in training and education programs to assist the children who were used as slave laborers in the mines. You caused such a global scandal, LeHops had no choice but to change their mining methods — for the betterment of humanity and the environment.”

The family was feeling pretty good about themselves, until...

“But they sold the diamond!” Kim blurted out. “The one that came from LeHops’s pet food company. And we’re keeping the money. That just can’t be right!”

Mr. Klein pondered the situation for a moment, and replied, “Kim, I understand your predicament. You don’t think it’s right to profit from someone else’s misfortune. Am I right?”

“Yes. That’s it. Sure I’d like to be rich, but...”

Mr. Klein interjected. “Perhaps I can help you see the situation from what I believe may be your parents’ perspective.”

“Please do,” Tommie requested.

“You see Kim, you and your family did not set out to intentionally harm anyone. You did not knowingly purchase dog food made from whales, that were killed to provide oil to LeHops.”

Kim knew where he was heading with this logic. “No, you’re right, and we did expose LeHops, and saved whales and children, but...”

Mr. Klein cut her off and proposed, “Perhaps you should think of it this way. What if you helped to find a bank robber? Would the bank not pay you a reward?”

“Probably,” Kim replied.

“Well, think of the diamond as a reward for your efforts.”

“A reward? The fact that we helped you and the whales and the miners should be reward enough.”

“You are a very special young lady,” Mr. Klein complimented.

“She’s SPECIAL all right,” Scott said sarcastically. “She doesn’t want us to be millionaires. Think of what we can do with the money!”

“Scott,” Tommie snapped. She thought Mr. Klein was getting through to Kim. The last thing she needed was Scott opening his big mouth.

Mr. Klein surprised Tommie. “Scott is right. You must understand that things happen for a reason. I suggest you accept the money, and put it to good use.”

Tommie was pleased with his logic. “That’s good advice.”

“Like what?” Kim asked. “What would be a good use for it?”

“I’m sure you and your family will find an excellent answer to that very question,” Mr. Klein replied and got up from the table.

Scott took this as a sign he was ready to leave. He rushed to the counter, gathered up Mr. Klein’s mail, and handed it to him.

“Thanks Scott. As it turns out, I’m on my way out of town again. Would you mind?”

“No problem,” Scott answered. “I’d be happy to pick up your mail.”

“Where to this time?” Kim asked.

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

It was Mr. Klein’s cell phone.

“Excuse me, I must take this.” He answered his phone. “Hello? ...Okay. ...I see,” he said and hung up.

Mr. Klein turned his attention back to the Campbells, announcing, “I’m afraid I must run. Thank you for your help.” He looked directly at Kim and added, “And Kim, I am confident you will put the money to good use.”

Mr. Klein then hurried to the door, and before anyone could respond, he was gone.

“That was a little weird,” Chris commented.

“It’s Mr. Klein. What do you expect?” Tommie laughed.

Scott sat back down at the kitchen table. They were finishing up their breakfast when...

DING... DONG...

Chapter Three



“Good grief. Now who?” Tommie asked.

“I’ll get it,” Chris said. He walked over to the door and looked through the peephole. “It’s your parents!” Chris opened the door.

Erin burst into the house, blasted past Chris, and headed to the kitchen. Lanny followed. Erin was on a mission and Lanny was along for the ride.

“What’s up, Mom?” Tommie asked.

“What’s up? How can you be so cool at a time like this? Scott and Kim have been attacked by that idiot banker, Smith. He’s undermining all the good they’ve been accomplishing. I still think he’s the real Ring Master. You’ve got to do something about this!”

Kim and Scott were shocked. “Like WHAT Grandma?”

Tommie repeated, “Like what, Mom?”

“Erin, calm down,” Lanny ordered. He turned to the family and explained, “We were at the zoo this morning. She’s been frothing at the mouth ever since she saw that interview. Your Grandmother’s out of control!”

“That was YOU trying to get to Smith!” Scott announced.

“Yes, that was your grandmother,” Lanny confirmed.

Erin trumpeted, “I am NOT out of control! I just refuse to let that scumbag, badmouth my grandkids. Tommie, Chris, what are you going to do about it?”

Chris and Tommie were speechless. The kids were amazed.

“You need to get the message out — that kids’ opinions STILL count!” Erin proclaimed.

“How do you propose they do that?” Chris asked. He wasn’t expecting an answer — just more ranting and raving. It was in the family genes.

“Use the Internet, how else!” Erin declared.

“Okay, Mom. Rein it in a bit,” Tommie ordered.

“I think I should be able to speak my mind in front of my family!”

Tommie thought her mom was getting carried away. “Do you realize you just barged into the house and demanded the kids take on John Smith?”

“Yes, I do realize that. And I think they should start their own Internet site to do it!

You missed that part, Daughter.”

‘Daughter,’ Tommie thought. ‘She’s really serious when she calls me, Daughter.’

The wheels were turning in the kids’ heads.

“What would we do on this site, Grandma?” Kim asked.

Erin was ready with an answer. “You kids can establish an Internet site so your generation can share information — and voice your own opinions. Like the old underground news...”

Lanny gave Erin a look. She stopped in mid-sentence.

Tommie and Chris were shocked now.

“That’s a coool idea!” Kim proclaimed.

“KidsOpinionsCount.com... that’s what we’ll call it!” Scott exclaimed. “All one word with caps at the beginning of each word.”

“Right, and the acronym is KOC,” Kim followed. “Whoops,” she giggled. Kim couldn’t help but get excited about the idea. “We can do all sorts of things on the site. We can get kids to contribute articles and opinions and stuff.”

“It’ll kick butt!” Scott proclaimed.

“And we can use the diamond money to do it!” Kim added. “I think this is exactly the kind of project Mr. Klein had in mind.”

Lanny and Erin looked surprised now. “Klein? Again? What does HE have to do with this?”

“Nothing, Mom.”

“You just missed him Grandma,” Scott explained. “He was just here.”

“Like ships passing in the night,” Lanny commented and laughed.

BEEEEEP... BEEEEEP...

Lanny looked down at his watch. “We have to go Erin. We need to get back to the zoo. The daycare field trip will be arriving soon. We’re supposed to be there to greet them.”

“What are you two doing at the zoo?” Tommie asked.

“Volunteering. You should do more of it, Tommie,” Erin commanded.

“Maybe, when I retire.”

“She can help the kids with their web site,” Lanny offered. He thought he was getting Tommie off the hook.

“Okay, you help the kids,” Erin said. She turned toward Scott and Kim and added, “I want results. And Chris, you make sure you help too. Make it a family project.”

Lanny got up and pulled Erin’s chair away from the table. She was still sitting in it.

“I get the hint,” Erin said as she stood up. Together, they walked toward the door. Erin opened it and she and Lanny hustled outside. Before the family was out of earshot, and before the door closed, Erin turned around and shouted, “Kids’ opinions count!”

“Man, what’s with Grandma?” Scott asked.

“She’s on some mission,” Tommie exclaimed.

“What’s it matter? She’s right!” Kim declared. “And she had a fantastic idea. Let’s do it!”

“What choice do we have?” Chris opined. “I’m sure she’ll be back to check up on us.”

“I have to admit,” Tommie confessed, “it is a great idea. You kids could even think about reviewing games and movies and books — talk about kids’ issues — set up chat

rooms on special topics — and I can market the site.”

“That’s what you do eh Mom?” Scott teased.

“Yes, I am a marketeer and proud of it.”

“Tiffany Cheers you’re not!” Scott laughed.

“I said marketeer not mouseketeer — you little rodent.”

“All right, Mom! Give it to rat face,” Kim chimed in.

“Look who’s talking, mousy girl,” Scott fought back.

“Drowned rat,” Kim returned.

“Mall rat,” Scott replied.

“Rat boy,” Kim shouted.

“Ratboy? Do you even know what a ratboy is?” Scott challenged Kim.

“You’re a boy and you’re a rat — rat boy.”

“You’re a girl and you’re an idiot — girlfriend.”

Kim looked a little guilty. “Okay, I get the message. I went a little off-topic.”

Tommie and Chris wondered what just happened. “Excuse me?” Tommie said.

“Mom, you need to get with the program. I said rat — boy and Scott thought I said ratboy,” Kim explained.

“You did say ratboy. What am I missing?” Tommie inquired.

“Rat boy — like in two words — just means he’s a boy rat. Scott thought I said ratboy — as in one word — and that means something totally different.”

“It’s still clear as mud,” Chris admitted. “Explain, please.”

“Ratboy is slang. And so is girlfriend,” Kim reported.

“Like cool — groovy — far out — out of sight?” Chris asked.

“No, it’s drug slang,” Scott clarified.

“How would you guys know drug slang?” Tommie barked.

“You don’t have to use it to hear it! I don’t listen to hip-hop, but I know Kim’s chopped,” Scott replied.

Kim looked really ticked-off at Scott. She also knew what ‘chopped’ meant. She wanted to respond, but she saw a look in Tommie’s eyes that said — quit while you’re ahead — so she did. She hoped that Scott would do the same.

“Do we need a slang dictionary to make sure everything they call each other falls within acceptable guidelines?” Tommie asked Chris.

He laughed and replied, “So what makes ratboy and whatever Scott said, bad?”

“Mom, ratboy is drug slang for a human laboratory rat. You know, a guy who the dealers test drugs on. And girlfriend is a street word for cocaine,” Scott explained.

“I forgot, bag rat,” Kim announced. “Oops. Sorry Mom. That one just slipped out.”

“Oh, that one I do get — and I think it’s time that you both bag ratted for your dad and me. How’s next weekend sound?”

“Okay Tommie, are you going to tell me what a rat bag is?” Chris asked.

“Bag rat, Chris. Are you square or what? Golf caddy.”

“Excellent Dudette!” Chris replied in his best hippie talk.

“Right back at ya Dude. This will be far out!” Tommie sixtied back at him.

“I can dig it! Can you dig it?” Chris asked the kids.

“You two sure are old!” Scott said.

Tommie looked majorly bummed out. Kim decided to change the topic. “We need to get back to the web site,” she demanded. “Where are we going to do this, and who’s

going to help us?”

Chris jumped on the opportunity to get back on track. “I can set up the hardware and software.”

“I’ll register the domain name,” Scott said. “KidsOpinionsCount.”

“And I can start to think about what we’ll do on the site, and how to incorporate other kids’ inputs,” Kim offered. “We also have to figure out how we’ll tell kids about the site and how to keep them coming back!”

“Well, I can help you with that,” Tommie said.

“Mom, can you and Dad stay home today?” Scott asked.

“Why?”

“To work on our project!”

Chris looked at Tommie and asked, “What do you think?”

Chapter Four



Tommie nodded at Chris. They were as excited about the Internet site as the kids. “Okay,” Tommie said. “We’ll all take the day off and work on this.”

The web site project was divided up into specific tasks for each family member.

Chris had the technology, applications and operations challenge.

Tommie had to figure out how to tell everyone about the site.

Scott and Kim’s tasks were to develop the site content and decide what services to offer. They needed to devise a good strategy to differentiate KidsOpinionsCount.com from all the others.

By the end of the day, the four of them had so many ideas, their brains were ready to explode.

It was 4:30, as the family gathered around the kitchen table. Tommie had planned ahead and ordered pizza. The family chowed down and discussed what they had done.

Kim began by saying, “Scott and I developed a plan.” Her laptop was sitting on the table. She opened it up and turned it on. “Scott and I think we have a solid concept here. We figure the site will continuously evolve, so we don’t need to worry about getting it perfect — just getting it started. Are you with me so far?”

“Yeah, I think so,” Chris replied.

“I get it,” Tommie answered. “As long as we get it launched with content that draws kids to it — we can keep adjusting it — to maintain their interest and to broaden the user base. It’s what all the fast food places do. They draw you in with a special offer and keep changing the promos to make sure you come back.”

“I’m inspired!” Chris exclaimed. “Why don’t you walk us through your plan.”

Kim obliged. “Okay, here we go. We’ll start with the Vision.” Kim pressed, Next Page, and up popped the Vision Statement in bold print and flashing colors. She continued, “The Vision of the KidsOpinionsCount Internet site is to enable kids to share opinions and information, and with that, gain knowledge to affect their future.”

“Very impressive,” Chris said.

“Simple but powerful,” Tommie complimented.

Scott contributed, “We think we can do things like we did with the diamond industry — only we’ll probably try to make smaller changes — they can’t all be global like that one.”

“Probably not,” Chris agreed.

Scott picked up from where Kim left off. He pressed the Next Page button, and the Mission Statement appeared. Scott read, “The Mission of our site, is to provide kids between the ages of 13 and 19, with an Internet site to voice their opinions. This site will respect the value of their contribution. Our Mission is to help organizations meet the social, educational, health and consumer interests and needs of us kids.”

“So, how will our site do this?” Chris asked.

“We’ll set up a survey business,” Kim offered.

“What for?” Tommie inquired.

“So that we can give organizations a place where they can talk to kids directly — and collect information that will help them understand us better,” Kim explained. “We’ll provide kids with membership to the KidsOpinionsCount.com global survey and opinion site. We’ll empower kids by giving them a chance to voice their opinions to an audience who really wants and needs to know what they think.”

“Yeah, I see where you’re going with this. We can make this a business, and then use the proceeds to support all of the other stuff we want to have on our site,” Tommie summarized.

“Right, and the business is actually something that will be a GOOD thing,” Chris laughed.

Kim clicked again and another page appeared. She read, “KidsOpinionsCount.com specializes in fulfilling our client’s online research and opinion survey requirements by posting their self-completion surveys on our web site. We provide our services to organizations responsible for monitoring, developing, influencing and implementing social, health, consumer, educational and economic policies affecting youth.”

“That’s a mouthful!” Chris said.

“I’m not finished,” Kim replied. “We are independent and responsible only to our members.”

“This is truly inspirational!” Tommie exclaimed. “So how many members do you think you can get?”

“I have some numbers that show how big we could grow,” Scott responded. “I pulled them off the Internet. Do you want to hear them?”

“They’ve done their homework!” Chris announced.

Scott began by saying, “I found out that kids and teens are the two largest growth sectors on the Internet. Experts say that by next year the number of global users under the age of 18 — will be over 80 million — and almost half of the growth will come from North America.”

“Eighty million kids on one site! Can you handle that Chris?” Tommie teased.

“No problem! Bring ‘em on!”

Chris had no idea what he was getting into. The Campbells talked well into the evening about their project. By 10:00 they were mentally exhausted and headed to bed. Scott, Kim and Tommie’s dreams were filled with even more ideas of what to do with the site.

Chris however, wasn’t so fortunate. “NO!” he screamed out in his sleep...

Chapter Five



...As the spitballs descended upon him. He was at the front of a classroom filled with a gazillion students and they were revolting. He didn't have enough power to run the web site... and they weren't happy. Then... his server crashed, and 80 million bazillion kids were now firing spitballs at him... relentlessly... He cowered in the corner of the classroom a shook like a leaf.

"Wake up Chris! You're having a nightmare," Tommie said shaking him.

"What?" Chris said as he groggily got his bearings. "Oh, I'm home and in bed... thank goodness."

"Where did you think you were?" Tommie asked.

"In H E double hockey sticks... that's where," he muttered. "I've got lots of work to do today to make sure that site is secure, redundant, robust and uncrashable!"

Tommie shook her head. She could only imagine what he had been dreaming about. 'At least it wasn't another woman,' she thought and laughed.

Before long, Scott and Kim were walking through the school doors. They found a revolt of sorts of their own. The band kids were hovering outside the band room. They were trying to hear what was being said behind the closed door.

Scott approached one of the band kids and asked, "What's up, Sara?"

"Principal Toole's in there with Mr. Wagner. I think Wagner's in big trouble for giving us Political Punk music."

"What?"

"Thanks to you and Alex — and your big bust last week!" Sara added.

"Huh?"

"Let me dumb it down for you, Scott. That stupid Mr. Smith blew the whistle on us yesterday on TV — and now Principal Toole is probably firing Mr. Wagner."

"Is this about the music you guys play?"

"Of course it is!"

"No way. You should be allowed to play whatever you want! If you want to play Po Punk, then you can!"

"Tell that to the Parent Council," Sara exploded.

“They can’t stop you!”

“Oh yes they can,” Jeremy, another band member, declared. “We’re supposed to be a free country, but that’s just garbage.”

“What can we do?” Kim asked.

Scott already had an idea and blurted it out. “We’re starting our own web site! When we get it up and running, you guys can all voice your opinions on our site — free from censorship.”

“Really?”

“Sure! They can’t censor our site. It’s on the Internet. We can put whatever we want on the Internet!”

Just then, the band room door opened, and out walked Principal Toole. He was delivering his parting speech.

“I’m sorry Mr. Wagner, but all music must be approved by our Parent Council before you give it to the students. That’s the way it has to be.”

Mr. Wagner remained in his classroom. He was wondering how to deal with this challenge. He saw the kids outside his door, and was surprised to hear how they were reacting to Principal Toole’s edict.

“See Scott. We told you. They’re censoring him and us!” Sara declared.

Scott spoke up, “Principal Toole, shouldn’t the students be able to decide what music they want to play?”

Principal Toole looked at the students and declared, “Don’t you have a class to go to?”

“The bell hasn’t rung!” Jeremy replied, just as Alex and Amy arrived on the scene.

“Why can’t they play their own music?” Kim asked. “You guys didn’t even know it was punk until Mr. Smith told everyone.”

“Yeah,” Scott said. “It should be student council’s decision — and Alex and I want to let them play what they want to.”

“I’m afraid not, Scott. This is a moral and ethical issue that the Parent Council has to deal with.”

“What? We don’t have morals or ethics?” Alex piped in.

“Apparently not — if you play punk music.”

“Have you ever listened to it?” Jeremy challenged.

“I can’t stand the noise.”

“It’s not noise — and have you ever listened to the lyrics?” Kim retorted.

“Parent Council says it’s just a lot of anti-social rantings and swearing.”

“It is NOT!” Scott exclaimed. “How can you comment on something you don’t know anything about?”

“I know that the Parent Council doesn’t like it, so I can’t have it being played in our school.”

“Our mom loves Political Punk!” Scott exclaimed.

“You’re mother?”

“Yes, our mother,” Kim replied. “She listens to the words. And she doesn’t get bent out of shape just because they swear.”

“Swearing isn’t acceptable,” Principal Toole advised.

Mr. Wagner decided to join the kids in the hallway. “But war and poverty and racism is?” Mr. Wagner interjected.

“That’s not what we’re talking about here,” Principal Toole explained. “From what I hear — the lyrics tell kids to F sharp authority — and we just can’t have that.”

“Right, the same authority who makes war — and incites prejudice — and kills children and...” Scott reiterated.

Principal Toole cut him off. “Scott, that’s quite enough. That has nothing to do with the issue here. All we’re trying to do here is...”

Kim rudely interrupted, saying, “Censor us! Censor our Freedom of Speech and right to express ourselves!”

Principal Toole was getting annoyed. “That’s it! I don’t want to have to give you a detention.”

“He wants to put us in jail for speaking what’s on our my minds!” Sara challenged.

BZZZZ...

Principal Toole looked relieved. “Now, get to class. This discussion is over.”

“But we have more to say,” Scott announced.

“Not in this school you don’t. I’m sorry, but that’s final!” Principal Toole declared. He turned his attention from the students, to Mr. Wagner. “Mr. Wagner, I suggest you heed my words — AND — I suggest you make sure your musicians do the same. I’d hate to see your budget reduced by Parent Council.”

Principal Toole turned around and almost goose-stepped down the hallway. He was acting out of character.

‘He must really be under pressure from Parent Council,’ Scott thought.

The kids turned their attention to Mr. Wagner. “What should we do?” Jeremy asked.

“Just keep cool. Give me a chance to think about things, and maybe you can consider voicing your own opinions on this web site that Scott mentioned. But don’t go... Forget I said that. They’re your opinions — say what you want.”

Mr. Wagner walked back into his classroom. He needed his job, and the students needed their band credits. He decided he’d look for some replacement music that would be acceptable, but that might still annoy the Parent Council members. He wanted to exact a little revenge. Within a matter of seconds — it came to him.

“I know what music we’ll learn,” he declared triumphantly. “It’s loud, classical and famous. The kids will love it, and the Parent Council will have to approve it... perfect!”

He quickly sent off an email asking for the Parent Council’s permission to play classical music from specific German operas. “There’s no way they’ll argue with this,” he said, as he began to search through his files for the music.

“So, what’s this about a web site?” Alex asked Scott and Kim. The kids had a few minutes before the second bell would go.

Scott explained as quickly as he could. “Kim and I have a web site all ready to go. It’s called KidsOpinionsCount, all one word, and you can go on and post your opinions about anything you want.”

“When did this happen — and why didn’t I know about it?” Alex asked.

“You were out of town all yesterday — and that’s when it happened,” Kim barked. “Not everything we do has to involve you!”

“What about me?” Amy asked.

“Amy, you were out with your mom. There’ll be tons of opportunity for you to input

as it develops.”

“So, what good will the site be?” Sara challenged.

BZZZZ...

The kids had no time to explain. “Just go to KidsOpinionsCount.com and see for yourself. And I’ll have a page set up for this music issue as soon as I get home!” Scott promised.

The four marched off to Economics class. Their teacher wasn’t in the room yet.

“Did you hear about Smith?” Alex asked.

“That’s why we started the site! Smith trashed us kids — and my Grandma said we have a right to our opinions — and we should start a site.”

“Your Grandma?”

“Yeah. She was really mad — and so were we — so we decided to just do it!”

The kids explained their concept. Amy and Alex were excited about the potential.

“So, what’s happening with the Men Of Business takedown?” Scott asked Alex.

“Nothing. My dad didn’t even seem upset when he found out they released Smith.”

“Really?”

“Yeah really. I don’t know what’s going on.”

“Was he mad that Smith bad-mouthed you on TV?”

“He laughed,” Alex admitted.

“What do you think that means?” Amy asked.

“I have no idea. We should keep checking the newspaper on page twenty and see if the cartoon tells us anything.”

The kids agreed.

“And what about what Smith said about Mrs. Hardy?” Kim asked.

“He’s just trying to make our school look bad,” Alex reasoned. “He’s just a big aaaa...” Alex stopped in mid-sentence, as their teacher, Mr. Somerville, walked into the classroom.

The rest of the day — at every opportunity they had — Amy, Alex, Kim and Scott told students about their new Internet site. The students were pumped — and they told two friends — and they told two friends, and so on, and so on...

When they got home, Tuesday evening, Chris was experiencing déjà vu. And it wasn’t the good kind...

Chapter Six



“What have you kids done?” he shouted from downstairs. Scott and Kim didn’t know if he was curious or mad. They ran downstairs to their game room — where they found Tommie and Chris, sitting in front of new computers, monitors and desks.

“Wow! What did you do?”

“I got the equipment, configured the network, set up the site, and went live. What did YOU do?” Chris returned.

“What?” Kim replied.

Chris pointed to one of the monitors and explained, “There were hundreds of hits, and they were looking for some Po Punk page. The kids had all these comments and emails they wanted posted — so I set a special page up — and it’s hot!”

Scott and Kim noticed all the activity on the screen. “Thanks, Dad!” Scott shouted. “I was going to do it when I got home.”

“We told all the kids to check out our site and write their opinions,” Kim added.

“I had no idea the kids would be so into their rights,” Scott announced.

“Their rights to what?” Tommie inquired.

“Freedom of Speech — Freedom of Expression!” Kim reported. “Our music!”

“What’s this all about?” Chris asked. “The postings came so fast, I didn’t really have time to read many of them.”

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

“That’s my office phone. I want to hear your explanation as soon as I get back,” Tommie warned. She raced upstairs to her office.

“We’ll wait until you get back,” Chris promised.

The kids checked out the new computers, and Chris took them into a back room to show them the mega-server he got to run the whole thing. “I also set this server room up specially to test games,” Chris explained.

“Dad, this is awesome.”

“Well, we have the money and the technology, so I thought I’d make sure we had room for all eighty million members.” Chris went on to explain that the site had back-up systems, the highest level of security for their network and data, and a robust survey capability. It was obvious that Chris went all out. “I have to admit, I had a great time

doing this.”

“And Grandma Erin will be happy,” Kim giggled.

“Wait until Grandma and Grandpa see this!” Scott said, as Tommie walked into the room.

She overheard Scott’s comment and said, “I guess we better show them what we’ve done.”

“Was that her on the phone — checking up on our progress?” Chris asked.

“No, it was RL Bailey, and he has good news.”

Scott’s eyes lit up. “I just thought of something!”

“Don’t change the subject. We still want to hear about this Po Punk page,” Tommie replied.

“No, I’m not changing the subject,” Scott promised.

Kim looked puzzled. “What could Scott be up to?”

“Mom, so what’s happening with your legal case against HucksterCo?” Scott asked.

“I have a long process ahead of me. I think the Feds will likely have their court case against the Freedom of Speech infringements and the illegality of the No-Speaks heard before my problems get resolved. RL has started the discovery phase and he’s getting some interesting documents and information. I’ll let you kids know how things progress.”

“You know, Mom, we think there are all sorts of violations to our right to Freedom of Speech,” Scott declared.

“Like what?”

“Like our music,” Kim replied.

“Right, your music. You were going to tell us about that,” Tommie said.

“The Parent Council won’t let the band play our music!” Scott exclaimed.

Kim figured out where Scott was heading and beat him to the punch. “Mom, can you find out if we have a case against the Parent Council?”

“For what?”

“For not letting Mr. Wagner, the band teacher, teach the band music they want to play. Isn’t that against Freedom of Expression?”

“What are you talking about?”

“Thanks to big mouth Smith,” Scott explained, “Mr. Wagner’s in big trouble. Parent Council must have read the riot act to Toole this morning. He was really mad at Mr. Wagner, and wasn’t being fair at all.”

“We told the kids we’d set up a page so they could voice their opinions,” Kim explained.

“I guess they couldn’t wait,” Scott added.

“That explains things,” Chris said.

“Mr. Wagner? Is that the band teacher’s name?” Tommie asked.

“Yeah. Why?”

“Oh, that’s just kinda funny, that’s all.”

“Why?”

“Well, there was a composer in the 1800’s named Wagner, who was a real revolutionary. He changed a lot of things in music, and he also made a lot of not-too-popular statements that got him into hot water,” Tommie explained. “I don’t know enough about his story to say if he was right or wrong.”

“So, he had no Freedom of Speech,” Kim remarked.

“He’s one of those people who history has written a lot of things about, and it’s hard to separate fact from fiction.”

“If it’s history — how can it be fiction?” Scott asked.

“It all depends on who’s interpreting the events,” Tommie declared.

“If it’s history — there IS no interpretation,” Kim announced.

“Oh yes there is,” Tommie countered. “Big time.”

“Do you think Mr. Wagner is related?”

“No, I doubt it,” Tommie laughed. “Just a coincidence. Maybe he should get your band to play Wagner’s music. That might set some people on their tushes.”

“Mom, you’re bad,” Kim giggled.

“Actually, you’re right. Forget I mentioned this. I’m talking about something I don’t know enough about to comment intelligently. Let’s get back to your question about Freedom of Expression. It doesn’t seem right that some uninformed Parent Council can stop the band from playing what they want to. I’ll ask RL about that.”

“I knew you’d help,” Scott said. “I told Principal Toole you love Po Punk as much as we do.”

“Oh, I’m sure that impressed him,” Chris joked. “Did you tell him I was a head-banger?”

“No Dad!”

“So what did Toole say?” Chris asked.

“I don’t think he knew what to say,” Scott replied. “Kim and I told him he needed to read the lyrics — and not just bad mouth something he doesn’t know anything about.”

“Oh, I bet you got yourself a few brownie points for that one... not!” Chris sighed.

“Land of the free... What a joke,” Kim declared.

“It’s reality. We all think we’re able to do what we want, but really, we’re just doing what the people who make money make us think we want to do,” Scott said.

“There’s no use resisting, you live in the land of the free,” Kim sang out a line of a Pennywise song.

“They’re free to control your life, land of the free,” Tommie sang.

“They’re free to control your mind, land of the free,” Chris added.

“No use resisting, we live in the land of the free,” Scott finished the chorus and then added his next two cents worth...

Chapter Seven



“Resistance is futile... You will be assimilated.”

Kim rolled her eyes. “Yeah, we get it Trekki boy.”

Tommie got the conversation back on track. “So — whose decision was this again?” Tommie asked.

“Principal Toole said it was Parent Council,” Scott replied.

“Now don’t you wish I was on Parent Council?”

“What could you do?” Scott challenged. “They’d just think you were some kind of radical, and probably throw you out. Mom, you think way to differently than most adults.”

“I’m likely more valuable to your cause — helping with the web site — than fighting the Parent Council, anyway.”

“Odds-on you’re right Tommie,” Chris agreed.

“So, did you get any sponsors or advertisers today Mom?” Kim asked.

“You bet. I got some corporate sponsors today, including, and I know you’ll guys will like this, Addictive Games!”

“Mom! You rock!” Scott shouted.

“No, I Po Punk Rock.”

The kids shook their heads and rolled their eyes.

“Okay, back to being a normal mom,” Tommie declared. “You kids grab yourselves something to eat. There’s sandwiches in the fridge and I’ve got soup in the microwave. You can bring it downstairs, and we can check out the web site.”

The Campbells gathered in the game room to read over the postings and continue to work on the web site. They worked diligently through the evening until...

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

“I’ll get it,” Tommie said. She disappeared for five minutes and returned, excitedly explaining, “That was RL. They set a court date for the no-speak case. Some head honcho Federal Prosecutor is coming in especially for this trial.”

“When is it Mom?” Scott asked.

“In six weeks. That’s not much time for them to prepare.”

“Are you going to it?” Kim inquired.

“I most certainly am!”

“Wow! That’s neat. Can Scott and I go?”

“Maybe you should talk to your teachers and see if you can go. I think it would be a great experience.”

“Did you ask him about the Freedom of Speech issue and Mr. Wagner?” Kim asked.

“Yes, I did. He thinks you kids have terrific insight. Hey, maybe I can talk to your Principal about letting you attend the trial.”

“Great Mom!”

Chris yawned. “It’s getting late. I think we should get to bed.”

“But Daaaad...”

“No buts. Upstairs you two.”

The kids were exhausted. They slept like logs, until...

KABOOOOM...

The earth shook.

Everyone in the house woke up.

“What was that?” Scott shouted.

Kim ran into Scott’s room and yelled, “That sounded like an explosion!”

Tommie and Chris sat up in their bed. They looked at their clock.

“It’s two in the morning! What the heck was that?” Tommie asked.

“I don’t know,” Chris admitted. “That sounded like it was right outside our backdoor! We need to check on the kids.”

Tommie and Chris jumped out of bed and ran to Kim’s room. She wasn’t there.

“Kim! Where are you?” Tommie shouted.

“I’m in Scott’s room.”

“What are you doing there?”

“I don’t know, I panicked. What can I say.”

Tommie and Chris joined Kim and Scott in his room.

KABOOOOM...

“Another one!” Chris declared.

“That does sound like it came from out back,” Tommie exclaimed. They all rushed downstairs and out the kitchen patio door.

Off in the distance, they could see flames flickering on the water.

Kim looked at Scott. Before they could speak, Chris said, “That looks like it’s over by the skateboard park.”

“Let’s see what the TV is reporting,” Tommie directed. They all rushed back inside and turned on the TV in the family room. They tuned it to CCTV. A rerun of the ‘A Team’ was on.

“We’ll wait a few minutes and see if there’s any news,” Chris suggested.

“We can watch the fire on the water through the family room window and on the TV,” Tommie said. They all sat down and made sure they had a good view of both.

KABOOOOM...

The family jumped out of their seats.

Scott looked upset. He turned to Kim and whispered, “We didn’t even know about it!”

“That dumb Alex probably knew,” Kim replied quietly.

Tommie overheard and asked, “Knew what?”

“Oh, nothing,” Kim said.

Chris and Tommie instinctively knew there was more to this. “What exactly are you two trying to cover up?” Tommie asked.

“Nothing! Ghee Mom,” Scott whined. “Why are you always looking for conspiracies where there aren’t any.”

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

“Who’s phoning at this hour?” Chris barked.

“It’s my cell,” Scott declared. He ran upstairs to answer it.

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

Tommie turned to Kim. “I think that’s yours. Let me guess,” she shouted after Kim, as she ran for the stairs, “Amy perhaps?”

Chris shouted, “No more calls tonight or you’ll be grounded for a week.”

The kids looked at each other and chuckled.

“And no emailing either. I can check you know.”

Their grins turned to pouts as they answered their respective cell phones.

Scott picked up his phone first.

“Scott, did you hear the explosions?” Alex asked.

“Of course I heard the explosions! I can see the fire from my window! Why didn’t you tell us your dad’s sting was tonight?”

“It isn’t my dad’s sting. He’s as surprised as the rest of the city.”

“Then who set this up?” Scott asked.

“My dad has no idea.”

“Did he tell you that?”

“No, but he’s acting weird,” Alex remarked. “It’s like things are out of his control — and he’s freaking out.”

“What’s he doing now?”

“I think he’s meeting with Mr. Montgomery.”

“Maybe Mr. Montgomery set this up.”

“I don’t think so. He’s the one that called here!” Alex announced.

“Man. Who could be behind this?”

“I don’t know. Hey, it looks like Lasowich is on the tube. I wanna watch this. I’ll call you back later.”

“No, my dad’s mad.”

“I’ll email you.”

“That’s out, too. We’ll meet up at school,” Scott said and hung up.

Kim was having a similar conversation with Amy, who explained to Kim, “No, my dad doesn’t seem to know what’s happening. He’s wiggling out.”

Scott burst into Kim’s room and announced, “Lasowich is on TV.”

“Amy,” Kim started to explain.

“I heard. Talk to you tomorrow.”

Kim hung up, and the two raced downstairs to the family room to rejoin Chris and Tommie. They were shocked at what they saw!

Chapter Eight



Alan Lasowich of CCTV reported:

Lasowich: A few minutes ago, the people of Center City were awakened by the sound of some tremendous explosions. I'm here on the site of the Borders and BMX Park in Center City.

KHHHH... KHHHH...

The screen went black and the words, 'We're Having Technical Difficulties', flashed up on the TV.

"Darn, the picture's gone!" Kim declared.

"How did Lasowich get there so fast?" Tommie asked Chris.

"Right place, right time?" Chris replied.

"In the middle of the night? I doubt it."

RING... RING...

Tommie ran to the kitchen and grabbed the phone.

"Mom? What are you doing calling at this hour?"

"Did you see the explosion and fire?" Erin asked.

"We're watching it on the news AND out our window."

"Did you get that web site up and running!"

"Huh? Auuuh, yeah, why?"

"Good. Oh, the TV's back on," Erin said. "Your dad and I will be going out of town for awhile. Water our houseplants will you?"

"Where are you going?" Tommie asked.

CLICK... MMMM...

"She hung up on me!" Tommie exclaimed.

"What the heck is she doing calling at this time of night?"

"She wanted to know if we saw the explosion, and if we got the web site up."

"You're kidding," Chris replied.

"I wish I were. And she says her and Dad are going out of town for a while."

"Where?"

“I don’t know — she just hung up!”

“Shush. Lasowich is back on,” Kim said.

Lasowich: This is Alan Lasowich of CCTV at the Boarders and BMX Park. We have just witnessed the successful conclusion of a sting operation that had been organized by authorities and executed, minutes ago.

Lasowich called out, “Detective Nash! Detective Nash!”

He turned to his cameraman. “Get him on camera.”

“Detective Nash, can we get a statement for CCTV!”

Nash walked toward Lasowich and stood beside him. He was ready to talk.

Lasowich: Can you please tell our viewers what happened here this evening?

Nash: Once we had all the criminals off the boats, and before we could get our special inspection teams on board, the boats exploded. It seems that the criminals had a plan to destroy evidence if they were caught.

Lasowich: That explains the explosions. Can you tell us now, which criminals you arrested? Was The Ring Master involved?

Nash: Five men have been arrested. We suspect they are part of a Men Of Business operation to smuggle goods, drugs and people, into the country through a tunnel system that had been built by the Nazis during World War Two.

Lasowich: That’s amazing! How long have you been working on this operation, and what other authorities have been helping?

Nash: This was entirely a Center City Police sting operation. We got a tip from a confidential source.

Lasowich: So, who were these men you arrested?

Nash: The five men we took into custody are, Chang, Devries, Lee, Smith and Singh. They are presumed innocent until proven guilty in a court of law.

“He didn’t mention Huckster or Gorky. They weren’t there!” Scott whispered to Kim.

“Rats,” Kim acknowledged as they continued to watch the TV.

Lasowich: So, Mr. John Smith, was indeed the man responsible for laundering the money for the Men Of Business.

Nash: No comment.

Lasowich: Are you hopeful that Smith’s arrest, along with the others, will make a big dent in organized crime in the area?

Nash: No comment.

Lasowich: Is there anything you can say to the my viewers?

Nash: I can say — that it is up to all of the citizens of our city — to work together to ensure that this kind of thing doesn’t have to happen again. We need to say no to crime, whether it’s street crime, blackmarketeering or white collar. Now, Mr. Lasowich, I’d like to know how it was that you were here with a crew — before the explosions occurred.

Lasowich: I have my confidential sources, too.

As Nash was trying to find out Lasowich’s source, his officers were dragging a man toward a police car that was parked just to the left of them.

“It’s Smith!” Lasowich shouted. He and his cameraman followed the officers and Smith toward the police car.

“Mr. Smith, do you have anything to say to the citizens of Center City? Are you ready

to confess, again?” Lasowich taunted. “Shall I find some ants? How about an apology to the good citizens of Center City for trusting you all these years. And maybe a special apology to those kids you trashed! I’d say their opinions count, big time, right now.”

Smith turned to Lasowich and declared, “I’m innocent!”

The police shoved him into the back of their car and screamed off into the night. Sirens blared and lights flashed. It sure looked like they had a criminal in their car.

Lasowich pulled out his cell phone and placed a call, live on TV.

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

Tommie ran to the kitchen and grabbed the phone.

“Hello?”

“Mrs. Campbell?”

“Yes.”

Chris, Scott and Kim joined Tommie in the kitchen. They could hear both halves of the conversation.

“Mom, you’re on TV!” Scott exclaimed.

Tommie looked worried.

“Mrs. Campbell, this is Alan Lasowich. I’m sure by now you know that there were some explosions in the harbor.”

“Yes, we’re watching your report on TV.”

“Then you know that the police arrested John Smith, again.”

“Yes, we saw.”

“We’d like a statement from your kids.”

Scott was jumping around like HE had ants in his pants. He was tugging at the phone, just dying to say something.

Tommie shook her head and said, “I’m afraid I’ll have to respect the wishes of the police force, and not comment at this time.”

“But Mrs. Campbell, it looks like your kids were right last week. Don’t you think they have a right to rebuke the rude comments that Smith made about them?”

“No comment,” Tommie replied.

Before Tommie could hang up, Scott took the receiver from her, and he and Kim both shouted their mantra directly into the phone...

Chapter Nine



“Kids’ opinions count! Check out our web site!”

Lasowich laughed.

Lasowich: Well, you heard it here first, folks. Kids’ opinions count. That’s just what I was going to say. I’ll be bringing you updates as they become available.

KHHHH... KHHHH...

The screen went black again. The family waited for ten minutes, but the picture never came back on.

“Okay, I think we know all there is to know,” Chris said. “Up to bed and no phone or emails. I’ll know.”

The kids were exhausted. They weren’t going to put up a fight. They dragged their rears up the stairs and fell into their beds.

As the family slept, CCTV managed to regain their ability to transmit — and Lasowich delivered more reports. He made numerous references to Kim, Scott, Amy and Alex — and he also mentioned the KidsOpinionsCount web site.

Thanks to the publicity from Mr. Smith’s arrest, and the Men Of Business take down in Center City, the media was now building KOC’s membership and popularity. The story went national and they were famous overnight.

The family awoke to a site gone wild. Everyone and their dog wanted to upload surveys — become a member — do a survey — or post a comment about something.

The Campbells tried their best to keep up with the requests and the demands on the capacity.

KOC was up and running. Actually, it was in warp drive. For the next three days, Chris and Tommie took time off work to deal with the activity. By Friday evening, the KidsOpinionsCount.com site was a force to be reckoned with.

The kids were posting reviews of games, movies, TV, music, other Internet sites — you name it. Addictive Games was so impressed with Scott’s game reviews, they asked him to test their products in development. The kids were ecstatic. This was quite the honor.

The Contributor's Comment/Issues Section became a ranting and raving and raging success, too. In addition to the Political Punk page activity, the Comment/Issues Section was receiving some very mature, insightful and surprising articles. In particular, the kids were really getting a strong reaction to the following contribution that came in Saturday morning.

Dear KidsOpinionsCount Friends,

You've got a cool site! All my friends love it! I'd like to suggest that you start a new issues page. I don't know what to call it. Maybe 'What's the Skinny?' or 'The Skinny Scheme.' They're plays on words because it'll be dedicated to talking about weight problems, junk food and stuff like that.

Here's why I think you should start one.

My name is Katie and I'm mad as hell (I hope it's okay to say this) and I'm not going to take it any more! I hope you kids read this and do what I'm doing. I'm not buying any more junk food and I'll tell you why. I've just been diagnosed with diabetes, and I'm only thirteen years old. It can happen to you!

Diabetes is closely linked to overweight, poor nutrition and inactivity. Millions of people get diabetes every year, and lots of these are kids. Tons of us don't even know we have it because doctors don't even think we have it. There's lots of other things that have the same symptoms, but if you are always thirsty, always tired, always going to the bathroom, losing weight and have blurred vision... you just might have diabetes.

So what? Big deal you may say. I'll just take some drugs and get rid of it.

Well, I'm here to tell you, you can't! There is no cure! Once you get it, you have to test your blood sugar every day. You have to change your diet and lifestyle, and even give yourself insulin injections with a needle. There's no miracle pill yet! You're stuck with it for life, and diabetes increases our risk of blindness, heart disease, circulatory disease, high blood pressure, kidney disease and amputation. You don't have to be old to suffer.

I know you're thinking that it'll never happen to you. But it can! One in four of us are overweight and lots more of us don't eat healthy foods or even exercise... that's why diabetes has become an epidemic. Hey, it must be an important issue if the soap operas are even doing stories on it. Remember Raul? They're even dealing with it on their make-believe web site... so I think KidsOpinionsCount should really deal with these issues on your real web site.

So what's the message I'm trying to get across? Take care of yourself... no one will do it for you. It's simple, you don't have to be skinny to be healthy, but if you are eating junk food, not exercising and putting on the pounds, you are putting yourself at risk... serious risk. If you are eating well, exercising and still carrying a few more pounds than some of your friends... don't sweat it. There is no perfect weight for everyone.

So, my point is, we need to pay more attention to what we eat... not because we should be obsessed about our weight, but because we should be concerned about our health. I'm writing this article because I think that we are letting big businesses and their greed, make us sick and themselves rich.

Sincerely,

Katie Lang

Louisville, Kentucky

Katie's posting received a lot of responses. Scott and Kim set up an issues page they called 'What's the Skinny'. Soon, another posting would really hit home for the Campbells and their friends.

Dear Katie and KidsOpinionsCount.com

I think your posting was slick! I did a science fair project on what influences what we eat, and I found that kids really buy in to all the advertising hype. Flash some beautiful people on the screen wearing a ton of make-up, put some colorful packaging in their hand, and have them running on a beach, and we'll buy it, even if it's barbecued flavored worms, we'll buy it and eat it. Yes, I'm exaggerating. And I'll bet you don't believe what I just said. But why do you believe what all the junk food advertisers say? It's outrageous if you think about it.

Before we're out of diapers, we're blitzed by TV commercials, jingles, toys and celebrity endorsements — a whole marketing culture — telling us it's cool to eat junk food and drink soft drinks.

Big business won't stop it because it makes them too much money — so we need to stop it because it's KILLING us! The junk food industry is just as bad as the cigarette industry, only for some strange reason, it's okay for the food industry to push their crud in our faces twenty-four hours a day. More people get sick from bad eating habits than from smoking. Maybe we need to do one of those big lawsuits! But actually we need to take matters into our own hands.

We need to clean up our own environment. We can start by banning the sale, promotion and advertising of soft drinks, junk food and fast food from schools. We need to say NO to Channel One Hundred and the branding of our schools... They're even telling us what BEAUTY products to use in school. Do we kids really need that crud? SAY NO to Dopa Solda, Purrfection Cosmetics and Chips, Chocolates and Colas!

HISSSSSSS What's that you ask? It's a red-hot branding iron. We're being herded into the corral (our schools) and burned. Not a pretty picture... but true. They say branding doesn't hurt the sheep and cows... but it can kill us. Where's the animal rights activists when WE need them?

So what am I saying? That we're a bunch of sheep and cows? Yes. We're not the independent thinkers that we think we are. We're bombarded with advertisements and conflicting messages that tell us we can be cool, slim, active, healthy and hot if we eat junk food and use their beauty and hair products. Excuse me? How stupid do they think we are? Oh, wait... we ARE stupid!

We let the junk food industry feed us stuff that makes us fat and has no nutritional value and gives us zits. We let the diet industry 'help' us take off the weight and the pharmaceuticals sell us stuff to put on and cover up our zits. We let the vitamin companies sell us stuff to make up for the lack of nutrition in the junk food we're eating. And the pharmaceutical industry covers up the symptoms with drugs.

HUMMMMMM are we stupid? Did you know that two-thirds of U.S. high school girls are dieting and half of them are undernourished? And did you know that guys are trying to lose weight or trying to bulk up, too? Is anyone happy with their body? Get this... one in five of us kids is taking diet pills, and lots more of us are using laxatives, diuretics, fasting, puking... anything that can help us counteract the effect of the junk food we're

eating.

Can you believe that almost \$50 billion, yes, I said BILLION dollars is spent each year on dieting products? And guess what, no one is regulating it! Are you surprised? I'm not... And what do our schools want to do? Make a few bucks branding us and buying into Channel One Hundred.

More than 12,000 schools subscribe to Channel One Hundred. If each school has 1,000 students, on average, that means that 12 million kids are held captive by their schools, forced to sit and watch commercials for fast foods and soft drinks, the very kinds of crud that's making us fatter... and not just fatter... but unhealthy.

Yeah, I'm mad as hell and NO, I'm not going to take it anymore... and neither should you. Let's get rid of Channel One Hundred! Let's say NO to school branding! Let's take better care of ourselves. Let's stick it to the companies who are making us sick! We have the power... NOT to spend our money on their crud. Just don't do it!

Yours truly,
Steven Carlyle
Cincinnati, Ohio

It was 2:00 Saturday afternoon when Steven Carlyle's posting was uploaded.
Tommie soon got a big surprise.

Chapter Ten



At 2:15, Tommie received a call from a disgruntled corporate client. He threatened to pull his surveys from the KidsOpinionsCount site if she didn't close down the new 'What's the Skinny' page.

"Scott, Kim! I'm in my office! I need to talk to you," Tommie shouted to the kids.

They were busy reviewing postings at their computer, when they heard her yelling. It sounded serious. They rushed to her office.

As they entered, she blurted out, "I just got a call from one of our survey sponsors. They said there was a posting on your site that badmouthed the national Channel One Hundred initiative. Do you know anything about this?"

"Yes," Kim replied. "I'll pull it up so you can read it."

"Great," Tommie said.

Kim got on to their site and found the posting. Tommie read it.

"I see what his problem is," Tommie announced.

"What problem?" Scott asked.

"The guy wants us to remove this. What do you kids think?"

"No way!" Scott snapped. "Who does he think he is?"

"Just the President of Chips, Chocolates and Colas," Tommie replied. "It appears he doesn't agree with Steven's assessment of the Channel One Hundred initiative."

"Well, WE do," Kim remarked.

"And I do too," Tommie reported. "So, what do you want me to do about his threat to pull his survey business?"

"Let him," Kim directed.

"Yeah," Scott added. "We have enough other survey sponsors, and if we have to, we can use our own money from the diamond to keep this site up and running. It's too important to let our Vision and Mission be compromised."

"I agree," Tommie said. "I'll do it."

The kids watched as Tommie pulled the company's surveys off the site, and sent a short email to the president saying, "We have a strong code of ethics on our site, and we must stand behind our convictions. For this reason, we must not allow money to dictate our content. I am sorry, but we will not be pulling this posting. Instead, I've pulled your

surveys, and I'll refund your money."

"Good one Mom," Scott declared.

Tommie's response surprised the company. The president curtly replied, "Are you sure you want to do this?"

"Is he being nice, or is he threatening us?" Kim commented.

"I don't think he's being nice. Let's see how he likes this." Tommie emailed him back. "Kids Opinions Count on our site, NOT YOURS."

The Campbells were quickly earning a reputation — one that many companies didn't particularly like or respect. KidsOpinionsCount couldn't be bought. They were true to their vision and empowered the kids, not big business.

Now, not only were they a force to be reckoned with, but a potentially dangerous one — to some.

Monday morning arrived. Kim and Scott met up with Alex and Amy in school. "It looks like it's over!" Scott said to his friends.

"Yeah. I'll have my dad back," Alex replied. "But the Boarder's Park is a write-off. Some of the tunnels collapsed and they have to shut down the park because they don't think it's safe."

"Bummer!" Scott shouted.

"Never mind the stupid skateboard park... What about Huckster?" Kim asked. "Did someone tip him off?"

"Don't know, can't say," Alex replied. "Don't worry Kim. He'll get his eventually. You're mom will sock it to him."

"Let's hope so," Kim said.

The morning announcements really got their adrenaline flowing. "Students, this is Principal Toole. You may have noticed that we have new drink and junk — I mean snack machines set up in our hallways, and cafeteria, and classrooms, and basically anywhere there was any spare space. This is part of the Channel One Hundred initiative that was bulldozed — I mean approved by the Parent Council."

Most of the students seemed pleased with the announcement. Scott and Kim — weren't.

"And you may have also noticed that each room has new TVs and DVDs. These are here to assist in your education. In exchange for this most selfish — I mean, generous offer, Channel One Hundred asks that we watch their commercials for the first ten minutes of each morning and afternoon. The Parent Council feels that this is a small price to pay for all of the benefits we will be receiving from Channel One Hundred."

Scott and Kim couldn't believe what they were hearing. They could also tell that Principal Toole wasn't a big fan of this initiative.

Scott turned to Kim and said, "The Parent Council is so short-sighted. They're selling their soul to Dopa Soda, Purrfection Cosmetics, and Hair Products and Chips, Chocolates and Colas."

"You're right!" Kim declared.

"We need to stop this!" Scott said.

"But how?"

"What are you talking about?" Amy asked.

Kim explained the issue to Alex and Amy.

“We need to do something about this... like Scott said,” Alex insisted.

“I’ve got an idea,” Amy offered, then went on to explain her fabulous plan.

Scott and Alex were immediately onboard. As President and Vice President of the student body, they would write an to email Parent Council, and air their grievance. The boys would go to Scott’s after school to do it.

At the end of the school day, Kim and Amy went to Amy’s to hang out. Kim needed a break from the web site, and from Scott. It seemed like they’d been together day and night since they started it.

Scott and Alex headed over to the Campbells. When they got there, they found a note from Tommie, saying she and Chris were out for dinner. They hadn’t had a minute’s rest either.

“Great! We have the house to ourselves!” Scott announced.

“So, what should we do?” Alex asked.

“Let’s raid the fridge and then write that email to the Council.”

“Oh, that sounds exciting,” Alex said sarcastically.

“Got a better idea?”

Alex thought for a second. “Nope.”

The boys found whatever was edible in the fridge, and wolfed it down. Then, they headed downstairs, sat down at a computer, and wrote an email to the Parent Council. They attached Steven Carlyle and Katie Lang’s postings. The boys’ cover memo read:

Dear Ladies and Gentlemen of the Parent Council

As President and Vice President of the student body of Spring Valley School, we would like you to reconsider your decision to allow branding and Channel One Hundred into our school. We understand that the revenue we will get from these initiatives is driving your decision. We feel that there are more important factors that you should consider. We would like to refer you to our Internet site. Please read Katie and Steven’s contributions. We have provided you with the direct URLs. These reflect our concerns.

Alex Black and Scott Campbell

www.KidsOpinionsCount/whatstheskinny/lang

www.KidsOpinionsCount/whatstheskinny/carlyle

Tommie and Chris arrived home and had walked into the kitchen, just as Alex pushed the Send button. They heard Alex shout from the game room, “Take THAT you bunch of moronic adults with nothing but dollar signs in your eyes and dead air between your ears! Take that — from the all knowing — all powerful — Alex.”

“And Scott!”

“Right, and if we get in trouble, YOU were the brains behind it. I was just along for the ride.”

Tommie and Chris were now standing at the top of the stairs to the game room, listening to the conversation. They decided they should find out what the boys were talking about, and what moronic adults they were sticking it to. They headed down the stairs.

“What are you two up to?” Tommie asked, as she and Chris surprised the boys.

“We’re sending a memo to the Parent Council,” Scott explained.

“Oh, THOSE moronic adults,” Tommie replied.

The boys looked a little embarrassed.

“We didn’t know you guys were home,” Alex confessed.

“You don’t think WE’RE moronic adults, do you Alex?” Tommie asked.

“No way! Not you guys!”

“Is this about the band thing?” Chris asked.

“No, it’s about Channel One Hundred. We got it, and we don’t want it,” Alex declared.

“Channel One Hundred?” Chris replied.

“Yeah, you can read all about it in this posting,” Scott suggested and pointed to the screen. “Mom already knows about it, but she doesn’t know that we’ve got it in our school now!”

Scott directed Chris to their email and to Katie and Steven’s postings. Chris read them over.

“Wow! I had no idea!” Chris exclaimed.

“I know. It’s sick,” Alex claimed. “They feed us junk and then sell us junk to get rid of the junk they feed us — and then they tell us to eat the junk but that we should look like we don’t.”

Chris looked at Tommie and admitted, “This is scary. I actually understood what he just said.”

Tommie laughed. “Me too. Alex, you’re one of us, aren’t you.”

Alex beamed. “Yup. And you can’t get rid of me.”

“We don’t plan to Alex,” Tommie promised.

Scott added. “He’s like a piece of snot.”

The four of them visualized how tough it was to get rid of a piece of snot. How it always sticks to your finger and no matter how hard you try to flick it off, it never seems to go anywhere, but somewhere else on your fingers.

“That about sums him up,” Chris laughed. “Just kidding Alex. You’re the GOOD kind of snot.”

“Alex, they’re just being silly,” Tommie remarked.

“I know Mrs. Campbell,” Alex replied and stuck his finger in his nose.

Scott jumped out of his chair. He knew what was coming. “Get away from me with that!”

“I think now’s a good time to leave,” Chris announced, as he ran upstairs. He wouldn’t put it past Alex to tag him with the booger.

Tommie took her time. She knew Alex didn’t have anything on his finger, but she didn’t bother to tell Scott. Alex wrestled Scott to the ground, and threatened him with his finger.

Scott was squirming and whining, “Mom! Tell him to get off me. Alex, don’t touch me!”

As Tommie walked up the stairs, she looked back at the two of them rolling around on the floor, and said, “Good luck. I hope your email works. If you need help from us, just let us know.”

“Mom! Don’t leave me!”

That night, Alex missed his target, but the email didn’t.

Chapter Eleven



On Tuesday morning, Alex and Scott got a surprise.

As soon as the boys walked into the school, they were summoned to the principal's office. Principal Toole and a number of adults were waiting for them. Alex and Scott had no idea what they were walking into.

"What the heck do you think you're doing?" an adult shouted at them.

The boys didn't recognize the man.

"You can't bad-mouth Channel One Hundred — and you can't tell us what to do!" a second adult exclaimed.

None of the adults bothered to introduce themselves — but they all knew who Alex and Scott were.

The kids were getting tag-teamed as adult number three piped in, "The school district — and we're not just talking about your school, we're talking about Terra Nova and all the other schools — will make a lot of revenue that will pay for a lot of good things with the Channel One Hundred money."

"Now Channel One Hundred says Dopa Soda, Purrfection Cosmetics and Hair Products, and Chips, Chocolates and Colas are refusing to honor their Channel One Hundred agreement with the school — until the KidsOpinionsCount site removes the letters from The Contributors about school branding," another adult explained. "You need to print a retraction and purge those postings from your site!"

"You're trying to censor our site!" Scott exclaimed.

"What about our Freedom of Speech?" Alex remarked.

Kim had been listening in at the doorway. She suspected Scott and Alex had been summoned because they were in trouble. She was right. She burst into the office.

"Kim, you weren't called down here," Principal Toole said.

"You're talking about my family's web site and my family's convictions. I have a right to be here."

"Your family is behind this? Do you mean your parents?" an adult asked.

"Yes, all four of us," Scott declared.

"And their friends!" Alex added.

"Maybe we need to speak to the parents. We can reason with them. They're adults,

they'll understand," another adult remarked.

Kim, Alex and Scott giggled to themselves.

"Sure, call them," Scott said. "And while you're at it, why don't you see if they'll support your position on the band music!"

Principal Toole snickered to himself and offered, "You can place the call in the meeting room. There's a conference phone there."

They all piled into the room. Meredith went along, too. She wasn't going to miss this. She suspected what the Campbells' response would be — and she wanted to be there for the Parent Council's reaction. She figured there'd be enough fireworks for a Fourth of July celebration.

Scott placed the call. "I think they're both home. They're working on the site."

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

"Hello?" Tommie answered.

"Mrs. Campbell, this is Principal Toole."

"Hello Principal Toole. What can I do for you?"

"I have Scott, Kim and Alex in my office. We're here with the Parent Council for the school district."

Tommie was surprised. She thought this had to do with the band issue. She jumped the gun.

"Principal Toole, I really do think the Parent Council was unfair when it placed a cease and desist order on the band. There's nothing wrong with Political Punk music."

"That's not why I'm calling," Principal Toole replied.

The kids could see the shock on the adults' faces.

Meredith was amused and grinned ear to ear. She was a huge fan herself of Po Punk, and knew what Wagner had been up to all along.

One of the adults shouted from across the room, "Is Mr. Campbell there? Maybe HE'LL be more reasonable than Mrs. Campbell."

Tommie thought, 'Typical male chauvinist. The man will put the little woman in her place. This bozo's in for a big surprise.'

"Sure, I'll get my husband, if you like."

The kids started to giggle to themselves — again.

Tommie called out, "Chris. Pick up the other line please. I'm on the phone with Principal Toole and the Parent Council. They want to speak to us about something."

CLICK...

Chris picked up the phone.

"What can we do for you?" Chris asked. "Is this about the music?"

"No," Principal Toole answered. "Maybe I should let one of the Council members explain. It's really their issue."

Tommie thought that was curious.

A Council member explained that they wanted the kids to purge the 'What's the Skinny' page and to stop causing problems, or the sponsors would pull the plug on the Channel One Hundred initiative.

"What's your opinion on this Kim and Scott?" Chris asked. "What do you think is the right thing to do?"

Kim explained, "The same thing that Mom did when that company threatened to pull their surveys. Let them! They're hurting us kids and so is Channel One Hundred."

“You heard their answer,” Tommie said over the phone.

“We want to hear Mr. Campbell’s answer.”

“It’s their site,” Chris replied.

“And you agree with them?” an adult asked.

“We most certainly do,” Tommie replied. “The kids control their site, not us. They will NOT be bought, and neither should the schools.”

“Mr. Campbell, do you always let your wife and kids speak for you? Does your wife wear the pants in the house?”

Chris laughed. “I’m afraid we are all pretty enlightened in this household. We respect each other. Maybe you should try it.”

Meredith burst out laughing.

“Smith may be in jail, but he was right about you people. You’re all a bunch of radicals,” one of the adults exclaimed. He was an odd looking man, with red hair, freckles and a cowboy hat.

Alex whispered to Scott, “FREE radicals, actually.”

“If you say so,” Chris said. He was finished fooling with the fools. “Now, I would appreciate it, if you would mind your own business, and if you continue to harass my kids, their friends, or my wife, there’ll be H E double hockey sticks to pay.”

“Well, I hope you’re happy with yourselves. You’re costing us thousands.”

“I think you should be expending your efforts on finding alternative support mechanisms, not persecuting kids for having their own, and I might add, informed opinions,” Chris stated.

Scott piped in, “Maybe if you stopped selling that crud in the schools and sold some good homemade stuff in the cafeteria, then maybe you’d make more profit than that measly money you’ll get from Channel One Hundred.”

“Mr. and Mrs. Campbell, we are very disappointed that you refuse to cooperate with us — and that you refuse to control your children. If Channel One Hundred pulls the plug on us — we’ll lose a lot of money. How do you propose we make up the difference?”

“I personally like Scott’s idea about selling your own food in the cafeteria, and maybe you could even make it healthy,” Chris declared. “You’ll take all the profits. I’m sure you’ll come out WAY ahead!”

The adults were super upset, but Principal Toole was surprisingly quiet.

“I think we should look for options,” Principal Toole advised. “I’ll be pleased to discuss any ideas you may have.”

“It’s our decision, not yours, Toole,” one of the adults announced.

“I have a school to run,” Principal Toole replied. “I’d appreciate it if you would take your meeting elsewhere. Mr. and Mrs. Campbell, thank you for your time.” He hung up on Tommie and Chris. Toole was finding a backbone.

“Kim, Scott, Alex — I think you have classes to attend. We’re finished here,” he said. Toole escorted the kids out of the office. On the way out, he quietly stated, “I think you did the right thing. We just have to figure out how we can offset this loss.”

The kids nodded their heads and walked to class.

The Parent Council marched out of the office and down the hallway, like a bunch of ants, following the lead fire ant.

There’s an old saying, ‘when a door closes, a window opens’... and this was to be one big honking window!

Chapter Twelve



The kids headed back to class.

“Who was that red-haired guy... the lead idiot?” Scott asked Alex. “His voice sounded familiar.”

“How should I know? I didn’t recognize any of them. I don’t even think they have kids going to our school.”

“Then why are they controlling what’s happening here?”

“I don’t know. But your parents sure surprised them.”

“Yeah, I’m proud of them.”

“Me too,” Alex announced. “And you’re right about that guy’s voice. I just don’t know who he is.”

An hour had passed since the confrontation with Parent Council. Alex and Scott were in their math class, listening to Ms. Fogarty explain how to solve for X and Y.

Suddenly, blasting out of the intercom system, “Alex Black and Scott Campbell, please report to Principal Toole at the office.”

“Not again!” Scott said.

“What now?” Alex whined.

They both looked up at their teacher.

“Okay boys. Off you go,” Ms. Fogarty said.

They gathered up their books and headed to the office. The boys took their time. They weren’t in a hurry for more trouble. Finally, they entered the office. Principal Toole was standing in front of Meredith’s desk. He was holding a big white envelope.

‘Is this good or bad?’ Scott wondered.

“First of all — Scott and Alex — I want to apologize for the adults this morning. I have no control over them. They run the district. I think I should tell you that I didn’t want Channel One Hundred either.”

“Then why didn’t you say anything?” Scott asked.

“I really didn’t have a say in the matter,” Principal Toole said. “I can only fight so many battles before they fire me.”

Scott and Alex were totally surprised by his confession.

“You see, I can’t see myself doing anything else but running a school, and those adults are very powerful. They could have me removed... permanently. When you kids grow up, you’ll see that choices and decisions are not as simple as you probably think they are.”

The boys nodded their heads. “We know that already.”

“But that’s not why I called you to the office,” Principal Toole explained. “Boys, you received something from Dream Destroyer Productions. Are you boys planning to make a movie?”

“What?” Alex replied.

Scott figured it out, “They must have seen us on TV when we told everyone about our election platform and took down The Ring Master.”

“Maybe this can replace the money we’re losing from Channel One Hundred,” Alex added.

“That would be nice,” Principal Toole replied.

“A movie at the school!” Meredith exclaimed. “That would be exciting. Is George Burns still alive? He can play you, Principal Toole.”

Meredith was just kidding, but Principal Toole took offense. He wasn’t that old!

“I think Richard Gere should play me,” Principal Toole said.

“Charles Nelson Riley or maybe Woody Allen, or Rip Taylor,” Meredith offered.

The boys and Meredith burst out laughing.

Toole played along. “Okay, maybe not Gere, but at least Kozner! We’ll call it School of Dreams.”

“What about Dances with Tooles?” Meredith added. “Or Fizzle Beach USA.”

The boys continued to chuckle.

“I don’t think Kozner’s a good idea,” Alex proclaimed. “Maybe your roll should be played by...”

“Matthew Broderick!” Principal Toole announced. “It’ll be the sequel to Ferris Bueller, only now HE’LL be the principal!”

“Hey, I saw that old movie,” Alex admitted. “It was really funny!”

“Actually, that’s not a bad idea!” Meredith offered. “We’ll get Sara Jessica Parker to play me!”

Now they knew she was kidding. Meredith weighed at least two hundred pounds.

Scott brought them back down to earth and suggested, “Maybe Alex and I should just open the envelope.”

Principal Toole handed it to Scott. Scott opened it and pulled out a bunch of legal looking documents and a letter. He read the letter to himself. “Holy smoke!” Scott announced. “They DO want to shoot a movie at our school! Alex, they were really impressed with the TV coverage. It says here, our student body looks just right. They think Spring Valley’s the perfect location to finish shooting their movie.”

“I’m pumped,” Alex shouted.

“It says in the letter that they need the contracts signed.” Scott placed the paperwork on Meredith’s desk.

“There’s a ton of contract stuff here!” Alex announced.

Principal Toole looked over the papers. “I don’t think the school has a budget to reply to this.”

“What are we going to do?” Alex whined. He looked desperate. They just had to get

the movie deal. He'd miss his big chance to be a star. There had to be a solution...

Chapter Thirteen



Scott was quick to solve the problem. “Maybe Amy’s dad can help out. He is in this business, sort of. Can we call her down to the office?”

Principal Toole agreed. He asked Meredith to call Amy.

“Amy Montgomery, please report to the office.”

“So, is there anything that says what kind of script it is?” Alex asked. “A vampire horror flick? Maybe some creepy slasher mystery? Or a love story?”

“Here, read the letter,” Scott said. He handed it to Alex. Scott and Principal Toole looked over the papers until Amy arrived.

“What’s up?” Amy asked as she entered the office. They were all staring at her, and it made her nervous.

Principal Toole answered. “Alex and Scott got a contract from a movie studio. They want to use our school for the shoot. We have no expertise in deciphering these contracts. They are very complicated, and I don’t think the Parent Council will give us extra resources for it.”

Kim had filled Amy in on the morning’s fiasco with the Parent Council — and the school was already overrun with men removing the machines and televisions. Good news traveled fast.

“I would like to contact your father and see if his legal people can help us.”

“A movie? Here? Wow! Who’s in it?” Amy asked excitedly.

“The letter doesn’t say,” Principal Toole explained. “We won’t get those details until we agree to sign their non-disclosure agreement and sign the contracts. It says here, that they’ll tell us then. Amy, do you think your dad would mind if I called and spoke to him about this?”

“Sure! He’s really pumped about what we’re trying to do at our school.”

Principal Toole called Amy’s dad on speakerphone. “Mr. Montgomery. Hello. This is Principal Toole.”

“Oh, hello Principal Toole. Is this about Amy?”

“No, well, sort of. I have Amy in my office,” Principal Toole explained.

“What’s she done now?”

“Nothing! I assure you. You know Alex Black and Scott Campbell were elected

President and Vice President of the student body, and your news crew broadcast pictures of the school and the boy's election platform to the entire nation."

"Yes I know," Mr. Montgomery replied.

"Well... part of their election platform was to raise outside contributions to the school so that we could fund more extra curricular activities."

"Yes, I recall Amy mentioning that. It's an excellent idea. Are you looking for corporate donations?"

"Sort of. Alex and Scott received a letter from Dream Destroyer Productions. They want to shoot a movie here."

"Excellent!" Mr. Montgomery said.

"Yes Sir, but they've sent us a non-disclosure agreement and contract papers. We don't have any resources to review these."

"I get the idea," Mr. Montgomery returned. "Send them over here. I'll have my staff take a look at them. We can advise you and the Parent Council on how to proceed. There's lots of things to consider, but it's a great idea. My hat's off to the boys."

"Oh, thank you Mr. Montgomery. I'll have the papers couriered over today!"

"No problem, I'll have my people get a report to me by tomorrow afternoon. I'll stop by your office with it, around four. Is that okay?"

"That's perfect. Would you help us sell it to Parent Council?"

"I'd be pleased to," Mr. Montgomery replied. "I don't know how they could refuse such a fantastic opportunity."

"Thanks. See you tomorrow," Principal Toole said and hung up the phone.

He turned to the kids and explained, "I'll set up a meeting with the Parent Council tomorrow afternoon, and if all goes well, we can sign the contracts then."

"Do we have to deal with Parent Council?" Scott asked.

"Yes, we need their approval."

"What are the odds they'll give it?" Alex asked. He didn't sound very optimistic.

"Mr. Montgomery will be here. I think when they see the dollars this will generate, they'll be pleased."

"But they don't really represent our school. They'll want the other schools to get the money."

"It doesn't work that way. Don't worry. I'm sure it will go over well. If this is a success, then they can pitch their own kids' schools."

BZZZZ...

"Class change. We better get going. Can we at least tell Kim?" Scott asked.

"Sure, but that's all," Principal Toole replied.

The kids met up with Kim in economics class and Amy told Kim all about the movie. Kim was impressed. That didn't happen often.

Chapter Fourteen



Tuesday afternoon, before the kids got home, Chris noticed something different about Tommie. She was wearing funky glasses.

“Since when do you need glasses?” Chris asked.

“I don’t,” Tommie replied.

“So what’s that resting on your nose?” Chris joked.

“Oh these? Do you like them? They make me look smart, don’t they.”

“Since when do you need to LOOK smart? You ARE smart.”

“Actually, it’s part of a market research project for my newest client, ‘Framed,’” Tommie explained. “They contacted me by email and I negotiated the whole deal online. I just got the glasses by courier.”

“Okay, now you’re starting to make sense. So what’s the project?” Chris asked.

“They want to sell fashion glasses to people who don’t need them.”

“Brilliant,” replied Chris. “Another useless product, and you’re gonna help sell it.”

“Wait, you haven’t heard the logic behind this.”

“I can’t wait.”

“You know how taller people seem to get more attention than short people, and skinny people seem to get more job offers than heavy people. It’s all perception. Framed, thinks that people who wear glasses, get more respect.”

“Did you make this up or what?” Chris asked.

“No! Hey, so I’m selling fake glasses. No biggie. Who can it hurt? It’s not like I’m selling guns!”

“Tommie, you marketeers can rationalize anything can’t you?”

“Chris, this could be a really big account. They want me to wear them for a month and write a report. They’re paying me a lot of money.”

Kim walked in on her parent’s conversation. “Wow, you look HOT Mom!”

“Why thank you Kim. See Chris, they do work!”

“I thought you wanted to look smart,” Chris replied.

“Smart AND hot!” Tommie announced.

Scott blew into the house like a whirlwind. “Mom, Dad, guess what? They’re shooting a movie at our school!”

“There was a shooting at the school!” Tommie exclaimed.

“I think you should get a hearing aid, and never mind the glasses,” Chris laughed.

“A movie, Mom,” Scott announced. “A studio wants to shoot a movie at our school. Isn’t that cool!”

“Way coool,” Tommie replied. “Anymore fall-out over the Channel One Hundred issue?”

“No, and that’s the great thing about the movie. Our school will make way more money, and kids won’t have to be scarfing down garbage to earn it!”

“Well, luck was with you today,” Tommie announced.

“Yeah, maybe now those dumb Parent Council people will respect me and Alex and us kids.”

“Maybe you should wear your mom’s glasses,” Chris chuckled.

“Yeah, what’s with the glasses?” Scott asked.

Tommie explained the story for the third time.

“Mom’s a lab rat!” Scott laughed.

Kim glared at Scott.

“That reminds me, bag rat,” Tommie teased.

“Scott, you twit,” Kim declared.

“You kids aren’t off the hook yet,” Chris added.

“Hook. Funny Dad. You slice and Mom hooks it.” Scott just couldn’t resist.

“Scott, you don’t know when to shut-up sometimes,” Kim barked.

“Let me try the glasses on,” Scott said. He took them from Tommie’s nose and put them on himself. “How do I look?”

“Like a nerd,” Kim laughed.

“They look pretty silly on you, Scott,” Chris admitted.

“What about Max? Let’s see how they look on Max,” Scott suggested.

“Cut it out and give me those!” Tommie ordered. It was too late. Max was already wearing them — and with his big, long nose — they stayed on pretty well.

Somewhere on the other side of Center City, an old man and his grandson were looking through Tommie’s eyeglasses and listening in on the conversation.

“Gramps, I don’t know why you’re so obsessed with spying on these people,” the grandson said.

“How many times?” the old man barked.

“Okay... Supreme Leader... But what’s up with this family? Why are you going to such extremes to literally keep an eye on them?”

“All in good time,” the old man replied. “What are these people doing?”

“What do you think? They’re having fun. Did you ever have fun Gra... Supreme Leader?” the grandson replied.

“No. There is no time for fun,” the old man snapped.

DING... DONG...

The Campbells’ doorbell rang.

Scott and Max ran to the door to answer it.

“Alex? What are you doing here?”

“Hey, whose are these?” Alex asked as he walked into the house and stood in the foyer. He took the glasses off Max.

“Oh, those are my mom’s,” Scott explained.

“She doesn’t wear glasses,” Alex replied.

“I know, she’s wearing them for research purposes,” Scott answered. “Her client sells them. They think that people get more respect if they wear glasses. They’ve designed these to be cool yet professional.”

Alex grabbed them and tried them on. “I’ll wear them to the swim meet tonight. We’ll see if I get any more respect. How do I look?”

“Like a Fred,” Scott laughed. “Let’s get going. Take those things off.”

“No way!” Alex called over to Tommie in the kitchen, “Mrs. Campbell — mind if I wear these tonight?”

“Where are you guys going?” Tommie asked.

“They’re going to the girls’ swim meet,” Kim replied sarcastically.

“School spirit! As President and Vice President, it’s our duty to attend these functions,” Scott replied. “Dad, we need a ride.”

“When are you going to finish that game review Scott?” Kim challenged.

“When I get home. I won’t be late. Alex will probably do something stupid and get us kicked out. Dad... the ride...”

“Meet you in the van,” Chris replied.

The boys ran down the hallway, and into the garage.

The drive to the school pool was fast and silent.

“Thanks Dad!” Scott shouted, as he and Alex jumped out of the van and ran into the school.

“Time to check out the girls,” Alex said. He strutted into the pool area and perused his domain. Scott followed.

“Look where he’s looking!” the grandson exclaimed. “Teen testosterone! Do you remember those days Gramps?”

The girls’ coach also noticed Alex checking out the girls, top to bottom — literally. “Black, get out of here!” he bellowed.

Alex ran from one end of the bleachers to the other — and across the floor. Before the old man and his grandson knew it, they were looking at the ceiling. Alex had slipped and landed flat on his back. The glasses managed to stay on his face, and now Alex and the watchers were in for a treat, as the girls hovered over him.

“Black, get your butt out of here!” yelled the swim coach... again. Alex started to pull himself up, but only got as far as a crouch position, then one of the girls pushed him into the pool.

SPLASH...

“He got what he deserved!” laughed the grandson.

The swim coach jumped into the water and yanked Alex out of the pool. The glasses and Alex were flung onto the tile. The glasses cracked.

“Black, you are a piece of work! How the heck you got elected Student Body President, I’ll never know. Good thing you have goody two-shoes Scott here to back you up. Get out of here and don’t come back!”

Alex shook himself off, picked up the glasses, and waved to the crowd. He headed to the boys’ change room to find some dry clothes.

“These glasses don’t work at all,” Alex declared. “I didn’t get any respect. Here, give them back to your mom.”

Scott took the broken glasses and put them in his pocket. He had no idea how to explain this to Tommie.

“Show’s over Gramps,” the grandson said. “It looks like you were foiled again. My guess is, these glasses will be stuck in this kid’s pocket for some time.”

“Where to now?” Alex asked Scott.

“You got us kicked out! There’s no use hanging around here. I’m going home. I’ve got a ton of stuff to do on the site,” Scott said. They decided to walk home.

That night, Kim reviewed the submissions of The Contributors, and posted them to the appropriate pages. Scott reviewed the new Addictive Game. This web site was a lot of work, but they loved every minute of it.

Chapter Fifteen



Wednesday morning arrived. The Campbells were ready to head to school.

“Scott, where are those glasses?” Tommie asked.

“Don’t you have another pair?” Scott replied.

“No, I just have those. Where are they?”

“It’s a long story Mom.”

“Who’s the culprit?” Tommie knew right away it was a story she didn’t want to hear.

“I suppose you’re going to tell me, eventually, that the glasses got broken, and that it wasn’t your fault.”

“That’s right. How did you know?”

“Years of experience.”

“Can you get another pair?”

“I’ll see,” Tommie replied. “Kim, I’m leaving in two seconds!” she shouted. In five minutes they were on their way to school.

As soon as Tommie dropped them off, she placed a call to the people at Framed. The grandson happened to pick up. “Yes Mrs. Campbell, we were just about to call you. We’ve decided to cancel the contract.”

“Pardon? I don’t understand. You just gave me the contract yesterday.”

“Well, if you see on page six, paragraph three, we can cancel at anytime, for no reason.”

“Yes, I remember, but it also says, that if there is no reason and you cancel, you still have to pay me the full contract value, whether I do the work or not. That was a change I made, and the older gentleman agreed to.”

“Yes, I realize that, and you will be paid in full. We just will not be requiring your services. Sorry for your inconvenience,” the grandson said and hung up.

“I don’t believe this!” Tommie exclaimed. “That was the easiest \$5,000 I’ve ever made. How weird was that?”

Meanwhile the grandson was busy talking to himself, as well. “Thank goodness I was here when she called. Now I’ve put the kibosh on this stupid project, and the old man is

none the wiser. He'll forget about them, and that'll be that."

The kids met up with their friends in front of the office. Richard Montgomery, Scott, Kim, Alex, Amy and Principal Toole were going to play host to Chuck Reimer, the movie's Director. The student body was told that the visitor was from out-of-country, and studying how the school system worked. The students had no interest in talking about school — yuck. Wednesday went off without a hitch, and no one suspected a thing.

After showing the Director around every part of the school and grounds, Mr. Montgomery and Principal Toole had a separate meeting with Chuck. Alex, Amy, Scott and Kim weren't invited.

"Well, I am impressed with this facility," Chuck said. "I also understand, thanks to Mr. Montgomery, that there is a well-trained and low cost pool of production people here. I didn't know that Center City had such great resources. You're a well kept secret and I'm glad we found you!"

"We're happy, you're happy," Richard remarked. "And please, call me Richard."

"I think your student body will do nicely, too," Chuck added. "I saw a lot of really phat kids."

"We have more O'Dinkle's per capita than any other city," Principal Toole explained. "There's one on every corner. I don't think of our kids as fat though. Is this a problem?"

Chuck looked surprised. "It's perfect. Our make-up, hair and wardrobe people can cover up the usual teenage deficiencies with push-up bras, muscle pads, hair extensions, wigs and the like."

"Deficiencies?" Principal Toole retorted.

"Yeah, zits, bad hair, flat chests, skinny arms, you know," Chuck answered.

"Push-up bras? Fake muscles? We ARE talking about young teenagers aren't we?" Principal Toole exclaimed.

"Exactly!" Chuck proclaimed. "Don't worry, it's done in all the movies. Who's gonna watch a bunch of flat chested, ugly girls making out with skinny, zit faced teenage boys. Not a very appealing picture, is it?"

"Maybe not, but probably closer to the truth," Principal Toole replied.

"Truth is for..." Chuck thought for a moment. "No, even the reality shows are scripted. Sorry, but there is no truth — except that beauty sells."

Principal Toole was having second thoughts. "I'm not sure this is such a good idea."

Richard couldn't let this financial windfall escape the school, or himself. The studio would be using some of his CCTV production people. He also knew how important this was to Amy.

"Kids aren't stupid," Richard said. "They know that actors and actresses are fake."

"Kids may know it, but that doesn't stop them from trying to be just like them," Principal Toole replied.

"I don't think your student body has a problem with that," Chuck said.

"So what next?" Richard asked.

"We need to take a look at the kids tomorrow morning," Chuck replied. "They'll all be in the movie, and we need to collect info on everyone. They all need to be registered as extras so they can be paid."

"I can set that up," Principal Toole promised. "How long will you be here?"

“Three weeks,” Chuck replied. “We just need to get the school shots. Most of the movie is already in the can.”

The men concluded the meeting. After escorting Chuck to his car, Richard and Principal Toole returned, summoned the kids to the office, and filled Scott, Alex, Kim and Amy in on what happened. The kids were psyched.

Even though the movie was supposed to be a secret, the student body suspected something was up. Someone let something slip.

Thursday morning, Principal Toole made the surprise announcement that no one was surprised to hear.

“Students of Spring Valley School. I have an announcement to make that will blow your socks off!”

“Huh?”

“Thanks to Alex Black and Scott Campbell, Dream Destroyer Productions will be shooting a movie at our school — and you’ll ALL be in it!”

Even though the kids already knew this, the announcement still excited the heck out of them. They all screamed and yelled and jumped up and down. The school was like a Super Bowl game.

“Now, calm down people. I’m not finished.” It took a couple of minutes for all the hooting and hollering to subside. Principal Toole continued. “The production people need to collect information on all of you so that you can be paid. I need all the classes to go down to the common room, one at a time. We picked the room numbers at random. We’ll start with room sixteen.”

Room by room, the students were paraded by the studio people. The boys were trying to look muscular, taller, cooler. The girls were trying to look skinnier, prettier, bustier.

Scott and Alex’s class was next. There was far more to the process than they expected. Personal information on each student was recorded, along with their height, age and weight — pictures were taken — and, there was a brief interview that consisted mostly of questions about their eating and buying habits.

The interviewer was writing letters down beside the student’s name. The data was being inputted directly into a computerized spreadsheet. Every now and then, someone would ask what the count was. The answer would be something like “10 percent A, 25 percent B, 65 percent C”.

This ratio seemed to please the studio people.

“What do you think those numbers mean?” Alex asked.

“Maybe they’re grading us on our looks?” Amy thought. She saw them write an A by her name.

“I don’t think so! They made me a B, and I’m way better looking than you are,” Alex declared.

“I think they wrote B by my name, too,” Kim admitted.

“How can we find out?” Scott asked.

“Maybe we should try the direct approach,” Amy said. She walked over to one of the studio people, and asked, “What does that grading system mean?”

“It’s confidential,” the man responded.

Amy walked back to the kids. “He wouldn’t tell me.”

“I think I know how to find out,” Alex declared. He reached into his backpack, pulled

out, and turned on his laptop. “I bet I can get into their transmission.”

Amy and Kim rolled their eyes. Alex saw their looks of disbelief and reminded them, “Remember the wet T-shirt contest?”

Kim groaned and admitted, “He can probably do it.”

Amy thought back to the day that Alex set off the fire alarms and sprinklers in the school, and totally weirded out the school’s computer system.

Alex successfully hacked into the studio people’s computer. “Man, this was easier than I thought!” He looked over the data that populated the spreadsheet and explained, “Look how they’ve split us up! It looks like they did it by weight! The skinny anorexics are group A. The normals like us are in group B, and the cows are in group C.”

Cynthia overheard Alex’s interpretation. “Wow, I never realized how many fatties we had in this school!” She knew she was an A.

It was obvious from the buzz around the school, that the student bodies all wanted to be classified as an A. The C’s were already getting abused. They were labeled as Cows, Chubbs, Custards... and even the B’s were getting bugged... Hey Bubba, Big Bertha, Blimpo, Bluto... it was never ending.

The pressure was on. Lose or continue to be abused. Desperate times called for desperate measures.

The film crew would be back on Monday to start the shoot.

The students didn’t have much time to improve their grade.

They’d do anything it took...

Chapter Sixteen



By the end of Thursday, the only question being asked and answered at school was, “How are we going to drop weight?” The next day, the school buzzed with weight loss talk.

The most popular source of information on how to lose weight was *The Inquisitor*. These were readily available in most homes. It just so happened, that the latest issue talked about plastic surgery and diet regimes of the rich and famous. What it takes to be phat and all that...

The issue was packed full of advertisements that made promises and testimonials as phony as breast implants. The ads claimed:

Lady Trucker loses 104 pounds on the road in nine months using BS Weight Loss Centers.

Inaccuratetrim tells women they’ll need to go shopping when they get the body they want after burning fat without exercising.

Accellerlean tells people they can lose weight and gain energy and it’s economically priced.

QuickSkinny Extra Strength Fat Blocker eliminates fat for effortless weight loss. One pill is the same as an hour of aerobics.

The naive and desperate kids believed the claims, and ignored the teeny tiny print that listed the potentially life threatening side effects of each of the miracle products. The *Inquisitor* provided the kids with product names, and the phone and Internet enabled them to purchase the stuff without a prescription.

In addition to the Internet purchases, there was a run on the health food and drug stores for non-prescription diet pills, herbal remedies, diet teas, diet books, steroids, bulk-up supplements and meal replacements.

The department and lingerie stores also ran out of full body girdles.

Amy, Alex, Scott and Kim didn’t give the weight and muscle thing a second thought. They were in the minority.

Friday afternoon, on the way home from school, Scott and Kim hoped it would rain

all weekend, so they could stay in and work on the KOC site. If it was nice out, they'd be bag rats.

RUMBLE... BANG... CRACK...

Fortunately for the kids — Mother Nature cooperated — and the weekend was just what they ordered — thunder, lightening and rain.

The weekend passed quickly. When the students arrived at school Monday morning, they found the parking lot jammed full of movie trailers and equipment.

The production crew had already turned the school into a movie set. The students were undergoing a metamorphoses, too. Groups B and C were trying desperately to become As.

At 11:45, Chuck burst into Principal Toole's office.

"I see we have a few less Cs," Chuck commented.

Principal Toole didn't know what a C was. He looked up from his desk. "Will that be a problem?"

"No, your student body is still well above average," Chuck replied. "They'll do just fine."

"So, Mr. Reimer, what can I do for you?"

"I'm here to give you some good news. The studio's chefs have set up in your cafeteria. We'll run the cafeteria — at no charge to you or the students — for the entire shoot. It's just another benefit for you."

"This wasn't in the contract," Principal Toole replied.

Chuck ignored him and announced, "The movie's star will be arriving today. I'll need those four kids I met before — to do an interview with her sometime this week. It'll be set up in her trailer. I'll let you know when you can send them down." Chuck was finished barking orders at Toole, and left.

Meredith decided to find out what was going on. She walked into Toole's office. She noticed he looked stressed, and asked, "Something wrong?"

"I'm not sure we should have agreed to this movie thing. I think this guy Chuck is taking over. I feel like I've lost all control!"

Meredith thought humor might help. "And you had control, when?"

Principal Toole shook his head and sighed. "I know. You run the whole place. But at least people think it's me."

Meredith smiled.

"Or do they?" he added.

"Don't worry. What's a couple of weeks of disruption? I'm sure the kids will get a heck of a great experience, and still manage to get to classes. Remember — they did want a normal school — doing normal school things."

Principal Toole wasn't feeling a whole lot better, even after Meredith's pep talk. "We'll just have to keep an eye on things."

"Will do," Meredith promised.

"Reimer said the star of the movie was coming today," Principal Toole stated.

"Did he say who it was?" Meredith asked.

"No, but he wants Kim, Scott, Alex and Amy to do an interview with her this week."

“He said it was a her? I wonder if it’s...”

BZZZZ...

Meredith was drowned out by the lunch bell.

The students dragged their tired and undernourished butts out of class, into the hallway, and outside to the front lawn where they usually liked to catch some rays, relax and eat. Today, all they wanted to do was sleep.

As most of them settled down on the grass, a white stretch limo drove by them on the street. The kids watched as it pulled into the school parking lot. They were suddenly re-energized.

“WOW! That thing’s gotta be thirty feet long!” Cal shouted.

“Maybe it’s a movie star!” Josh shouted.

Within seconds, the students stampeded their way to the limo and followed it around the parking lot until it finally stopped at the biggest trailer. The driver’s door opened and a man in a suit and hat got out. He walked around to the passenger side of the limo and opened a door. The kids expected a star to emerge. Instead, two burly men hauled themselves out of the limo, and stood on either side of the door. A third body emerged. It was much smaller and had long flaming red hair. It looked female. The big men stood between the woman and the kids and escorted her to a trailer. The door opened and she disappeared inside — leaving the men to remain on guard.

The kids could only guess who it was.

“It was a girl! It had to be!” Zach said.

“And she was tall,” Sara added.

“And she had red hair,” Cynthia observed.

“And she must be really famous because she has two body guards!” Erica established. “Just like I’ll have someday.”

Allana screamed, “Omigod! It’s Melissa!”

Melissa was absolutely what every young girl wanted to be and what every young boy thought he wanted. She had long, red hair, a thin five foot ten inch frame, a full bosom and a shapely butt. She was an icon to the kids and a cash cow to the studio.

“Melissa!” the students shouted, hoping she would come out of her trailer.

The kids advanced on the trailer. There had to be at least three hundred of them by now. It looked like they could easily overpower the bodyguards until...

Chapter Seventeen



“Back-off you munchkins!” one of the bodyguards shouted. “We’ve got pepper spray and tazers and we’re authorized to use them. If you don’t want to be crying like babies — you’ll get back in school.”

The students dispersed quickly.

“We can’t even get near her!” Cal whined.

Zach complained. “What good is it having a star here if we can’t even meet her. This is a drag!”

Alex, Kim, Scott and Amy weren’t aware of Melissa’s arrival. When the lunch bell went, they had headed to the gym to eat and shoot hoops. Playoffs were coming up.

The kids heard all about Melissa and the bodyguards during first class.

The novelty of the whole thing seemed to have worn off by last class. The students didn’t have the energy to sustain their excitement. The school was yawning by 2:00, nodding off by 2:30, and falling asleep in their seats by 2:45.

That night, basketball practice was weird. The players were dragging butt in both the girls’ and boys’ gyms. After practice, when Scott and Kim got home, they mentioned the lethargy to Chris and Tommie.

“What’s happening? Is there a virus going around?” Tommie asked.

“I don’t know,” Kim replied. “I think the girls might be dieting or something.”

“And the guys are trying to make mountains out of mole hills,” Scott added. “They’re trying to look like Arnold.”

“That’s not healthy. What are they taking or doing?” Chris asked.

“The girls are taking diet pills and the guys are buying guns,” Kim claimed.

“What?” Tommie asked.

“Buying guns,” Scott replied. “Taking steroids. Going on the juice. Mom, did you think I meant they were buying guns?”

“That IS what you said. So what’s a gun?” Tommie asked.

“Muscles!” Chris clarified to Tommie and then turned to the kids and asked, “How can kids get their hands on steroids?”

“Easy. There’s lots of stuff out there you can order over the Internet,” Scott explained.

“Most of the girls just aren’t eating — or they’re on one of those jag diets,” Kim explained.

“What’s a jag diet?” Chris asked. He couldn’t believe his ears. This was more confusing than the rat conversation.

“It’s when you only eat one food — like the grapefruit diet or the cabbage soup diet or the water cress diet,” Kim explained.

“Other kids are taking diuretics and laxatives,” Scott added.

“A lot of the girls are puking in the cans... it’s gross!” Kim said.

“I think I need to talk to your Principal,” Tommie proposed.

“He’s lost weight himself,” Kim observed. “And you should see how much our secretary’s dropped!”

“This doesn’t sound right. I’ll stop by the school tomorrow and check things out,” Tommie committed.

“No don’t,” Scott insisted.

“I think your mom should,” Chris confirmed.

“No don’t Mom,” Scott repeated.

“Why not?” Tommie asked.

“Because you’ll embarrass us, that’s why,” Scott claimed. “It’s none of your business what the other kids do!”

“Mom, I think that maybe you SHOULD go,” Kim admitted. “Lots of the students look like death and are really dragging their butts, and the teachers don’t even seem to have the energy to do anything about it. It’s kinda like they’ve all been zapped with a lazy gun.”

“This sounds like an epidemic!” Tommie exclaimed. “I’ll check it out.”

Tuesday morning, despite the fact that the cafeteria was jammed packed full of great looking, free food and vitamins, very few students were eating any of it.

Chuck had to do something about this. He needed the students to eat at the cafeteria. It was part of Dream Destroyer’s contract. He spoke with Principal Toole. Within minutes, Toole remedied the situation. He made an announcement over the intercom.

“Hello students, this is Principal Toole. The movie Director requested that you make sure you eat the food and take the vitamins that they are providing you in the cafeteria. They want a healthy student body.

“To make sure you do this, he is insisting that all you students sign agreements to promise not to do anything to change your bodies, and to ensure that you’re all eating healthy. They want you to eat breakfast and lunch in the cafeteria, and take their vitamins. We will hand out the agreements. We want you to take them home with you tonight. Have your parents read them over and sign them. This is very important! We’d like everyone to head to the cafeteria by the end of first class.”

“What’s going on here?” Kim asked the others.

By 10:00, all the kids had stopped in and sampled the Hollywood goodies.

Tommie arrived at the school around 10:30. She saw no indication that the student body was sick. As a matter of fact, Tommie couldn’t believe how high the energy level was. The school was buzzing. ‘What were my kids talking about?’ Tommie wondered

She decided to stop by the Principal’s office to see just how skinny, he and Meredith were. Principal Toole was standing in the hallway and saw Tommie approaching. “Mrs.

Campbell. It's nice to see you. Is there something I can do for you?"

Tommie wasn't sure what to say. Principal Toole looked fine to her.

"The kids asked me to stop by and see if I could help out at the school during the movie production."

"That's very kind of you. But we've got everything under control."

Tommie poked her head inside the office. She wanted to sneak a peek at Meredith. She was nowhere to be seen.

"Well, if you don't need me, I guess I'll go. But if anything comes up..."

"I'll be sure to call," Principal Toole promised.

Tommie thought the kids must have been exaggerating. She headed home. Tommie'd discuss her observations with the kids, later.

Chapter Eighteen



Kim, Scott, Alex and Amy's classes were the last to hit the cafeteria. The four of them had a spare and were sitting in the common room.

It was 11:00 when Scott exclaimed, "I feel like I could run a marathon."

"I know what you're saying," Alex replied. "I've got tons of energy. Usually I'm falling asleep by 11:00."

"I wonder what's in these vitamins and the food they gave us?" Kim said.

"Do you think they're drugging us?" Amy deduced.

"I think I know how we can find out," Kim said.

"How?" Scott asked.

"Amy, remember Natalie, the girl who helped us with our pheromone project?"

"Yeah, what about her?" Amy asked.

"She's a chemistry major. Maybe she can analyze these. Let's grab some vitamins and some extra food and take it to her," Kim suggested. "We can do it right now. We've got lots of time before classes start again this afternoon."

"That sounds like a good idea," Scott said. "But what will we do when we find out what this stuff is? If it's making people feel this good, it must be good for us!"

"It has to be some kind of upper or something," Alex declared. "Like someone said in their KOC posting — in the last millennium everyone took diet pills that were made with amphetamines. People were on speed. Maybe that's what's in these!"

"They can't do that can they?" Amy asked.

"If they sell them like an herb or a vitamin," Scott answered, "they can put whatever they want in them and claim whatever they want — it's not regulated by the Food and Drug Administration."

"The FDA? How do you know that?" Alex replied.

"Our Contributors," Kim answered. "There's been a ton of postings about weight issues."

"So then, who'll care if we do find out what's in them if the FDA doesn't?" Alex inquired.

"Maybe the kids will," Kim suggested.

"I doubt it," Amy replied.

“We need to get the facts and then decide what, if anything, we need to do,” Scott declared.

“Agreed,” Kim replied.

Amy, Scott, Kim and Alex gathered up samples from the cafeteria, put them in take-out containers, and walked and talked their way over to Scentorama.

They were in luck. Natalie was at the aromatherapy counter. Natalie saw the kids approach and called out, “Hey girls. Long time no see. And who are these handsome gentlemen you brought with you?”

“These two Freds?” Kim replied. “Just my brother Scott and his dorky friend, Alex.” Kim didn’t want anyone thinking they were couples.

“Kim, these guys are cuties all the way,” Natalie announced. She was flirting with the boys.

‘She’s hot!’ Alex thought. ‘Oh, oh! I hope I don’t... Too late.’

Alex was having a hard time — controlling himself — literally. The joy of puberty.

“We have a favor we need to ask you,” Kim admitted. “We got some pills and some food and we need to find out what’s in them. Can you do that?”

“Show me what you’ve got,” Natalie answered.

Kim handed her their take-out containers.

“Where did you get these from?” Natalie inquired.

“Can we tell her? Aren’t we sworn to secrecy?” Amy figured.

“Not about this!” Scott replied, sounding pretty sure of himself.

“Maybe we should get her to sign a non-disclosure!” Alex suggested, trying to sound smart.

“This sounds serious,” Natalie said.

“It is,” Alex declared.

Natalie looked at her watch and replied, “I can take my lunch break now. We can go somewhere and talk about this.”

The kids’ eyes lit up.

Natalie told the other girl at the counter that she was taking a break. She and the kids went for a walk. Alex hobbled behind them, complaining of an old basketball injury. It wasn’t easy walking with a woody. They finally found a quiet place in the food court.

The kids told Natalie their story — talking a mile a minute. Natalie imagined all sorts of scenarios. ‘...The pills could be a combination of diuretics, fat burners, laxatives and amphetamines. ...The food could be genetically modified to be almost calorieless. ...How could the studio get away with providing potentially dangerous drugs to the kids? ...using kids like ratboys!’

“Did your parents sign forms that waived responsibility of the movie production company from any harm to the students?” Natalie asked.

“Yeah, they did,” Scott replied. “But we don’t have to do anything except walk around in the halls and sit in classrooms. Nothing that we don’t do already. And all the kids are getting paid, AND the school is making a big whack of cash.”

“But today we got another form to sign,” Alex added. “I brought a copy of it.”

Natalie read it over. “It says here, you have to eat at least two meals a day at the cafeteria, and they’d prefer if you ate there three times daily. They also don’t want you going on any diets or taking any other medications or supplements. Basically you’re to eat the cafeteria food and that’s all — if I’m reading this correctly.”

“That’s about it,” Kim agreed.

“Can you get me copies of the waiver and the other contract with the school?” Natalie requested.

“Are you a lawyer?” Amy teased.

“No, but I might know what’s going on,” Natalie admitted.

“Can you tell us?” Kim requested.

“Not until I check out the pills, food and the contracts. Would you kids mind if I got some help from a friend at the university?”

“Go for it Natalie,” Scott said. “We’ll fax the contracts to you. What’s your number?”

Natalie gave Scott her fax number. They were all set. Natalie had the food and the vitamins — and would soon get the contracts.

“It’ll take a couple of days,” Natalie said. “Give me your phone number Kim, and I’ll call you as soon as I know anything. Probably Friday.”

“Thanks Natalie. We really appreciate it!” Kim replied.

“Oh, and I’m sure I don’t have to tell you four — don’t eat the food or take any more pills,” Natalie directed.

They said their good-byes and the kids headed back to school. Alex’s hobble was gone.

“Alex! It looks like your leg’s better,” Kim innocently observed.

“Yeah, it was just a spasm,” Alex replied.

Scott thought, ‘I’m glad it didn’t happen to me.’

That night, when Scott and Kim got home from school, they sat down with Tommie and Chris in the kitchen and told them about their day.

“I didn’t notice the students dragging butt today,” Tommie declared. “As a matter of fact — it was just the opposite!”

“We think they’re giving us uppers or something!” Scott exploded.

“What? Did you say uppers?” Chris asked. “What’s this all about?”

“They’re making us eat in the school cafeteria,” Scott explained. “It’s movie food. The stuff really gave us a buzz. Like too much Dopa Soda does!”

“Did you know about this Tommie?”

“No!”

“We got it under control,” Scott announced.

“Yeah, we took some of the pills and the food to Natalie at Scentorama,” Kim explained.

“Who?” Chris asked.

“Natalie,” Scott continued. “She’s a chemistry student and she’s going to analyze them. She wants a copy of the contracts and the releases we signed. We’re going to give her all three.”

“Three? I thought there were two,” Tommie replied.

“We got another one today,” Scott followed. “Here it is!” Scott pulled the third contract out of his backpack and handed it to Tommie.

“I don’t see anything suspicious about this form,” Tommie admitted as she looked it over.

“What if the vitamins and food are spiked?” Kim asked.

“With what?” Tommie replied.

“I don’t know, that’s why we need Natalie’s help,” Scott added.

“Natalie? Is that the girl that gave you the aromatherapy samples for your science fair project, Kim?”

“Right Mom. She’s a Ph.D. student at Center City University.”

“Really?” Tommie replied.

“Yeah, she has some friend who she’s gonna get to help her,” Scott added. “Uncle Mac goes to Center City University. Maybe Natalie knows him.”

“What makes you say that?” Chris asked.

“Well, there ARE chemistry requirements for medicine aren’t there?” Scott reasoned.

“It’s a big faculty Scott.”

“She might know him. We should ask him.”

“What’s with you? Why are you pushing this?” Tommie inquired.

“Mac could use a girlfriend — and Natalie is a girl,” Scott answered.

“You’re playing matchmaker? What makes you think he needs help?” Chris asked.

“Dad, come on!” Scott announced. “Mac needs all the help he can get. Maybe we should try and set him up with Natalie.”

“You think Natalie’s hot, don’t you!” Kim teased Scott.

“I’m just trying to do Mac a favor, and what do I get? Grief. Okay, forget about it.”

“It seems like Scott’s testosterone is making him a little testy,” Tommie laughed.

“I don’t like her! She’s too old for me!” Scott defended himself. “I’m going to work on the site!” He jumped out of his chair and escaped to the game room.

“I’ll bring dinner down to you,” Tommie called out after him. “Kim why don’t you give me an hand.”

Wednesday and Thursday went by without anything out of the ordinary happening. The students were filmed, they continued to eat in the cafeteria, and still no Melissa. With only a week left in the shooting schedule, most kids were resigned to the fact that they’d never meet her. Even Kim, Scott, Alex and Amy thought the whole thing was a rip-off... until Friday morning...

Chapter Nineteen



Before classes started Friday morning, Meredith announced over the intercom, “Alex Black, Scott Campbell, Kim Campbell and Amy Montgomery, please report to the office.”

“What’s up?” Kim said to Amy.

“Who knows.”

“Maybe something to do with the movie,” Scott suggested.

Alex had it all figured out. “They probably want to get us to do one of those — you know, when they get you to speak on camera and they test you?”

“A screen test?” Amy replied sarcastically.

The kids rushed down to the office. Principal Toole was waiting for them. He was standing in the doorway, grinning ear to ear.

‘This has to be good news,’ Scott thought.

“Time for our screen test?” Alex asked.

“Sort of,” Principal Toole replied.

“See, I told you!” Alex declared. “They want me for the leading man, don’t they.”

“Alex, get your head out of the clouds for a minute and listen up,” Principal Toole ordered. “I just got a call from the Director. He would like you kids to meet Melissa.”

The kids gasped for air.

Principal Toole continued, “The Director is sending someone to escort you to her trailer. It’s for a promotions shoot.”

“All right!” Scott said.

“Excellent!” Alex exclaimed.

“Cool!” Kim added.

“Way coool!” Amy screamed.

The kids could barely stand still as they waited for the escort. Eventually, two Hercules sized men arrived. They walked the kids down the hallway, out the door, and to a trailer. It seemed like forever, but finally, the door opened and the kids entered. Melissa wasn’t there. The kids were disappointed, until Chuck appeared from another room.

“Hello Kids. It’s good to see you again. Thanks for coming out and doing the Entertainment This Evening segment for us.”

“No problemo,” Alex exclaimed.

The girls groaned. Alex was so uncool.

‘Such a Barney,’ Kim thought.

“We’re happy to be here,” Kim announced. She tried to sound more mature than Alex.

“I hope you don’t mind if we put a little make-up on you for the cameras,” Chuck said.

“Not at all!” Amy replied.

They boys weren’t as enthusiastic.

Chuck escorted them to four chairs that were surrounded by a group of make-up and hair people. The experts immediately went to work to transform four normal kids into four beautiful people.

Alex thought he was already gorgeous. “Hey, enough of that crud. You’re messing with perfection. I’m not a girly boy you know.”

“No,” one of the make-up people said, “but you do have zits, you’ve got bags under your eyes, your haircut looks like you took a chainsaw to it — anything else you want the whole world to know?”

Alex shut up.

Once the kids were presentable, they were taken to another room in the trailer. This one had cameras, couches, lighting and a big screen TV.

“This is where the interview will be done,” Chuck explained. “You kids will sit on this couch, and Melissa will sit on the love seat across from you,” he said pointing to it. “You can see there’s a teleprompter right here for you. You’ll read the questions off the teleprompter when I give you the cue.”

“What’s the cue?”

“My finger,” Chuck laughed, waving his middle finger at them.

Kim raised her eyebrow. ‘Was that supposed to be funny?’ she wondered.

“For now, you can practice reading your question off these cue cards. Now Kim, I want you to sit here...”

Chuck positioned the kids on the couch — like they were stuffed animals. He handed each one their individual cue card, which had their personal question written on it.

“So, we just want you kids to act natural,” Chuck directed. “Now, take a look at the question we gave you. Familiarize yourself with it. It shouldn’t be too hard. You only have one question each. That’s all we have time for.”

The kids quickly read their card. Alex looked puzzled. “You want me to ask Melissa this? It’s stupid!”

“Hey, that’s what kids want to know,” Chuck replied.

“No they don’t. Listen to this you guys. If you were a bird, what bird would you be? Get serious.”

“Hey Alex, if you don’t want to do this, we can replace you.”

“No. I’ll do it,” Alex said.

Scott whispered to Alex. “You think your question’s dumb. They want me to ask her what kind of hair color she uses.”

Chuck overheard.

Chuck was once a famous director. When he was really young, he worked with real

screen legends. He'd even written and directed plays. But now — he was stuck with what the producers were producing — teen flicks. He was a multi-talented man, whose talents were wasted on commercial teen flicks. He wasn't a happy artist.

"You kids have no idea why these questions are planted do you," Chuck retorted. Before they could respond, he told them. "Let me fill you in on the art of making money. I'll make it simple for you. We're here to shoot a movie. We need to promote the movie so we can sell tickets at the movie theatres... so the DVD and video distribution is hot... so companies will pay to have their products in the scenes... so we can pay your friends and school to have the movie shot here."

"What does hair coloring and birds have to do with anything?" Kim asked.

"You've heard of Purrfection haven't you?" Chuck replied. "Well, Melissa's answer will be all about how great her Purrfection Hair Products are. And the kind of bird she'd be... she'd be the kind of bird that flies people to their loved ones... Eagle Airlines. Are you kids getting the picture?"

"Yeah, money," Alex answered.

"Yeah, like LeHops and diamonds," Scott said.

Chuck was surprised. "Yes, like LeHops! How did you know?"

Before Scott could answer, the two Hercules reappeared.

This time they were escorting....

Chapter Twenty



“Melissa!” the kids jumped up from the couch and yelled in unison.

Melissa gave them a little wave with her right hand as the men escorted her to the love seat, across from the kids’ couch.

“Kids, I’d like to introduce you to Melissa,” Chuck said. “You can sit down now. She’s not the Queen of England, you know.”

“Who?” Alex asked.

“Never mind, just take your seats,” Chuck directed.

Kim and Amy were embarrassed by Alex. They all took their seats.

Scott and Alex couldn’t believe how beautiful Melissa was. They stared at her. Their mouths were open and they looked pretty stupid.

Alex was worried. He didn’t want a repeat performance of what happened with Natalie. He decided to keep his hands in his lap, just in case.

Amy and Kim were surprised at how skinny Melissa was.

“She looks like a skeleton,” Amy whispered to Kim.

“Shush,” Kim replied.

“Melissa, I’d like you to meet Alex Black, Scott Campbell, Kim Campbell and Amy Montgomery. They’ll be asking you questions for the ETE segment. You’ve already learned your lines, I assume.”

“Very nice to meet you,” Melissa said to the kids. “And yes Chuck, I know my lines.”

“Kids, the teleprompter is all set. All you have to do is read your question when I give you the finger.”

Before the kids had time to respond, Chuck pointed at Melissa and said, “Five, four, three, two, one and we’re rolling.”

Melissa was right on cue. “Hi, my name is Melissa,” she read from the teleprompter. “I’m so happy to be here at Spring Roll... Whoops!” she laughed.

“Very funny Melissa,” Chuck remarked. “We’re not paying you to adlib. We’re paying you to read your lines. Now, take two from the beginning. And that’s Spring Valley School.”

Melissa started over. “I’m so happy to be here at Spring Valley School to shoot my new movie, ‘What’s the Skinny’. It’s about a school full of unhappy kids who take a

special pill that makes them all perfect! It's like teen Nirvana! I've worked very hard to get fat for this role."

The kids couldn't believe their ears. Each reacted differently to her statement. They kept their comments to themselves — but that didn't stop them from thinking them.

'Is she saying we're a school full of fat kids?! What's the Skinny?! Is that why they like our school? We're a bunch of puddins??' Kim wondered.

'Hey, I'm not sure I like this!' Scott thought. 'Did they pick us because we're skinny?'

'Now everyone who sees this movie will think we're a bunch of chubs!' Amy figured.

'This is stupid,' Alex thought. 'We don't need a pill to be phat!'

All of a sudden, Chuck signaled Amy to ask her question.

She couldn't speak. All Amy could think was that they wanted her there because she was fat.

Chuck wasn't amused. "Cut! Do you have a problem?"

Amy stuttered her reply, "Nnnno, Sir. I..."

"Look. The only reason you kids are here is because we need some talking heads to ask Melissa the questions teens want answers to. If you can't do it, there are thousands who can. Now, do I need to replace you?"

"No, Sir," Amy declared. "I'll be fine."

"Good," Chuck said, and pointed to her again. "Three, two, one and roll 'em."

Amy regained her composure and began, "Melissa, I am so pleased to meet you. My name is Amy, and I know that all the kids want to know where you shop."

Melissa replied. "Where else? For all of my casual clothes — I'm a Fabbo Girl. When I need a more formal look — there's no place like Glitzie Girls."

Kim got the next signal, as Chuck raised his hand and pointed his finger at her.

"Melissa, I'm Kim. I know that all the girls my age want to be just like you. What's your secret?"

Melissa answered. "Well, to keep my energy level up, I make sure I take my EZ Herbs and Vitamins. To make sure I get all the nutrition I need and none of the extra calories, I drink Skinny Quick, twice a day. The pharmaceutical company that makes these products is launching some brand new creations that all you kids will be wild about — and I'm going to be their spokesgirl!"

"Really? What is it?" Kim asked excitedly. This wasn't part of the script.

Melissa was silent.

"Cut!" Chuck ordered. "Stick to the script kids — there's no time for small talk."

"I didn't think it was. I thought it was relevant," Kim explained.

"Well it's not. Melissa, take it from, 'And I'm going to be their spokesgirl.'"

Melissa began, "And I'm going to be their spokesgirl. And even though I have an almost flawless face, I still need some help to achieve perfection — and for that — I use my Purrfection Make-up. I hope that helps you and all the other girls out there."

Chuck signaled Scott.

Scott followed with, "Melissa, I'm Scott Campbell and I'm Vice President of the student body here at Spring Valley School. You have such great hair! How do you manage it?"

Melissa read, "Oh, I use the best hair shampoos, conditioners, gels, hair sprays and

colors — and they're all from the same company, Purrfection. You might want to try some Scott. Guys just don't seem to take hair seriously enough. And you should. Looks are everything to a girl."

Scott was crushed. "Does she think I look bad?"

Alex was up next. "My name is Alex Black. I'm President of the student body here at Spring Valley. Melissa, I'd like to know — if you were a bird — what kind of bird would you be?"

"Oh, that is such a deep question," Melissa answered. "Usually people don't want to know about the real me — I mean what's inside of me. They just want to know how I keep the exterior so hot. I like this question. Let me think for a minute."

For dramatic effect, Melissa looked as serious as she could. She played with her hair a bit, pushed it off her face, and twisted it up in a bun — like she was trying to look studious. Then, on Chuck's signal, she broke into her well-rehearsed, well-read teleprompter answer.

"I think the bird I'd like to be is the Eagle. The Eagle on the Eagle Airline's super Boing XXX's. I always fly Eagle and I always have a great time! The food's fantastic, the flight crew's really cool, and the in-flight movies — well, what more can I say — they showed one of MY movies on the flight here! So, if I was a bird, I'd be an Eagle."

The kids couldn't contain themselves. They all broke out laughing, including Melissa.

"Cut!" yelled Chuck. "Melissa, I can't expect professionalism from these four, but you? You know how important these product endorsements are. Your career depends on them. Straighten out and fly right!"

"Fly right? Like on Eagle Airlines?" Melissa replied. "Those guys are never on time. The food's crud and the stewardesses are stewed!"

Scott, Kim, Alex and Amy were shocked.

"Don't talk back to me, Young Lady. You can be replaced!" Chuck yelled.

The kids could feel the tension in the air.

The door to their room flew open.

A man stormed in and demanded, "What's going on here? I could hear you yelling from outside. Take a break! Get something to eat!" he shouted at Chuck and then pointed to the door.

Chuck walked out of the trailer. The door slammed behind him.

Melissa quickly regained her composure.

"Melissa, I know you think directors are a dime a dozen, but they do serve their purpose. If you want me to replace Chuck, just give me the word and it's done," the man said.

"No, that's okay, Dick. It was my fault. The promo dialogue was pretty lame, and I gave him a hard time."

"You know it's our bread and butter, Kiddo. No promo, no money. Movies don't finance themselves," Dick explained. "You don't have to believe what you're saying — just sound like you do."

"Yes, I know," Melissa replied.

"You're not far away from becoming a 'what's her name'," Dick threatened. "You better cash in while you still have the look."

The kids were stunned.

Melissa looked horrified. Dick obviously had control over Melissa and her career.

“So, who do we have here?” Dick asked, turning his attention to the kids.

Scott took over the introductions. “I’m Scott, this is Alex, and that’s my sister, Kim, and her friend, Amy.”

“Glad to meet you kids, and thanks very much for helping us with this ETE shoot. It should air soon. Make sure you watch for it.”

“Oh, we will!” Amy declared.

“By the way, I’m Dick Vertola. I’m producing this movie. Sorry you kids had to see Chuck at his worst. He’s been on a very hectic shooting schedule.”

As Melissa and the kids began feeling comfortable again, the door to the room opened. Chuck returned.

“Feeling better, Chuck?” Dick asked.

“Yeah, I’m cool. I think we got all we need. You kids can head back to school now. Watch for yourselves on Entertainment This Evening.”

Chuck held open the door for them as they exited the trailer. Once outside, the kids could speak their minds.

“She was hot for my bod!” Alex bragged.

“She was not!” Scott rebutted.

“She didn’t even notice you two Barneys,” Amy said.

“Did you guys hear what she said about us fatties?” Kim asked.

“What was that all about? It freaked me out!” Amy exclaimed.

Alex had an explanation. “They picked us because we’re P H A T, not F A T, you nerds.”

“Are you sure?” Kim asked.

“Sure I’m sure. Do we look F A T to you?”

Just then, a number of students walked by, including J.R. O’Dinkle.

“No, but THEY do,” Amy commented.

The kids weren’t exactly sure what Melissa meant — so they decided to keep quiet about it.

BZZZZ...

Chapter Twenty-One



“Rats! We gotta go to class now,” Alex said.

“So, what are we going to tell everyone?” Kim asked.

“Whatever we do, we don’t mention the F A T thing,” Alex ordered. “Just in case she meant it.”

They walked into Mrs. Hardy’s class.

Cal raced up to Scott and asked, “Did you meet her?”

“What’s she like in person?” Zach followed.

“I’ll bet she’s all fake,” Allana declared.

“Yeah, no one looks that good — naturally,” Erica announced. “She’s had plastic surgery. I read it in *The Inquisitor*.”

“Alex, who’s better looking — her or ME?” Cynthia challenged.

“Can they use the band in the movie?” Sara asked.

The questions were flying at the four of them. They didn’t really have an answer for any of them — until — Alex took the stage. “Fans, fans — back, please give me room. Make room for Melissa’s new leading man — her ONLY man.”

“Get serious Alex. What’s she like?” Cal insisted.

“We’re sworn to secrecy — but I can tell you — she’s got the hots for me.”

“Shut-up Alex. You’re such a poser!” Allana declared.

“Yeah Alex. You’re nothing but a bad actor. You’re not fooling us,” Erica added. “You couldn’t get a job doing hemorrhoid commercials — even though you’re the biggest pain in the rear in the world!”

The kids burst out laughing.

Alex ignored them. “I’m a method actor. I’ll use whatever method I can, to get close to Melissa.” He thought he was so clever. “And that’s all we can say, because we all signed a non-disclosure.”

Scott, Kim and Amy were shocked. Alex actually made sense.

“That’s all I had to hear, Alex,” Mrs. Hardy exclaimed. “So you’ll have some acting experience before you tackle our school play next month. I’m so excited. I can’t wait to see what you can do.”

Alex was caught off-guard. He had no intention of doing the play. He thought a little

offense was the best defense.

“I don’t want to be doing some old play. I’m the man of the new millennium. If it’s not relevant to today — then I’m not in the play.”

Scott chortled and wondered if Alex knew he actually rhymed that last sentence. It didn’t go unnoticed by Mrs. Hardy.

“Excellent Alex. I think you’ve got something. Why don’t YOU write a school play. Make it relevant to your peers — and perhaps win a Pulitzer while you’re at it. I’m sure you can do it.”

She was kidding — but Alex didn’t know when to shut up.

“I’m sure I can.”

“Alex, be quiet. She’s joking!” Scott whispered to his buddy.

“And Scott will help me.”

“Man — the election all over again,” Scott whined.

Kim and Amy decided to contribute their two cents worth.

“I think that’s a great idea Mrs. Hardy,” Amy declared.

“So, what are you going to write about Alex?” Kim challenged.

Alex turned to Scott. “So, what are we going to write about, Scott?”

Scott groaned. He looked at Mrs. Hardy and begged, “Tell him you were just kidding. You know he has no clue about anything.”

Alex took offense and went on the offensive... again. “I have lots of clues and lots of opinions and lots of ideas!”

“Like what?” Sara challenged. The whole class was waiting for an answer.

“Speak up Alex. You’ve got the floor,” Jeremy teased.

“Exactly!” Alex declared. “We never really get the floor. No one ever really listens to us kids. That’s why Scott and Kim had to start their Internet site — so that we kids could exercise our Freedom of Speech rights.”

Mrs. Hardy was liking what she was hearing.

“Alex, what kind of Freedom of Speech play are you thinking about writing?”

“I need time to think about it. I’ll take suggestions from the floor,” he declared. “Unlike most adults — I’m listening!”

Kim had a brainstorm. Her face was lit up like the Northern Lights, but she wasn’t sure if she should say anything.

Alex could see in Kim’s eyes, that she was holding something back. Usually, it was curse words or some rude comments aimed at him or Scott. But now, he suspected it was something good, for a change.

“Kim. You look like you want to say something. I’m listening,” Alex said.

Kim shook her head.

“Come on Kim, I know you’re dying to say something.”

Mrs. Hardy could also tell Kim wanted to speak, so she nudged her just a little. “Kim, if you have an idea that might be helpful to Alex, and obviously to the rest of us, then we’d love to hear it.”

Kim preferred to answer to Mrs. Hardy and not Alex. She was ready to speak.

“I think we should go to the trial that my mom’s involved in, and we should tape it and write a play about it. I think we should set it to Political Punk music and make it a Po Punk Musical. That’s relevant isn’t it?”

“Like Hair!” Mrs. Hardy exclaimed.

“Huh?” the entire class replied.

“It was a famous play I acted in. We were all... never mind,” Mrs. Hardy almost explained before changing the subject. “Now, tell us about this trial,” she asked.

Kim and Scott proceeded to explain what the no-speak documents were, and how they violated people’s First Amendment rights. They told the students all about the trial coming up, and that a Special Federal Prosecutor was being brought in especially for this case.”

“When is it?”

“It’s in three weeks.”

“So,” Alex said, “if we can go to this trial — and I mean the whole class — then we can all work together to write a play about it.”

Sara added, “And if Mr. Wagner can come too — then he can help figure out what music could go with it!”

Mrs. Hardy was pumped. “I don’t think I’ve felt this much adrenaline flowing through my veins since I was arrested...”

“It WAS true!” Alex exclaimed.

“Guilty as charged,” Mrs. Hardy replied. “Now, I need to get some details about this trial, and I need to arrange for the class to attend. Kim, should I call your mom?”

“Yeah! And if you have problems with Principal Toole, my mom said she’d speak with him.”

“So you’ve discussed this with your parents.”

“We talked about attending the trial, but we never thought about writing a play. She’ll love it.”

“And she’ll especially love the Po Punk Musical angle,” Mrs. Hardy added. “And your grandparents will think this is far-out!”

Scott, Kim and the rest of the class weren’t sure what she meant by that comment.

“Okay, I’ll let you know what Principal Toole says. I’ll have to let him know we’re writing our own school play, and we’ll have to postpone our performance. If the trial is in three weeks, it’ll take us at least two weeks to write the play and one week to rehearse. I’d say we’ll have to be ready for an audience in six weeks!”

“What if the Parent Council says we can’t do it?” Scott asked.

The kids waited for her reply.

Chapter Twenty-Two



“The who?” Mrs. Hardy teased. “We’ll just take it underground.”

“Underground? To where?” someone asked.

“We’ll just go about our business. It’s better to do and ask for forgiveness later... that’s my policy,” Mrs. Hardy admitted.

The rest of the afternoon was quiet and uneventful, until Principal Toole made the final announcement of the day.

“Students of Spring Valley — you will have to come to school on Saturday and Sunday. The movie crew requires more shots. The cafeteria will be open, and of course we expect you to eat all of your meals here.”

The entire student body moaned so loudly that it echoed through the school’s hallways all the way to Principal Toole’s office.

“I hear you,” Principal Toole continued, but if you look at the contract you signed with the production company, it says that you might be required to work this weekend if they needed you. It is in the very fine print, on the bottom of page five.”

“How did my dad miss that?” Amy whined.

“I’ll bet NONE of the parents missed it,” Alex announced. “It’s like THEY get a weekend off!”

“The good news is,” Principal Toole added, “that you can do extra curricular activities all day. The gyms and pool will be open, and the band room and the outdoor fields will be accessible.”

This made things a little more palatable.

“And of course, you’ll all be getting paid overtime. That was in the contract, too.”

BZZZZ...

The kids bolted out of the school. Alex and Amy had plans that night, so Kim and Scott were on their own. They spotted Tommie parked in front of the school. They ran to the van and jumped in. They had lots to tell her.

“We met Melissa today!” Kim exclaimed. “We did an ETE TV promo with her.”

“That’s exciting! So when will you be on TV?”

“We’re stuck in school tomorrow and Sunday!” Scott complained.

“What? One at a time,” Tommie requested. “Scott, since working the weekend impacts on your bag ratting activity and the web site, you start first.”

Scott filled Tommie in on the contract and the extra curricular activities on the weekend. He also mentioned that the cafeteria would be open, and that the kids were all supposed to eat there.

“I hope your friend gets the results back soon,” Tommie said.

Before pulling away from the curb, Tommie noticed the students filing out of the school. “It still looks like the kids are doing well on this cafeteria food. They look really healthy, if you ask me. They even look a little lighter overall.”

Suddenly, it dawned on Scott — there was more important news to share with his mom. “Kim, you tell her why they look so skinny,” Scott directed.

“We started out fat!” Kim exclaimed. “That’s what Melissa said.”

“And there’s a company that’s going to make billions!” Scott added.

“I don’t get the connection,” Tommie admitted.

“And Melissa is nothing but a mouthpiece!” Kim claimed.

“They picked our school because we’re fat!” Scott announced.

“You are not. That’s absurd!” Tommie shouted.

“Really Mom, we think they picked our school because they’re doing a movie about a fat school that takes some miracle pills and the kids all get skinny and popular,” Scott explained. “That’s what we were trying to tell you. Melissa said that she’s going to be their talking-head for the product. We’re lab rats! ... WORSE! We’re RATBOYS!”

Tommie shook her head. “Are you sure she didn’t mean P H A T? You know... real coool... you kids are all that, you know.”

“That’s what Alex said — but we think he’s wrong.”

“I hope your friend gets the results back soon. Do you know how to contact her?”

“We don’t even know her last name.”

“But we have her fax number!” Scott exclaimed. “Let’s fax her a message and see when she’ll be done.”

“Great idea,” Tommie said.

As soon as they arrived home, Scott and Kim rushed upstairs to Scott’s room. Tommie went to the kitchen to make dinner.

The kids sent the following message to Natalie:

Natalie,

We were wondering when you’d be finished the analysis of the food and pills and contracts.

Scott and Kim

The kids went downstairs for supper. When Scott finished his last bite of lasagna, he went upstairs to see if Natalie had responded. There was a return fax. He printed it off and brought it back down to the kitchen table and announced, “She replied!”

“What did she say?” Kim asked excitedly.

Scott read:

Scott and Kim,

Some ingredients are hard to identify. They seem to react with the food. My friend

and I need another couple of days to run more tests.

I'll let you know as soon as we're done. Make sure you don't eat any of this.

With regard to the contracts, it looks like the parents signed away their rights to hold the company responsible for any harm to the school or the kids. This isn't good.

Natalie

“It’s weird that all the kids at school are eating the food and taking the vitamins and they seem fine,” Scott commented.

Tommie replied, “That doesn’t mean it’s safe. Long term effects don’t show up in a week. Look at all the lawsuits going on nowadays. The Food and Drug Administration pushes approvals through — and before you know it — people are getting sick from taking the drug that’s supposed to cure something else.

“Mom’s right,” Scott announced. “Like Natalie said, the problem here is that all of the parents signed forms that basically gave away their rights to take action if something goes wrong.”

“Sounds like HucksterCo,” Tommie mumbled to herself.

MMMM... CLUNK...

“Dad’s home!” Kim shouted.

Chris was at the office all day. He had to catch up on work. He’d been spending all his time on the kids’ web site and he needed to show his face to his employees. He was tired and hoping for a quiet evening in front of the tube.

“Chris, I have your plate in the microwave. Sit down and the kids will fill you in on their day.”

“Sounds great. I’m pooped. There’s a baseball game I want to watch.”

“Not right now Chris. We’re watching ETE.”

“Huh? Since when are you interested in that trash?”

“Since we might be on it!” Scott exclaimed.

The kids explained what happened that day, while Tommie cleaned up.

ETE didn’t run the Melissa story. It looked like it was going to be a quiet evening, after all.

DING... DONG...

Scott ran and opened the door. He couldn’t believe his eyes.

Chapter Twenty-Three



“Melissa! What are YOU doing here?” Scott exclaimed.

Kim overheard and ran to the door. “Melissa! Come in!”

Chris and Tommie wondered what all the excitement was about, so they headed to the foyer. There, standing in front of them, stood a tall, skinny, red-haired, sad looking teenager. They had no idea this was the famous Melissa, the movie star.

“I hope I’m not disturbing you,” Melissa said.

“NO! No way!” Scott replied.

“Scott, how about introducing us to your friend?” Tommie asked.

Scott turned beet red. “Mom, Dad, this is Melissa!”

“Melissa, I’m Tommie and this is Chris.”

“Nice to meet you Mr. and Mrs. Campbell.”

“How did you find us?” Kim asked.

“I knew your last name, so I just looked up your address in the phone book. No one knows I’m here.”

“You snuck out?” Kim asked.

“I had to.”

“How did you do it?” Scott inquired.

“I get really bad migraine headaches, and I need it to be totally quiet and dark. I just faked one and they left me alone. The production company doesn’t want my headaches lasting long because it costs too much if I can’t be in the shot.”

“Have you eaten yet?” Tommie asked. She thought Melissa looked pale. “We’re just finishing supper, but I have lots left. It’s nothing special, veggie lasagna, Caesar salad and garlic bread.”

“Oh, that sounds wonderful!”

“When’s the last time you ate, Dear?” Tommie asked.

“I don’t remember. I don’t think about it much. I take my vitamins and eat in the cafeteria when I feel like it.”

They all sat down at the kitchen table. Tommie dished Melissa out a little of everything. Melissa wolfed the food down. All of a sudden, she looked panicked. “Where’s your bathroom?”

Scott pointed to the main floor bathroom and Melissa ran to it as fast as she could. "I knew you were a rotten cook Mom, but this is bad!" Scott said, not realizing the seriousness of the situation.

"Scott, you idiot!" Kim bellowed.

The four of them rushed over to the bathroom and stood outside the door. They could hear the painful sounds of her throwing-up. "Melissa, are you going to be all right?" Tommie asked.

"I'm fine," Melissa weakly replied. "I'm so sorry. It wasn't the food." She opened the door and exited, saying, "I ate too fast. I should probably go now."

"No, you'll stay right here until we're sure you're all right," Tommie declared.

Melissa was surprised. It sounded to her like Tommie actually cared. "Mrs. Campbell, I think I can hold down supper now. I'm feeling much better."

"Let's all sit back down at the kitchen table."

Tommie made up another plate. She and Chris sat quietly as the kids talked.

"I'll eat slower this time," Melissa promised.

"So, Melissa, what brings you to our neighborhood?" Scott asked. He was trying to be cool, but it came out pretty lame.

"Actually, I was hoping to spend some time with you and Kim."

"Really?" Kim replied.

"Really. I had fun today at the ETE taping. I never get to just hang out with normal kids. My life is so planned and boring."

"Boring!?! Your life is so exciting!" Kim exclaimed.

Melissa shook her head and said, "It's really not."

"But you travel all over and meet such neat and famous people," Scott announced. "You can talk to whoever you want to!"

"But I never get to speak my own mind. I have to say the words that other people write. You saw what happened at the ETE shooting. I can't even joke with the crew. All I am is a money maker."

"That WAS dumb," Kim agreed. "So you're just a mouthpiece."

"Right. I never get to be a kid."

"Man, and we envied you!" Scott exclaimed. "We never thought you'd want to hang out with us."

"I do! Maybe we can even shoot..."

Chapter Twenty-Four



“...some hoops! I hear you two are really good players,” Melissa explained.

“Shoot hoops!” Scott exclaimed. “You play basketball?”

“I used to — before I became an actress. It’s too dangerous for me to play now. The studio won’t let me do anything. I can’t skateboard, ride my BMX, snowboard, wakeboard...”

“But you do all that stuff in your movies,” Kim said.

“That’s not me, that’s my double. I don’t do anything physical.”

“We’ve got tons of basketball shoes,” Kim said. “Something should fit you. Let’s hit the paint!”

“Great. I’m a size eight and a half.”

“Kim, I don’t think Melissa has the energy,” Tommie observed. “Besides, she just finished eating... again.”

“I’m fine Mrs. Campbell. I’ll take a couple of vitamins. They work in no time. Besides, I need the exercise,” she said as she popped some pills.

“We need another player — so we can go two on two,” Kim said, looking at Tommie.

“Okay. I’ll play too.” Tommie wanted to keep an eye on Melissa anyway.

“I’ll ref,” Chris added. He wanted to keep an eye on Scott.

Tommie and Chris headed to their bedroom to get ready.

Kim ran upstairs to her bedroom to get changed as well. She found a pair of shorts, a T-shirt and socks for Melissa.

Scott changed and then sifted through the umpteen pairs of old runners in the back closet — to find ones that would fit Melissa. Scott and Kim met outside the downstairs washroom and handed the gear to Melissa. She changed, and within minutes, they were warming up on the driveway.

“Mrs. Campbell, I’ll play with you.”

“We’ll KILL you!” Scott said.

“I don’t think so,” Melissa teased, as she grabbed the ball from Scott and went in for a lay-up.

“Not bad,” Scott said. “But anyone can do that.”

Melissa got the ball back, dribbled to the three-point line, and...

SWOOOSH...

"I still got game!"

"Beginner's luck!" Scott called out.

Tommie couldn't believe the transformation. 'Fifteen minutes ago this girl was almost comatose. Now she's a bundle of energy. What's in those vitamins?'

Chris wondered the same thing.

"Game on!" Melissa said. She began passing the ball back and forth to Tommie. Before long, she and Tommie were ahead by eight.

Chris was impressed. Scott wasn't. He was getting frustrated. It's one thing to get beat by your sister, but it's quite another being beat by a girl you want to show off to.

Scott suspected that Kim was throwing the game, partly to let Melissa win, and partly to make Scott lose.

"Come on Kim! You're playing like a girl!" Scott announced.

"What's your point?" Kim replied and laughed.

Scott started to get aggressive and played really close to Melissa on defense. He was bumping up against her and trying to push her out of position.

"Scott! Watch your manners!" Chris scolded. "Melissa is our guest!"

"It's okay Mr. Campbell. I'm used to it. Guys don't like being beat by a girl."

"Scott's used to it," Kim replied. "Amy and I beat him and Alex all the time."

Scott's manhood was in question. "You do not!"

"Scott, chill out! You know I'm teasing. ...Not!"

Scott took a run at Melissa to try and steal the ball. She was ready for him, and protected the ball with her hip. Scott ended up hip-checking Melissa, and knocked her on her butt.

Kim ran over to Melissa. "Are you all right?"

"You play dirty!" Melissa barked. "So — street ball rules is it?"

Chris had Scott by his T-shirt. Chris was really mad and ordered Scott, "Apologize, right now. When I said I'd ref, I meant out of bounds, not out of line plays."

"Sorry Melissa. I guess you knock over so easy because you're so skinny." It seemed like Scott forgot all about the fact that Melissa was a famous movie star. He was treating her like he would Amy.

Melissa loved it.

"Now Scott, keep it in check. I don't want to be handing out fouls," Chris announced. "But I will."

"Okay Dad. I'll be nice to the girls."

The pick-up game went on for another twenty minutes.

The score was tied at 38. Tommie was tired and thought it would be a perfect time to end the game. No winners, and no losers.

"I'm exhausted, can we call it quits? I'm ready to collapse," Tommie declared.

"Okay Mom," Kim said.

"Right, quit just when I'm getting hot," Scott whined.

"Scott, be a good sport," Chris lectured.

"How about — next basket wins?" Scott said.

Melissa had the ball in her hands. Scott bolted toward her and grabbed the ball from her. He must have made contact with her because as he dribbled down the driveway, Melissa fell to the ground.

“OOOW!” Melissa cried out as she grabbed her ankle. “I think it’s BROKEN!”

Scott stopped in his tracks. He picked up the ball and ran back to see what damage he had done. He remembered that Melissa was a priceless object, and one that’s not supposed to be broken, especially by a jerk like him.

Kim, Chris and Tommie were already crowded around her when Scott arrived. He bent over her and put down the ball. Melissa suddenly jumped up and grabbed the ball, yelling, “Game on!” She booted it down the driveway and scored.

“No fair!” Scott shouted. “You cheated!”

“Sucker!” Melissa called back. “We win Mrs. Campbell.”

Tommie shook her head and replied, “You sure fooled me!”

Chris laughed and said to his whining son, “You get back what you put out. Be a man.”

“Man, if you were on our team, we’d clean up the county and probably the state!” Kim exclaimed.

Scott had to admit, “She’s good enough for the boys’ team!”

Tommie and Chris went inside to shower-up and change.

On the way in, Melissa revealed, “You guys have a really neat web site. I’ve checked it out.”

“How did YOU find out about it?” Kim asked.

“Peter,” Melissa replied, “he heard from some of his music buddies.”

The kids assumed she meant Peter, from Out of Sink.

“Really?” Scott said.

“Yeah, really. The whole Freedom of Speech and Expression issue is majorly important to him,” Melissa explained.

Kim was surprised. “Important to Out of Sink? They don’t do anything edgy.”

“Peter would like to, but the music moguls won’t let him. It might tarnish his good boy image, and moms wouldn’t buy their daughter’s his CD’s.”

“You’re kidding,” Scott said.

“Are you kidding?” Melissa asked. “The music industry is way worse than my business when it comes to censorship. Heck, they can’t even say F sharp on the radio!”

The kids thought about it.

“You’re right!” Kim exclaimed. “Why don’t you do a chat room with us tonight? Kids could ask you questions — and you could tell them what YOU want to — not what the studio tells you to say.”

“Awesome! I’d love to. When can we do it?”

“How about now?” Kim asked. “We can put out a broadcast email to the members. I’ll bet we’ll get tons of questions. What do you think, Scott?”

“You DO have a brain!” Scott replied. He was still hurting from the butt kicking he got from Melissa. She was no longer the screen dream, just another annoying girl.

“I’ll set it up now, while you guys are catching your breath and cleaning up,” Scott announced.

“Aren’t you changing?” Kim asked.

“I hardly broke a sweat,” Scott declared.

“I’m not sitting beside you,” Melissa announced.

Scott’s bad attitude was now directed at both of them.

“If anyone is stinky, it’s you,” Scott exclaimed, as he headed to the game room to set

up.

The girls giggled as soon as Scott was gone. Kim and Melissa were starting to bond, dissing Scott — like normal teenage girls. It was easy, because they had something in common...

Chapter Twenty-Five



...their total dislike, disdain, distrust, disinterest, for most teenage boys.

“Melissa, once you change and clean up, we’ll meet back in the kitchen. We can get some snacks and head down to the game room,” Kim directed. “That’s where we have the computers and Internet access set up for the site.”

“Cool!” Melissa said. She and Kim got changed, met back in the kitchen, grabbed some juice and fruit, and caught up with Scott. He had already set up the chat room, and sent out a broadcast email to all members, letting them know about the special guest.

Tommie and Chris joined the kids in the game room.

“What are you doing down here?”

“We’re doing a chat room with Melissa.”

“So you kissed and made up then,” Tommie teased.

“As if,” Scott snarled.

Chris laughed. “Why do you bug him like that, Tommie?”

“Because it’s so easy.”

Scott knew he shouldn’t react to his mom’s dumb comments, but he did anyway.

“Mom, I sent a broadcast email out to all the members. Would it be okay if I call Alex and tell him Melissa’s here?”

Melissa reacted quickly. “No, it’s better if no one knows I’m here. They can think I’m just online like the rest of them.”

“You didn’t tell anyone she was HERE, did you?” Kim asked. She sounded concerned.

“No! Do you think I’m stupid?”

“Don’t answer that Kim,” Tommie ordered.

“Well, you are if you think big mouth Alex can keep a secret,” Kim retorted.

“Alex. Is that the other guy that did the interview? He was weird,” Melissa announced. “And what was with his hands in his lap? What was he doing?”

“Yeah,” Kim added. “It looked like he was hiding something.”

Chris looked at Tommie, and then they both looked at Scott. The three of them knew exactly what he was doing, but the girls were clued out. Tommie decided it was better they stay that way, and she changed the subject.

“Let’s get this thing going! What’s the first question for Melissa?”

The kids got comfortable in front of their own PC, and Melissa started taking questions.

Question by question, Scott, Kim, Tommie and Chris were increasingly surprised by Melissa’s answers. When they added them all together, her real life story was more unbelievable than her movies.

Q. Melissa, what’s your favorite color?

A. I love blue.

Q. What’s your favorite number?

A. I love the number 14. It was my basketball jersey number.

Q. You play basketball?

A. I used to, when I was a normal kid and went to school.

Q. You don’t go to school?

A. I take my classes in a trailer. I have school three hours a day.

Q. You lucky duck. I’d love to go to school for just three hours a day.

A. It’s not that great. I don’t have any friends. I can’t play on teams. I don’t go to school dances. I can’t hang out at the mall. I never date. Life is a drag.

Q. But you must have lots of money. You can do anything because you’re rich.

A. I don’t have any money except for the little allowance that the studio gives me. My parents manage my career and they have all the money. I don’t get to see any of it. My parents live in a really big house in Beverly Hills.

Q. Wow, you live in Beverly Hills?

A. No, I live on location. I haven’t been home for three months. I’m always making movies. My parents need to get me to make as many as I can before someone else comes along and becomes your favorite teenage girl.

Q. No way! You’ll always be our favorite! You’ll be making movies forever, won’t you?

A. I have about two more movies in me, that’s what the studio says... then I’m yesterday’s news. They already have a new girl lined up to take my place. They’re getting her ready... getting her skinny and teaching her all the right moves.

Q. So what will you do when your career in movies is over?

A. Oh, probably try to do commercials, be a spokesgirl, or maybe go back to school and be normal like you.

Q. Is it true you’re dating Peter from Out of Sink?

A. No, I don’t have a boyfriend.

Q. How come we keep seeing you in magazines and on TV with Peter then?”

A. The studio does that for publicity. We’re friends. We rarely see each other though, so we usually just communicate by email. Our handlers make us look like a couple, so we’ll be more popular and cross-market each other. The people who own me, also own Out of Sink.

Q. Handlers? It sounds like you’re animals or something.

A. That is all we are to them. Circus animals. They bring us out to perform and then put us back into our cage.

Q. Do you like Peter’s music?

A. No, and neither does Peter.

Q. What kind of music do you like?

A. I'm supposed to say boyz bands, cause that's what my owners are pushing right now, but I really like Political Punk. Those guys know what they're talking about!

Q. You said Peter doesn't like his music. Then why does he sing it?

A. Same reason we act like we're dating. Because we're told to.

Q. You're kidding!

A. No. I'm not. I don't have my own life, I live the life that my bosses tell me I have to. It's a drag!

Q. What do you do for fun?

A. I'm not allowed to do anything. I might hurt myself. But before I became famous I used to skateboard a lot. I played a lot of basketball. I was all-state when I was ten years old. There was even talk of me playing for the Olympic team. I was really tall when I was ten.

Q. How tall are you now?

A. I'm five feet ten inches. I'm still pretty tall for a girl.

Q. Do you miss your parents? Do they come and visit you on location?

A. No, they're really busy. They travel a lot. I haven't seen them since the studio held a huge birthday party for me.

Q. That must have been really fun! Were there lots of stars there?

A. Yes, there were, but it really wasn't very much fun. The whole thing was staged like a movie. It was all done for the media, like those guys at Entertainment This Evening. They gave me all these really neat presents, but I didn't get to keep them. They were all studio props. I cried for hours that night when it was all over. My parents didn't even stay the night. They just took off with some of the older actors.

Q. Are you going to get into trouble for speaking out like this?

A. Probably, but I don't care. I think you kids need to know what some of our lives are really like and I think you need to know that lots of us don't like having to seem perfect. We're kids just like you, with zits and periods and bad moods and bad hair days.

Q. But you always look perfect!

A. That's because we wear gobs of make up, the studio doesn't let us eat, and they film us with special lenses and only from angles that make us look really good. If you saw me right now you wouldn't recognize me.

A. Hey guys. This is Scott. I've played basketball with her and she's about as feminine as Shaq. And when she doesn't have any make-up on and her hair is a mess, she looks just as bad as my sister, Kim.

Q. No way man!

A. Yes way dude!

Q. Melissa, you sound lonely. Are you?

A. I am! I wouldn't recommend this career to anyone. I can't wait until I retire.

Q. Where will you go? Will you go home to your parents? They don't sound like they want you.

A. You're right! They love my money and the fame I bring them, but I don't think they give a darn about me.

Q. Maybe you can sue your parents for the right to live on your own. Like some other kid did. Or if you want you can come and live at my house. I bet my parents wouldn't mind.

A. Thanks for the offer, but right now the studio owns me. But don't think I haven't thought about trying to live on my own... cause I have. I have a grandmother somewhere. My parents never let me meet her. I don't even know where she lives or what her name is. I'd like to find her. Maybe I could use the web site to send a message to her.

Q. Why don't you do it right now? Write your message right here! Maybe some of us can help you?

A. Only if it's okay with Kim and Scott.

The Chat room was now chatless...

Chapter Twenty-Six



Kim and Scott interrupted the chat room to speak with Melissa.

“What do you know about your grandmother?” Kim asked.

“Not much. My parents changed their names when they immigrated to the United States.”

“Where did they come from?” Tommie asked.

“I really don’t know,” Melissa admitted. “They never talk about it. It’s like they’re embarrassed or something.”

“Why don’t they speak to your grandmother?” Chris asked.

“Mom and Dad don’t want to be associated with her.”

“Is your grandma famous or something?” Scott asked.

“I have no idea,” Melissa replied.

“If you could find your grandmother, maybe she’d look after you,” Kim figured. “You could quit the movie business and get away from your parents.”

“It’s not that easy. I have a contract with the studio. They own me,” Melissa admitted. “They’ll let me go when THEY want to.”

The kids in the chat room were getting impatient. Questions continued to flash up on the monitor.

Q. Where did you guys go?

Q. What’s happening?

Q. Where’s Melissa?

Q. Is it Okay, Scott and Kim?

A. It’s okay with us.

Q. Are you ready, Melissa?

A. I sure am! Okay! Here goes. Dear Grandma. My screen name is Melissa Mastrianni. I don’t know what my real name is because my parents changed their names. I think my dad’s real name is Phillip or Phillipe, but he goes by Morgan. My mom’s current first name is Olivia, but I think her real last name sounds something like Emerson. If you think I’m your granddaughter, could you please contact me through the KidsOpinionsCount.com site.

Q. Do you think she'll find you?

A. I hope so.

Q. What's your favorite part of the KidsOpinionsCount.com web site?

A. I love the Contributors sections. Especially the Comment and Issues pages on topics that mean something to us kids. I really like the new 'What's the Skinny' page. I hope you all read this one and write in.

Q. Why?

A. I've been anorexic. I've been bulimic. I have my own shrink and I'm on a bunch of different drugs to keep my weight down and to give me energy without taking in calories. It's not a good thing. No one wants to do what I do to look like this. It just isn't worth it. I'd be fine if I could do sports and eat healthy food. I may have a little more body fat, but that would be good for me. We're supposed to have some body fat —unless you're a lollipop headed actress like they want me to be.

It was already 10:30, and Scott, Kim and Melissa had school tomorrow.

"I think you should call it a night," Tommie advised. She and Chris had been the perfect parents. They'd kept a low profile, and their comments to a minimum. Scott and Kim were thankful.

The kids agreed. They were exhausted. Scott typed the final messages.

Q. Did you guys have a good time?

A. Yes!

Q. It's time to sign-off. We'll try to do more of these. Stay tuned and let us know the kinds of people you'd like for guests. Make your opinions count!

The chat room was over.

"Thanks for letting me do this," Melissa said to the Campbells.

"It was our pleasure," Chris replied. "How are you feeling?"

"I'm feeling great. This is the first time I've actually said what I want to say to someone else. I usually just rant and rave to myself."

"I hope you don't get into trouble," Kim commented.

"I can handle it. But, I'd better buzz off and get back to my trailer. Melissa DOES mean honey bee you know."

"Mom, you can drive her, right?" Kim suggested.

"Of course," Tommie replied.

On the way back, Tommie and Melissa had a long chat. Tommie was surprised at how open Melissa was with her. When Tommie arrived at the school, Melissa began to cry.

"Melissa, I don't know what to do?" Tommie admitted. "I don't think this is what you want, and I feel useless because I don't know how to help you."

"It's all right Mrs. Campbell. I'll be fine. I'll cry for a while and fall asleep. I'll be good as new in the morning. This happens a lot."

"Which trailer is yours?"

"You'd better drive right by the school and drop me off down the street. I'll walk back. It'll be easier for me to slip in the back window without them seeing me."

"Are you sure?"

“I’m sure. I’ve done this before,” she confessed. “I’m getting really good at becoming invisible.”

Tommie slipped her hand into her purse and rummaged around for a second. She pulled out her business card and handed it to Melissa. “Here’s all of my numbers. If you need me for anything, you just call.”

“That’s okay Mrs. Campbell.”

Tommie reached over and touched Melissa’s hand. “Melissa, please call me if you want to talk, or need to get out of here. I’m serious.”

“Thanks Mrs. Campbell,” Melissa replied. She could see that Tommie was sincere. She wasn’t used to adults who really cared. She was used to unkept promises, flattery, insincerity...

Tommie pulled over and stopped at the next corner. Melissa jumped out of the van, and in a split second, she disappeared under the cover of darkness — to break back into her prison.

When Tommie returned home, she found her family sitting in the family room, discussing the evening’s events.

“Man, we’ve got a perfect life compared to Melissa,” Scott declared.

“It’s a bloody crime!” Tommie exploded. “We’re going to do something about it.”

“Like what?” Chris asked. He was concerned. Tommie had that look in her eye... her rage against the machine look...

Chapter Twenty-Seven



“I have no idea, but that’s no way to treat a child!” Tommie insisted. “There must be something we can do to help the poor girl?”

“It’s really not our place to do anything Tommie. She has parents,” Chris answered, trying to offload the problem.

“But they sound so awful!” Tommie announced.

“And you don’t think that Scott and Kim tell their friends about what monsters we are? You know how kids exaggerate,” Chris proposed. He was only making her more determined to support and help Melissa.

“Sure, but I’m convinced she’s telling the truth,” Tommie answered.

“Yeah Dad. Why would she lie?” Kim asked.

“I’m not saying she did. But she IS an actress. Look how she faked you out, playing basketball.”

“What are you saying?” Tommie returned.

“Just don’t jump to her rescue so fast. She could be playing us.”

“Dad, since when are you suspicious?” Scott asked.

“If she comes to us for help, then we’ll see what we can do,” Chris suggested. “Don’t get too invested in her.”

It was already 11:00. “Bed time you two,” Tommie said. “School tomorrow.”

The kids were actually pumped that they had to go to school. They’d have another chance to see Melissa. They headed upstairs and fell fast asleep.

Tommie questioned Chris about his attitude toward Melissa. “I thought you were concerned about her. Why did you do a one-eighty?”

“I didn’t. I just want us to be cautious. We don’t want to get too emotionally invested in this girl. I don’t want the kids getting their feelings hurt.”

“Where’s this coming from?”

“Personal experience and that’s all I’ll say,” Chris admitted.

Bright and early Saturday morning, the Spring Valley students showed up to school, ready to have fun. The two days were set up like field days. The film crew needed a smorgasbord of activity. There was a track meet going on, soccer games, baseball games,

chess tournament, photography club, basketball and even the school band was playing their new music.

There were no Melissa sightings all day Saturday, and the students were disappointed. Sunday however, was a different story.

“It’s Melissa!” Ryan shouted.

There she was. Plain as day. Walking out onto the baseball diamond. She took to the mound and pitched three innings. Each one of them, a no hitter. She signed a ton of autographs and went on to the next event. One by one, Melissa participated in every extra curricular activity — and she did it superbly — kicking butt in almost every one.

She ran the one hundred-yard dash in eleven seconds flat.

She beat the reigning chess champion.

She scored three goals in five minutes on the soccer field.

She was truly amazing.

The whole day was like a fantasy to the kids at Spring Valley. They were playing with, and talking to, the famous Melissa.

Tommie picked up Alex, Amy, Kim and Scott at 4:00. The shooting had stopped for the day, and ‘Melissa’ was again, tucked away in her trailer.

“What a rip-off!” Alex exclaimed.

“What was?” Tommie asked.

“They had a fake Melissa at school today,” Scott announced. “She was acting like the real one, but she was a fake.”

“And we couldn’t tell the kids because they thought she was the real one, and we didn’t want to burst their bubbles,” Kim added.

“Did you see the real Melissa at all today?” Tommie asked.

“No. We had to pretend she was real.”

Tommie dropped Amy and Alex off at their houses. Scott and Kim continued to complain — all the way home. The bloom was off the rose...

Monday morning, the kids arrived early at school for basketball practice. Tommie dropped them off in front of the parking lot. As they walked toward the school doors, they noticed Melissa’s trailer door was open. The real Melissa came bouncing out of the trailer, escorted by her two burly bodyguards. She looked like a million dollars.

“Melissa!” Scott shouted over to her.

Melissa ignored him.

“Melissa, it’s me and Scott!” Kim shouted out.

They knew she could hear them now, but again there was no response.

“What going on?” Scott asked Kim.

“Maybe Dad was right — and she IS playing us,” Scott offered.

“What about all that stuff she said on the chat room?”

“Maybe that was all part of some publicity stunt.”

“Get serious,” Kim replied.

“How else are you going to explain this. She doesn’t even wave or say hi. She didn’t even look at us.”

“Maybe she didn’t hear us.”

“Come on Kim. You’re louder than a death metal concert! We need to get to practice. Forget about her,” Scott ordered.

“Right, and we should probably forget about this grandmother thing,” Kim conceded. “She probably made that up, too.”

“She sure sucked us in,” Scott announced.

“And Mom! Should we tell her?”

“Nah. Only if she asks,” Scott replied. “I think she’ll be hurt. She’s ready to adopt her.”

“I know.”

Scott’s coach shouted from down the hallway, “I see the Campbells are finally coming!” The kids raced to their respective gyms.

The entire day flew by. Nothing out of the ordinary happened.

BZZZZ...

Kim and Scott headed straight home when the final bell went. It was a hot afternoon, and they were planning to relax and do nothing for a change.

As soon as they walked through the backdoor, and threw their backpacks down, they got an unpleasant surprise...

Chapter Twenty-Eight



“Great! You’re home!” Tommie announced. “We’re going golfing tonight. Are you two ready to caddy?”

“Rats!” Kim replied.

“Right. Bag rats... remember?” Tommie said.

“You’re joking, right Mom?” Scott asked. “I’m tired and I just want to veg... alone!”

“Family time is quality time,” Tommie teased.

“Scott, shut-up before you tee her off and we’re stuck doing this again,” Kim barked.

“Speaking of tee-offs, we’ve got one in half an hour. Let’s go,” Tommie directed. “We’ll grab dinner at the club after our round.” Tommie turned her attention to the second floor of the house and shouted, “Chris, they’re home. Let’s go!”

Chris bolted downstairs. He was dressed in his golf attire.

“Dad, don’t wear those plaid shorts!” Kim begged.

“Yeah Dad. You look like a moron,” Scott added.

“Hey. These are Campbell tartan shorts. I’m proud of my heritage.”

“You can be proud at home. You look like a goof,” Scott declared.

“Actually, Chris, I agree with the kids. Those things are embarrassing.”

“You bought them for me!”

“Yeah, as a joke. I never expected that you’d wear them in public.”

Chris turned around and headed upstairs. When he returned, he was wearing beige... beige socks, shirt, shorts and probably, beige underwear. “Dull enough for you three?”

“Perfect,” Scott replied.

“Okay, let’s go!” Chris ordered.

As the four of them loaded into the van, Kim whispered to Scott, “Do you have the walkie-talkies?”

“Of golf course I do! It’s no fun without our caustic play by plays.”

“Great, it really is a hoot watching them golf... they’re soooo bad,” Kim replied.

Scott and Kim had suffered this consequence before. Tommie and Chris were pretty consistent golfers. Chris consistently sliced and Tommie consistently hooked. The kids were always on opposite sides of the fairways. When Scott and Kim caddied for them, they took walkie-talkies with them so they could help each other find missing balls, and

more importantly, so they could do silly play-by-plays of each shot. The kids usually golfed too, but today they wanted to get finished as quickly as possible, so they decided not to.

When the family arrived at the first hole, a foursome was teeing off, and a twosome was waiting. Scott and Kim lined their carts up along side the others, and they sat down on the bench with Tommie and Chris and waited.

Kim leaned over and asked Scott, “Did you put the, you know whats, in the bags?”

“Forgot. I’ll do it now.”

Scott walked over to the line-up and quickly shoved the walkie-talkies in the pockets. He didn’t realize that he had activated the talk button on the first one he put in. He walked back and joined Kim.

“So, how was Melissa today?” Tommie asked as they waited.

Kim looked at Scott. “Tell her the truth,” Scott directed.

Kim obliged. “She was weird. She didn’t even talk to us. Maybe she was putting us on, like Dad said.”

“Really?” Chris remarked.

“Yeah. She was probably just practicing her acting,” Kim added.

“I’ve seen trailers for her movies. I don’t think she’s that good of an actress,” Tommie commented.

“Well, she did a great job on the chat room. Maybe she’s practicing for more mature roles,” Kim suspected.

“I almost forgot to tell you kids, I got a postcard from Grandma and Grandpa today.”

“Where are they?” Kim asked.

“The postcard was a picture of Budapest, Hungary, in Eastern Europe, but there was no postmark on it,” Tommie explained.

“Well, they must be in Budapest then,” Scott replied.

“Not necessarily,” Tommie announced.

“What did they say?” Kim asked.

“They said they’re having a great time. They wished we were there with them. They’ve apparently found some exciting backpacking tours around Eastern Europe that they plan to take, and they’ll be home — when they get home.”

“How could they just up and leave like that? They didn’t even say good-bye!” Kim remarked.

“It’s like they’re kids, backpacking around Europe. Are they going through their second childhood?”

“Danny said they were weirder than I thought, and he was right,” Chris commented.

“Danny? What’s Danny got to do with this?” Tommie asked.

“He’s known your parents longer than I have, and he said they...”

The kids were all ears. Tommie gave Chris a look that said, ‘stop now — while you still can’. Chris was pretty good at reading Tommie’s facial expressions. He shut up in mid-sentence.

“What? They what?” Kim wanted to know.

“Campbell, party of two, you’re up!” blared out of the loudspeaker by the tee box.

“Our turn,” Tommie declared.

Chris got up from the bench and walked over to the men’s tee box. He was about to swing at the ball when, Scott blurted out, “Grandma and Grandpa, what?”

“Drop it. It’s not important, and we’re holding up the people behind us.”

Kim and Scott snickered. “Not yet we’re not,” Kim whispered to Scott.

The kids dropped their line of questioning.

Chris readied himself again, then swung. True to form, he sliced the ball. Off it flew to the right of the fairway.

“Great shot Dad,” Scott laughed.

“Thanks Scott,” Chris said. “I’ll just keep using this three wood. I’ll probably need it for a couple more shots. This is a really long hole.”

“Right Dad.”

Tommie was up next. She walked to the ladies’ tee box. She took a couple of practice swings and then whacked the ball.

“Great shot Mom!” Kim exclaimed. “That has to be at least seventy-five yards to the left.”

“Yeah Mom. You’ll be on the pro-tour before you know it!” Scott added.

“Thanks Kid,” Tommie replied.

Chris and Tommie knew they were terrible golfers. They just never had the patience for the sport. But they did like to get out for a walk alone with the kids, with no distractions, except for their little jibes here and there. They always had a good time, and the food at the club was a treat.

Tommie’s ball rolled into a grove of trees, to the left of the fairway. She and Kim headed after it.

“Kim, I think I’ll just keep using my five iron until I get within chipping range.”

“Sounds like a plan Mom.”

Scott pulled the cart on the path, while Kim was stuck on the other side of the fairway — in the rough. Scott reached into his bag to pull out the walkie-talkie. “I knew I put it in the bag. It must have fallen out,” Scott said to himself. Scott looked across the fairway at Kim. She was waving at him, motioning him to come to her.

‘What the heck does she want?’ he wondered.

Chapter Twenty-Nine



Scott assumed that Kim had both of the walkie-talkies. Chris wouldn't need another club for at least five minutes. It would take him that long to get close to the green. Scott cut across the fairway and met up with Kim.

"Scott, where did you put the other walkie-talkie?" Kim asked.

"I thought YOU had it," Scott replied.

"No, I heard voices but it wasn't you or dad, so I shut it off."

"I'll bet I stuck it in the wrong bag!" Scott exclaimed. "The guys ahead of us have it. They must have the same bag as Dad. What are they talking about? Anything interesting?"

"I don't know. I wasn't paying attention. As soon as I realized it wasn't your voice, like I said, I turned it off. I don't think it's right to eavesdrop."

"Oh, come on. What's it gonna hurt," Scott said. "Turn it on!"

Kim did as she was told.

"Nice putt. Smooth stroke, Morris," a voice said. "I'm so glad we could get out today and away from those kids. This clinical trial is working out great, but I hate being stuck in that school, eight hours a day."

"I know what you're saying Brian. Another week — and the movie's over and we're out of there. We shouldn't complain. The Conglomerate is paying us a fortune to do these clinical trials. So far their skinny scheme is working. The kids are losing weight, and there doesn't seem to be any side effects.

"Although, it's pretty hard to tell if there are no side effects from the diet food, especially when we give them those so called vitamins to counteract them," Morris explained. "I wonder what would happen if they separated the food from the supplements? What if someone just does one without the other?"

"That's not our problem," Brian replied. "The Conglomerate is marketing them together. The skinny scheme is food AND supplements. If the people don't buy both, and follow the directions, The Conglomerate's not responsible. If people are stupid enough to think they need this stuff — that's their problem."

Kim and Scott were shocked. "I think they're talking about our school," Scott

declared.

“I thought those guys ahead of us looked familiar,” Kim said. “They’re the guys who interviewed us that first day. The guys that made us A, B or C. I’ve seen them around in the cafeteria, too. They’re always typing stuff on their laptops.”

“You’re right Kim! They’re dressed so nerdy in their golf get-ups, I didn’t recognize them at first. We need to tell Mom and Dad.”

“Tell them what?” Kim asked.

“Tell them that The Conglomerate is using us like ratboys in their skinny scheme!”

“We better not use the word ratboy — that’s what got us into this mess,” Kim laughed.

The kids met up with their parents, near the green. Each had just made their second approach shot.

“Mom — Dad — you won’t believe what we just found out!” Kim cried out.

“What have you two been doing?” Tommie asked.

“Spying on those guys at the next tee box,” Scott replied. “I put one of our walkie-talkies in their bag by mistake.”

“What?” Tommie exclaimed.

“We overheard the men on the next hole,” Scott explained. “They were talking about The Conglomerate and about the food and the vitamins that they’re giving us at school. They say they’re doing some sort of drug test to support their skinny scheme.”

“They called them clinical trials,” Kim piped in.

“The Conglomerate? Who’s The Conglomerate, and what’s the skinny scheme?” Chris replied.

“I think they’re referring to THE Conglomerate,” Tommie said. “You know, the one the Security and Exchange Commission is trying to investigate. It’s made up of a bunch of major corporations. The SEC thinks they manipulate the market.”

“How do you know all this Tommie?” Chris asked.

“RL thinks that HucksterCo is part of it,” she replied.

Kim and Scott looked at each other. Their eyes were bulging out of their sockets.

“Huckster’s a double agent,” Kim whispered to Scott.

Scott had a revelation. “He’s a TRIPLE agent. He’s on the Parent Council too! He’s the guy that’s in charge. Alex and I knew we recognized his voice.”

“That explains things!” Kim announced.

“Explains what?” Chris asked.

“Oh, nothing,” Kim said.

“Shush! Listen to them,” Scott ordered. “They’re talking about it again!”

Chris and Tommie were holding up the people behind them. They decided to let them play through. The four of them found a bench at the next hole. They sat down and listened.

One of the men was now on a cell phone. The Campbells could only hear half of the conversation.

“We’ve got three more days of clinicals and we’ll be done. ...The stuff is working miracles. It’ll be bigger than Viagra! ...Yes, we can photograph them and weigh them all tomorrow. ...Yeah. We can have the analysis finished by midnight. ...Yes, that test can be completed tomorrow. Can I ask what the rush is?”

“That little brat! ...And you think she’ll go public with it? ...I understand the need to close. ...Okay. We’ll get our report to you tomorrow, by midnight.

“You want ME to notify him? ...He’s not going to like this. ...All right. I’ll call him right now, but what should I tell him? ... Okay, got it. ... Yes Sir. ... Immediately,” he said and hung up.

“I think that was Morris,” Kim said.

“How do you know?” Chris asked.

“They called each other by name before,” Scott explained.

The other man asked, “What was that all about?”

“That’s Brian,” Kim said.

Morris replied. “It was the boss. He just found out that Melissa went on some kids’ Internet site last week, and almost spilled the beans. She bad-mouthed the industry. Who knows what she’ll do next. And to make matters worse, the Director knew and he didn’t tell The Conglomerate. He just kept her under lock and key. We need to get this clinical trial completed — tomorrow.”

“What about the FDA?” Brian asked.

“Fast Darn Approval? They’re not the problem,” Morris declared. “We’re making their Director a VP of research. He’ll be quadrupling his salary.”

“Who does the boss want you to call?” Brian asked.

“Huckster. He’s handling all the sales. He’s positioned to make billions himself,” Morris explained.

“And we’ve made a fortune testing it.”

“Testing it. What a joke,” Morris admitted.

“What are you supposed to tell Huckster?” Brian asked.

“He needs to know that the product is going to be launched as early as next week. That means he has to get his people ready, NOW.”

“He’s not going to like that.”

“I know.”

“What about the movie? It was supposed to coincide with the launch.”

“It will. The studio’s going to piece together whatever they’ve got in the can — and that’ll be it.”

“You’re kidding!”

“No, I’m not. Kids will watch anything,” Morris laughed.

“So, everything is pushed up by four weeks. But it’s still all a go,” Brian confirmed. “What about Melissa? Is she still the spokesgirl?”

“The boss didn’t say anything about that. I suspect they can always use her stunt double. The kids thought they were all hanging out with the real McCoy on the weekend.”

“Yeah, you can fool some of the people some of the time, but you can fool all of the kids, all of the time,” Brian laughed. “You better call Huckster.”

“Man, I’m not looking forward to this,” Morris admitted. He pushed speed dial on his phone. It connected directly to Huckster’s private line. Morris waited for him to answer.

“Hello — Huckster — this is Morris — I’ve got some great news for you. ...We’re finishing up the clinicals early, and the launch has been moved ahead by four weeks. That

means you'll be raking in the dough a whole month earlier than you expected."

Brian smiled at Morris and whispered, "Smoooooth."

The Campbell family listened intently.

"No, I don't know how you're going to get your people up and running on a week's notice. That's not my problem — it's your opportunity. Just move resources off other projects. ... Well, that's your challenge. ... If you can't deliver, the boss can always take the business elsewhere. ... But I really think you're the only guy with the 'know-how' to handle this. The boss will be really disappointed if you can't come through. I hear you're a master at making things happen. ... Tomorrow's the last day of shooting and trials so why don't you come on down and see how successful the whole project is. ... It'll blow your mind!" Morris said and hung up.

"Man, you sure manipulated him," Brian said.

"You just have to know how to deal with an ego-maniac. Make it look like he'll make a whole bunch of money, challenge him with a problem, and kiss up to him — like he's the only one that can manage it, and he's putty in your hands."

The Campbells heard the whole thing.

"Huckster is in the middle of this!" Scott exclaimed.

"Huckster's into everything! He's a dangerous guy," Kim said. "Maybe you should back off, Mom."

"What's he going to do, whack me?"

"You never know," Kim said and looked over at Scott. "I think we need to tell her."

"Tell me what?"

Scott nodded. "Tell you that Huckster is part of the M O B."

"Huh?"

"The Men Of Business. The mob!" Kim declared.

"Yeah Mom. We know for a fact that he wanted to use those Nazi underwater tunnels that were blown-up the other day."

"And how do you know this?" Chris asked.

"We can't tell you. Just trust us," Scott replied.

"Look, if you can't reveal your sources, your Dad and I can't totally believe you. Besides, Huckster's scheduled to go to court in a couple of weeks. After that, Molina and I are going to go forward with our legal cases against him, and this is all on record. I think if he whacked me, everyone would know why. I don't think he wants to trade in a short stay at a white collar crime country club for life in a maximum security prison."

Tommie and Chris were trying to act cool. They were both concerned, but they couldn't let on. They knew they had right on their side and they couldn't live in fear that Huckster would retaliate.

"Okay Mom, but just keep your eyes open," Scott insisted.

"I will. Now, onto more pressing matters," Tommie said. "What about Melissa? How's this going to affect her?"

The answer hit Kim like a ton of diet pills. "That explains why Melissa didn't even say hi to us today. She's a prisoner!"

Chris offered an explanation. "I'm sure the Director's just keeping her out of trouble."

"We don't know that for sure. If this food stuff is dangerous, maybe Melissa's going

to be whacked for squealing on The Conglomerate,” Scott worried.

“We’re getting carried away here,” Tommie commented. “I think the first thing we need to do is to go home, and you two can contact your friend Natalie to see if she’s finished her analysis!”

They packed in the golf game and headed home.

As soon as the Campbells walked into their house, some familiar music was playing on the television.

“Hey! Maybe we’re on tonight!”

They forgot all about why they came home and rushed into the family room, just in time...

Chapter Thirty



It was the Entertainment This Evening music. The Campbells plunked themselves down on the couch. The announcer, Giovanni Imahotta reported:

Imahotta: We have a real treat for you this evening. Our first story is an exclusive from Dream Destroyer Productions. We have an interview with Melissa, and she's telling us all about her new movie. I understand she reveals some very personal information about herself and gives us a little preview of an upcoming announcement that will make everyone happy. Please roll the clip.

"Look!" Scott chuckled. "Alex looks so preppy!"

They all burst out laughing.

"See! I told you he was sitting with his hands in his lap."

"Yes, he is," Tommie snickered. "He must have been excited to be there," she whispered to Chris.

Scott overheard and turned red.

"Shush," Kim sounded.

They watched the clip.

"I wonder if any of the kids at school saw this?" Tommie said.

"They'll be mad as heck about it, won't they," Scott commented.

"Not necessarily. It does sound like P H A T," Kim announced.

"But we know it's F A T," Scott said.

"But the students don't," Kim declared.

RING... RING...

Kim ran to the kitchen to answer the phone. She didn't recognize the caller ID and answered "Hello?"

"Kim, it's Natalie."

"Natalie! Have you found out what the pills and food are?"

"Yes, I have. I'd like to come to your house tonight, and speak to you and your parents."

"Come right over. We live at 414 Apple Creek Road. See you soon," Kim said, hung up the phone and turned to her family declaring, "That was Natalie on the phone. She's

coming over now. She's completed the analysis on the pills and the food samples."

"That was weird. We were supposed to call her and she called us," Scott said.

Tommie and Chris felt foolish. They'd been sidetracked by Trash TV as Chris called it.

"Maybe I should call Mac," Scott suggested. "He's a doctor in training. He might know what these clinical trials are all about."

"That's a great idea," Tommie agreed.

Scott took the phone from Kim and called Mac. His answering machine picked up. Scott left a message — asking him to come over.

While they waited for Natalie and Mac to arrive, the family ate dinner and engaged in some wild theorizing about what was in the food — what kind of trouble Melissa might be in — who else might be in The Conglomerate...

"Maybe we need to break Melissa out of that prison she's in," Scott thought out loud.

Chris suggested, "We'll wait til we hear what Natalie has to say."

Tommie agreed. "Don't jump to conclusions. Remember the trouble that got us into with the diamonds."

"Point taken," Scott replied.

They were just finishing up when...

DING... DONG...

Everyone jumped up from the kitchen table and rushed to the door. Scott flung it open. There stood Natalie and Mac.

"Natalie, Mac, come on in!" Scott announced. "That's pretty weird you both got here at the same time!"

The two walked into the foyer. Natalie looked just like Melissa, only about ten years older and about twenty healthy pounds heavier.

"I see what you mean. What a hottie," Chris whispered to Scott.

"Mac, you got Scott's message," Tommie remarked.

"What message?" Mac replied.

"The one asking you to come over," Scott added.

"Oh, that message. Of course I got it. That's why I'm here," Mac explained. He was acting funny.

"Let's all sit down in the family room," Tommie directed. They followed her to the couches and all took a seat.

Chris started the ball rolling and said, "Kim, maybe you should introduce everyone."

"Mac, I'd like you to meet Natalie. She's a chemistry major at the University. Natalie helped me with my pheromone project."

"And you didn't ask me? I'm hurt," Mac replied.

"I thought you'd be too busy becoming a doctor, so I didn't bother you with it," Kim explained.

"I'm never too busy for you kids," Mac answered. "Besides, you're getting so smart, you can likely help me with MY studies."

"You probably want to know why we called you here," Kim said. "Natalie's been analyzing some pills and food samples we gave her. They've been feeding us this stuff at school. We think that The Conglomerate is using us like lab rats and doing clinical trials. But no one told us."

"Kids, you're right. That's exactly what I suspected. That's why I asked for the

contracts,” Natalie explained. “Sure enough, they confirmed it. But how did you come to this conclusion? Do you kids have ESP?”

“No, we overheard a couple of the researchers on the golf course,” Scott admitted.

“Excuse me?” Natalie said.

“It’s a long story,” Tommie interjected. “Why don’t you tell us what you found out.”

Natalie agreed. “First, we’ll start with the food. These are designer — they’ve been altered genetically. They look and taste great, but they don’t have anything in them. It’s like eating water.”

“So they aren’t doing you any harm, but they’re not doing you any good,” Chris summarized.

“Not quite. If you just eat these, you’ll eventually die of malnutrition.”

“That’s outrageous! Why would anyone create such a stupid food?” Scott asked.

“Because, they’ll sell you the designer food AND the vitamins,” Mac replied.

“Natalie and I were shocked at what we found in the pills you gave her.”

“YOU and Natalie?” Scott replied.

“Should we tell them?” Mac laughed.

Chapter Thirty-One



Natalie nodded and confessed, “That friend I told you about?”

“You KNOW each other!” Scott exclaimed. “Why didn’t you tell us?”

“It just didn’t come up,” Mac said.

“Mac, I can’t believe you did that. It’s something Tim would do,” Tommie accused. Tim was Mac’s twin brother.

“Hey, don’t compare me with Tim. He’s an...”

“Mac! Watch your language There’s children present,” Chris teased.

“So, Natalie, what IS in those pills?” Tommie asked.

“Super high doses of vitamins, with some calories, and...” Natalie began.

“That doesn’t sound bad,” Chris cut in.

“You didn’t let her finish,” Mac said. “There’s amphetamines, diuretics, laxatives, caffeine and a few other poisons thrown in for good measure. This stuff will give you energy — make you lose weight — and get you addicted.”

“What you just described sounds like the diet programs they advertise in The Inquisitor,” Scott remarked.

“This one is more dangerous, because people will actually think they’re eating healthy food. But in time, the body will have fed off all of the fat it has stored, and will start to eat away at the muscle tissue. People will eventually become lollipop heads and probably end up in the hospital, or worse, the morgue,” Mac announced.

“Who would develop such a system?” Kim asked.

“The pharmaceuticals, that’s who,” Natalie replied.

“And why would people buy this stuff?” Scott asked.

“Because the media keeps pushing body types like Melissa’s down our throats, and the food industry keeps shoving their junk food down our throats,” Kim proposed. “Something’s got to make us skinny!”

“Wow!” Scott proclaimed. “We’re going to be responsible for proving this stuff works — and the movie is going to promote it. We’ve got to stop this madness!”

“You’re right,” Kim said. “We know the stuff isn’t good for anyone except the people producing and selling it. And we know there’s going to be a global launch of this stuff with the premier of the movie. So what can we do? How do we stop it?”

“The problem is,” Natalie explained, “that The Conglomerate isn’t doing anything illegal. There’s nothing you can do.”

“But we think they bribed the FDA guy!” Scott said.

“Pardon?” Mac replied.

“I think it’s time we filled Natalie and Mac in on the conversation we overheard on the golf course,” Tommie suggested.

Kim and Scott took turns telling the story. When they were finished, Natalie and Mac knew everything.

“Now, is there anything we can do Mac?”

“I’m still afraid not. They’re doing everything by the book.”

“Yeah, a book with an unhappy ending,” Natalie added.

“We gotta be able to do something!” Kim declared.

“I have an idea!” Scott announced.

“What?” Chris asked, afraid of the answer.

“The Pudgy Plot.”

“It’s not dangerous is it?”

“No way!” Scott proceeded to explain his scheme. It was simple and it was going to be devastating. It was — The Pudgy Plot.

“Hey you two,” Tommie lectured. “We got lucky with the other adventures we got into, no one was hurt, but now you’re messing with some really dangerous people — big legitimate business.”

“Mom — Kim and I can handle it,” Scott declared.

The kids said good-night to Natalie and Mac, and headed up to Scott’s room — to put The Pudgy Plot into action.

DING... DONG...

The doorbell rang. Chris went to answer it. “Who could that be at this time of the night?”

Chapter Thirty-Two



He opened the door and announced loudly, “Mrs. McDuffy?”

“Chris, I need to speak with you and Tommie. It is very important.”

“Please come in,” Chris replied. “Let’s take a seat in the family room.”

As they walked into the family room, Mrs. McDuffy realized the Campbells had visitors. “Oh, I’m sorry. I see you have company. I can come back another time.”

“No Mrs. McDuffy — you said it was important,” Tommie piped in. “This is my brother Mac and his friend Natalie. If you need privacy, we can talk in my office.”

“No, that’s not necessary,” Mrs. McDuffy replied. She sat down and immediately turned her attention to Mac and Natalie. She stared at Natalie and smiled as if she knew her. Tommie and Chris were surprised. “Natalie is it?” Mrs. McDuffy said. “You are a very beautiful young lady.” Now Natalie was surprised. “And Mac, I’ve heard you’re a doctor.”

“Almost,” Mac replied.

“I’d like you to listen to what I am going to say then,” Mrs. McDuffy said.

‘What could this be about?’ they all wondered. They would soon be shocked with what they heard as Mrs. McDuffy confessed, “I was on the kids’ chat room the other night.”

“The KOC chat room?” Tommie replied.

“Yes.”

“How did you get on the chat room?”

“Your mom and dad turned me on to the kids’ web site.”

“Pardon?”

“It’s groovy!”

Chris looked at Tommie and commented, “Your parents are full of surprises.”

Natalie and Mac had no idea what they were talking about. “What web site?” Mac asked.

Tommie went on to explain the brief KOC site history.

“That’s awesome!” Mac exclaimed.

“Oh yes Mac, the web site is amazing. It reminds me of the underground news...” Mrs. McDuffy decided not to finish her sentence, and changed the topic. “I sat in on the

chat room.”

“How did you find out about it?” Chris asked.

“I got an email.”

“Are you signed up as a member?” Tommie asked.

Mrs. McDuffy looked guilty. “I confess. I lied about my age on the application form. You’re not going to bust me are you?”

Tommie and Chris laughed. “As long as you don’t do any of the surveys, I don’t think we’ll tell.”

Mrs. McDuffy now got straight to the point. “I was on the celebrity chat with Melissa. I was shocked to hear her story. When I saw her on ETE tonight, I got this crazy idea in my head that she could be my granddaughter.”

“I didn’t know you had children,” Tommie said.

“I haven’t seen them or heard from them for over twenty years. They just disappeared. How can I find out if she’s my granddaughter? Can you help me?” she turned to Mac and specifically asked, “Could you do one of those tests that they do on criminals?”

Mac knew what she was trying to say. That explained why she was interested in his medical training. Mac thought he might have a solution. “I have access to DNA equipment at the University. If we could get a sample of Melissa’s DNA, and check the markers against Mrs. McDuffy here, we would know for sure if they’re related. It’s too bad we don’t have any of Melissa’s DNA.”

“But we might!” Tommie exclaimed. “I haven’t washed the clothes she borrowed when we played basketball the other night. And I think the HuskieAid bottles the kids drank from are still in the recycling box. Would that do?”

“Excellent! If Natalie and I can get a sample of Mrs. McDuffy’s DNA — we can do the comparison. Mrs. McDuffy, would you mind?” Mac inquired.

“Do you need to take some blood?” Mrs. McDuffy asked.

“A strand of hair will do,” Natalie explained.

Mrs. McDuffy pulled a hairbrush out of her purse. She handed it to Natalie. Natalie found what she needed.

Tommie grabbed the T-shirt that Melissa had borrowed from Kim. She found four long red hairs — they could only be Melissa’s. “Will these do?” Tommie asked as she handed the hairs to Natalie.

“Excellent!” Natalie replied after finding what she needed. “Mrs. McDuffy, we’ll let you know if you’re a match.”

“Oh, how exciting!” Mrs. McDuffy said. “I won’t take up any more of your time.” She stood up and walked toward the foyer.

Tommie jumped up from her seat and escorted her to the door.

When Tommie returned, Mac exclaimed, “That was bizarre!”

“What? Mrs. McDuffy’s connection to Melissa?”

“No, Mom and Dad’s connection to Mrs. McDuffy,” Mac returned. “I wonder how far they go back.”

“I’ll have to ask them — whenever they get home.”

“Yeah. Where the heck are they? I got a postcard from Berlin last week,” Mac said.

Tommie admitted, “And we got one from Hungary.”

“They’re probably on some spy mission,” Chris teased.

Natalie looked puzzled. “Your parents are spies?”

“No, senior citizen globetrotters,” Mac said.

“And do-gooders — don’t forget,” Tommie added.

“And busy-bodies,” Chris declared.

Mac and Tommie gave Chris a dirty look. It was one thing for them to joke about Erin and Lanny, but it was quite another for anyone else to.

“Okay. They’re perfect. I admit it,” Chris remarked.

“It’s getting late and Natalie and I have a lot of work to do tomorrow if we’re going to get this DNA test done. We’ll call you as soon as we know anything.”

“Thanks Mac. Thanks Natalie. We’ll walk you to the door,” Tommie said. They all got up and headed to the foyer to say their good-byes. Before you could say ‘underground newspaper’, Tommie and Chris were in bed, asleep, and Scott and Kim were hard at it — putting The Pudgy Plot into action.

They needed to tell every student at Spring Valley School about their plan. Email was the logical choice. But what would they say?

“How are we going to convince everyone to come to school looking like crud?” Kim pondered out loud. This seemed to be an insurmountable problem.

Chapter Thirty-Three



The kids devised a plan... “The kids who saw ETE won’t even be on board unless we tell them she meant F A T,” Scott replied.

“Yeah, we need to explain the REAL meaning of the word to them. But how many saw it?”

“I don’t know. This could be a hard sell. ...Unless...” Scott thought out loud.

“Unless what?”

“Unless we can get the ETE clip and email it to everyone with an explanation of what REALLY went down at that taping.”

“And explain she said FAT not PHAT,” Kim directed.

“And that’s why we didn’t say anything to them after the taping, because we didn’t want to hurt their feelings,” Scott added. “So, back to The Pudgy Plot. How are we going to get...”

“Amy!” they both shouted.

Kim called Amy on her cell.

“Kim?” Amy answered.

“Amy, did you see the ETE show tonight?”

“No. Were we on?”

“Yeah. And I’m sure Melissa really did mean F A T.”

“How come?”

Kim explained the whole thing to Amy.

“That’s awful!” Amy exclaimed. “We’re just lab rats!”

“You got it. We need your dad’s help.”

“For what?”

“We need to get a copy of the ETE interview.”

“What for?”

“So we can send it to all the kids at Spring Valley — to show them how we’ve been used.”

“Why?”

“To convince them to come to school tomorrow — looking like a piece crud and blowing the whole skinny scheme out of the water.”

“Brilliant!” Amy exclaimed. “That should wreck their clinical trials, and the last shots they’ll take of the students. You rock, Kim.”

“Well, I have to admit, it was partly Scott’s idea. So can you help?”

“I’ll ask my dad right now and call you back.”

As soon as Kim hung up, Scott asked, “What did she say? Is she going to do it?”

“She’s asking her dad.”

The kids waited impatiently for Amy to call.

“It’s too bad we just didn’t tape the darn thing,” Scott admitted.

RING... RING...

It was Kim’s cell.

“Amy. What did he say?”

“He can send you a streaming video and you can do what you want with it. It’s not exactly legal, and he could get into trouble, but when I explained what these guys were doing at the school, he was so mad he’s doing it anyway. He also says he’s sending Alan Lasowich to the school tomorrow to broadcast the whole thing live!”

“Awesome!” Kim exclaimed.

“Is there anything else I can do?” Amy asked.

“You’ve done it!” Kim declared. “Just make sure you come to school tomorrow — looking fat and ugly.”

“That’s nothing new for her,” Scott commented.

“Tell him I heard that,” Amy said to Kim. “Tell B boy he won’t have much work to do.”

“Hey! I’m a B girl!” Kim replied.

“Sorry Kim.”

“Ignore Scott.”

“Like always,” Amy laughed. “My dad should be sending the file any minute. If you need me, just call. Otherwise, I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Bye Amy, and thanks,” Kim said and hung up.

“I need to let Alex in on what’s happening,” Scott announced. He made the call. Alex was excited about The Pudgy Plot, and offered to help out. Scott explained that he and Kim had it all under control, but that if anything came up, he’d call him.

They waited for Amy’s streaming video attachment to arrive.

TING... TING...

Scott and Kim looked at his email. Scott exclaimed, “It’s here!”

The kids pulled up their mailing list for the students at Spring Valley School. They wrote a memo, attached the video, and pushed, Send.

“I hope this works!” Kim declared.

Scott replied. “Well, since we asked the kids to let us know if they’re going to cooperate, we should have an idea of how successful this will be. It’s a darn good thing that ETE aired the segment tonight — otherwise we’d have a hard time convincing the kids to do this.”

“Fate,” Kim said.

“Fat,” Scott countered.

By ten o’clock, fifty percent of the students had replied — positively.

“Okay, it looks like we’ve got a success on our hands,” Scott declared.

“Maybe WE should do a live feed,” Kim suggested. “Like Mr. Montgomery is going

to do. We can broadcast it to our web site.”

“Fantastic idea Kim. We can use the hat cam and send the video through Alex’s wireless connection on his laptop to the web site. The whole KOC world will know about the skinny scheme.”

“I guess you should call Alex. He’s the tech whiz,” Kim admitted.

By 10:45, the technology was in place — The Pudgy Plot was in progress — and the students of Spring Valley School were about to take on some of the most powerful men in the world — The Conglomerate.

Could the kids possibly be the victors?

Chapter Thirty-Four



The morning soon arrived. Scott and Kim announced their web cast on the KOC site. Time of the event was 9:00. It was promoted as a live feed from Spring Valley School, advertising the fact that they were shooting a movie starring Melissa. It was billed as, “A Day in the Life of an Extra on the Set of ‘What’s the Skinny.’”

When the kids were finished setting everything up, they headed downstairs for breakfast. As they rushed into the kitchen, Tommie exclaimed, “Whoa, where do you think you’re going looking like that?”

“It’s part of The Pudgy Plot,” Kim replied. “We even have rocks in our pockets.”

“I figured as much, but maybe you’re just a little TOO extreme.”

“We’re going to teach The Conglomerate that it’s not a good idea to fool with kids — right Kim?”

“Right Scott. Mom, where’s Dad?” Kim asked.

“Danny called early this morning,” Tommie explained. “He and Danny snuck off to the tennis courts.”

Scott and Kim wolfed down a huge breakfast as fast as they could. They were actually hoping that things wouldn’t agree with their digestive systems. Of course, according to Scott, that would be anything that Tommie fed them.

“We’re finished!” Scott declared. “I’m stuffed.”

BELCH...

“You’re supposed to do that at school, not at home!” Kim lectured.

“I’m sure there’s more to come,” Scott exclaimed.

“If the rest of the student body looks and sounds as bad as you two — the movie guys are going to have a fit. You’ll wreck the movie and their clinical trials.”

“That’s the plan!” Kim announced.

“Just make sure you keep your cell phone with you at all times,” Tommie ordered. “And call me if you think there’s going to be any trouble. I’m volunteering in the school office today — so I’ll be close by if you need me.”

“Mom, can you drive us to school now?” Scott asked.

“What about your teeth?”

“Not today. We want them yellow, and our breath stinky,” Kim explained.

“Okay... just for today. Meet you in the van,” Tommie replied.

Scott grabbed his hat cam on the way to the van. Scott’s camera was hidden in his baseball cap. It was the same one that he and Alex had used for science fair last year.

The kids were restless on the drive to school. When they arrived, Tommie knew their plot was a success. The student body was more than pudgy.

As soon as the kids got out of the van, they met up with Alex and Amy. Scott activated the hat cam and transmitted the live broadcast to their web site.

Tommie headed to the office. She checked out the kids in the hall. They were acting sick, walking slowly, grabbing at their stomachs as if they were in pain, moaning and groaning — it was quite the performance.

The Spring Valley student body never looked worse. Kids came running up to Scott to tell him about how the cafeteria food and the supplements were making them sick and ugly. They complained about their weight gain, their pimple problem, the stinky diarrhea the food was giving them, and of course, the embarrassing farts, belches and bad breath.

One kid said the food gave him such a bad bellyache, he had to miss going to an out of state Out of Sink concert. Another kid said she had a fart attack — right in the middle of her River Dance Auditions.

All of these comments on the cafeteria food and supplements, and their gross effect on the student body, was uploaded to the web cast — and fed to all the KidsOpinionsCount.com members across the globe.

This was only part one of the plot.

BZZZZ...

The bell rang and the kids piled into their classrooms. Scott kept filming. He zoomed in on the zit filled faces, the midriff bulges — and gave his own account of the student’s bad breath, B.O. and smelly queefs.

The first announcement of the morning, informed the kids that filming had been finished ahead of schedule, and the students were no longer needed as extras. They were told to stay out of the common room because one last scene was being shot with Melissa.

It was explained to them, that to finalize their paperwork and update their actor’s profile, they were to go to the cafeteria when their room number was called, and be photographed, weighed and interviewed.

Now, for part two of the plot.

The men in charge of the clinical trials would soon get the surprise of their life — as the first group of students arrived in the cafeteria. They were so ugly...

Chapter Thirty-Five



Alan Lasowich was there to catch it all — along with...

Buck Huckster, who was standing with Brian and Morris in the cafeteria.

“What the heck?” exclaimed Morris. “These kids look like something the cat dragged in. Look at their complexions. They’re not only pale as cadavers, but they’ve got tons of acne!”

“Let’s just hope we can touch up the photos. Start weighing them,” Brian directed.

“This had better be part of the movie,” Huckster declared.

As Brian and Morris weighed the kids, they thought there was something wrong with their scales. “These kids are actually heavier than they were two weeks ago,” Morris observed. “Get another set of scales. These ones must be off.”

The second set of scales gave the same weight. Brian had a suggestion. “Maybe we have the kids’ names mixed up. We need to verify.”

As they double-checked the scales, the names, and the data — they realized the kids HAD put on weight.

“What the heck happened? The Conglomerate is going to kill us!” Morris whined.

“Does this stuff work or not?” Huckster demanded to know. “If I just ramped up 500 sales positions, and screwed over my other clients to do it, someone’s going to pay!”

Morris looked at Brian. Before he was able to answer...

RING... RING...

Morris looked relieved. “That’s mine. I better get it.” He looked at the caller ID and said, “Brain, it’s Dick Vertola. Keep weighing the kids and taking their pictures. This might take awhile.”

Morris answered the cell and walked away from Brian and Buck, before speaking. “Dick, what can I do for you?” Morris asked.

“We have a problem,” Dick replied.

“Yes, we know. Brian and I are finishing up the clinicals today. Things aren’t going very well. The kids have put on weight — and they look like heck!”

“I can see that,” Vertola answered.

“How?” asked Morris.

“The little brats have live cameras transmitting video to their blasted Internet site!

And to top it off — that local TV station is transmitting live from the school. Is Huckster there?”

“Yeah. What do you want us to do?” Morris asked.

“Keep weighing them and taking their pictures.”

“What about the media?”

“Don’t worry. Do your job. Now, put Huckster on.”

Morris turned around and walked back to Huckster. He handed Buck the phone, and barked, “Vertola wants to speak with you.”

Buck grabbed the phone and screamed into it. “Everyone on the face of the earth can see how ugly and fat the kids are at Spring Valley School. They’ve ruined everything. I thought you told me the clinicals were going great!”

Vertola replied, “They were. Something must have happened with the batch we gave them yesterday. They’ve all broken out in zits — and they’ve put on weight!”

“All I care about is selling the darn stuff. I’ve got lots at stake. You promised we’d be going live within the week. Has anything changed?”

Vertola reassured Huckster, by saying, “The Conglomerate pumped tons of money into this scheme. We’re not letting these kids wreck our plan.”

“But the media’s filming the kids as we speak. They all look a mess.”

“You’re not dealing with amateurs, Huckster. We might be delayed a bit, but not much.”

Brian and Morris were concerned about what was happening at the school. They weren’t aware, Vertola was telling Huckster, he had everything under control.

Scott, Kim, Amy and Alex overheard Brian say to Morris, “Now that blasted KidsOpinionsCount site is making us all look like idiots!”

“Yeah. I don’t get it,” Morris replied. “Why are those kids uploading the video onto their site? Why would they want to make themselves look like a bunch of fat, ugly losers — unless... There’s NO WAY they could have found out what we were up to.”

“Melissa must have told them. Where is she?” Brian demanded.

“She’s shooting the last scene of the movie in the common room,” Morris answered.

“It’ll be the last scene of her career!” Brian proclaimed.

Scott knew that Melissa was in trouble. He had to save her. He had to be the hero... and not the zero she thought he was the night they went two on two.

Chapter Thirty-Six



“We need to get Melissa out of the school,” Scott whispered.

“But how?” Alex asked.

“I’ve got an idea. Follow me,” Scott directed.

Once they were out of the cafeteria, Amy asked Scott, “What’s your plan?”

“Just listen,” Scott said. He pulled out his cell and called Mac.

RING... RING...

“Mac speaking.”

“Mac, it’s Scott. Have you got the results of the DNA tests yet?”

“I just finished them Scott. Mrs. McDuffy and Melissa are related all right.”

“That’s all I need to know,” Scott commented. “Melissa’s in trouble. We’re going to break her out of here, and use Mrs. McDuffy’s place as a safe house. No one will know to look for Melissa there. Mac, can you pick her up?”

“Are you sure we should be doing this?” Mac asked.

“Mac — take a chance!” Scott challenged.

“You’d better see if Mrs. McDuffy is home. I’d hate to be standing out on her doorstep — and not able to get in. That wouldn’t be very covert.”

“I’ll check and call you back. Thanks Mac.” Scott called Mrs. McDuffy. She was beside herself with joy at the news that Melissa was related to her. The fact that Melissa was going to be smuggled out of the school, and hid at Mrs. McDuffy’s, added to her excitement.

“This is just like the night I hid Tim in my apartment! Only better! Melissa is my granddaughter.”

Scott didn’t know what she was babbling on about. “I have to go. I need to get her out of here.”

“Well?” Kim said, as Scott hung up the phone.

“I’m not finished. I have to call Mac back.” Scott placed the call. Mac promised he’d be outside the school in fifteen minutes.

“Now it’s all set. All we have to do is get a message to Melissa to meet us somewhere. If she can sneak away — we can sneak her out.”

“How are you going to get a message to her without everyone knowing?” Alex asked.

The four kids' minds were working overtime, trying to find a solution to their problem.

Suddenly, Kim shrieked, "I've got it! All we have to do is use the code 'Honey Bee' and she'll know we're talking to her and no one else will get it! Remember what she said?"

"You're right! Brilliant Kim. So what should we say — and how do we say it?" Scott asked.

"We can send a message over the intercom," Amy suggested. "We can make it clear as mud — so only Melissa will get it."

"What's the message?" Kim asked.

Amy quickly offered, "How about saying that the worker bees have found the honey bee's old queen and that the honey bee needs to go to the first floor girls' washroom, now."

"It kinda makes sense," Scott admitted.

"It's worth a try. Cross your fingers," Kim said. They ran to the office and found Tommie, sitting in Principal Toole's meeting room — watching the CCTV broadcast on the television — and the KOC web cast on a PC. As the four kids burst into the room, Kim declared, "Mom! We need to talk to you."

"No kidding!" Tommie shouted back. "Have you seen the telecasts? You all look like H E double hockey sticks! Great job!"

"Mom! That's not what we need to talk about. Melissa's in trouble!" Kim responded.

Tommie's voice turned serious. "What kind of trouble?"

Scott explained what they had overheard in the cafeteria and their plan to contact Melissa. Before they could finish, Tommie cut them off. "Kids, I think we're in over our heads," Tommie advised. "We need to call Detective Nash."

"What will he do? He won't believe anything we tell him," Kim reasoned. "The studio people will just lie. That's what they do!"

"Besides, it's like Natalie and Mac said, according to the law and the FDA, the studio people and The Conglomerate aren't doing anything wrong," Scott added.

"This sucks!" Alex declared.

Tommie realized that the kids were right. This did suck... big time. She decided to hear the rest of their plan. "What's this announcement you're going to make?"

Scott wasn't forthcoming. "It's probably better that you don't know. We don't want them to be able to beat it out of you."

"Scott, get serious," Kim barked.

"I am! If Toole asks her... she's so honest... she'll tell him!"

"I'm not THAT honest! I'll tell a white lie if it doesn't hurt anyone." Tommie was trying hard to sound like she could be bad. The kids knew she talked the talk... but wasn't sure she'd walk the walk.

"Really Mom," Kim admitted. "Scott's right. If you don't know, you won't be forced to lie. It's better that way."

Tommie thought that this was such a strange discussion to have with kids. But in a way, they were right. If she doesn't know their plan, she can't say anything about it... truth or fiction. "Okay — get going — do what you have to do and get Melissa out if here. If it turns out she's not in any danger... then it should be no problem bringing her back... right?"

"Right!" the kids answered in unison.

They rushed out into the office area. Meredith was no where to be found. “How do we use this?” Kim asked, looking at the school intercom.

“I’ll do it,” Alex said. He grabbed the microphone, pressed a button and exclaimed, “The Bee Gees have found the honey bee’s old queen. The honey bee needs to go to the second floor washroom, now! Honey bee, we found the old queen bee. Go to the second floor girls’ washroom immediately, and we’ll take you to her hive!”

“The Bee Gees?” Kim said.

“I’m no worker bee. It was the best B, I could come up with on short notice.”

They all moaned, but at least the message was out. “We gotta go Mom. We need to get to the second floor girls’ washroom. You stay here Mom, in case we need you.”

Tommie obeyed orders as the kids bolted out of the office and down the hallway...

All of a sudden, they were forced to stop dead in their tracks. Mrs. Hardy had just walked out of her classroom and was standing right in the middle of the hall. “Where are you kids headed in such a hurry?” she asked.

Their adrenaline was pumping. “We’re breaking a friend out of prison!” Alex replied without thinking.

Kim tried to save the day. “He’s kidding. We’re just getting a friend out of class.”

“Yeah,” Amy said. “No prison... just class.”

Tommie heard Mrs. Hardy’s voice and walked into the hallway to see if the kids needed help.

“Mrs. Hardy. Maybe you can help us. You see, our friend needs a disguise,” Scott announced.

“For what?” Mrs. Hardy asked.

“We can’t tell you. You have to trust us,” Kim begged.

“Are you kids serious?”

Tommie arrived on the scene. “I’m afraid they are, Mrs. Hardy. Kids I think you should let Mrs. Hardy in on this. You see Mrs. Hardy, the kids are doing a video for their web site and the fifth actor didn’t bring a costume today. You’ve noticed the kids are all dressed up today. Well it’s for the KidsOpinionsCount.com web site. So, could you help them with a costume?”

“Well then, this makes sense now... you’re making a video, you kids get your butts in here and grab a wig and clothes — whatever you need.” The kids rummaged through her closet of drama costumes and grabbed a couple of things.

“This reminds me of the time my late husband and I...” Mrs. Hardy reminisced. The rest of the story remained unspoken.

The kids found what they needed and took off like a shot to the second floor girls’ washroom. Tommie stayed behind and explained what was actually going on... to the extent that she could. Mrs. Hardy, in turn, filled Tommie in on her own cryptic remark made earlier. As it turned out, Mrs. Hardy had been involved in covert activity before. Tommie was surprised and impressed. She returned to the office... knowing that there was more to Mrs. Hardy than met the eye.

The kids soon reached the second floor girls’ washroom.

“I hope she’s still here!” Alex declared.

RING... RING...

It was Scott’s cell.

“I’m waiting outside. Are we set?”
“Yes,” Scott replied and hung up.
Alex flung open the door.

Chapter Thirty-Seven



Earlier,

“That’s a wrap,” Chuck announced, seconds before Alex made the announcement.

“The Bee Gees have found the honey bee’s old queen. The honey bee needs to go to the second floor washroom, now! Honey bee, we found the old queen bee. Go to the second floor girls’ washroom immediately and we’ll take you to her hive!”

“What the heck was that?” Chuck exclaimed. “No one is supposed to be using that darn intercom when we’re shooting.” Chuck stomped off to the office to tear a strip off Principal Toole.

Melissa saw her chance to escape. “Man I really need to go!” she said to the crew. “I don’t need anyone to come with me. I’m just going to the can.”

One of her bodyguards insisted. “I’ll escort you.”

“Please, can I have privacy, just this once!”

“Okay, but take your cell phone, and make sure you have your panic alarm on you.”

“Yes, I’ll take both.” Melissa grabbed the two devices from a props table and took off like a shot. She ran so fast, she actually passed Chuck in the hallway.

“Hey, where are you going?”

“To the can!”

“Where’s your bodyguard?”

“Can’t I take a pee in peace?” she shouted.

Chuck shook his head and bellowed out to her, “I’ve got the shoot finished. It wouldn’t matter if you disappeared off the face of the earth at this point.”

When Chuck reached the office, he found Principal Toole and Meredith. “Who the heck used the intercom? You know it’s off limits during production times,” he lectured.

“We weren’t here. Mrs. Campbell was in charge,” Principal Toole explained, passing the buck. “We heard the announcement and headed down to see what was going on.”

“Where’s this Mrs. Campbell?”

“Here I am,” Tommie said, as she returned from Mrs. Hardy’s room.

“Mrs. Campbell, I thought I made it clear that there were to be no announcements made this morning,” Principal Toole scolded.

“You did, but I was back in the filing room, and I didn’t see who actually did it. I

took off after them, but I didn't recognize the kids. You know they're all dressed really strangely today. Is this part of the movie?" Tommie asked Chuck, thinking to herself, 'Great save... and I CAN lie.'

"No! It's not. I don't know what's going on."

"Did the intercom ruin the shoot?"

"No, we had just wrapped, when the intercom blasted out that cryptic message."

Meredith interjected. "What's a honey bee and old queen bee and Bee Gees got to do with anything?"

"You got me," Tommie replied.

"I should head back and let the crew know we're done for the day. I need to get my star to her trailer — then pack up and get out of here," Chuck said. "She's on a flight to LA tonight."

"That poor darling. Does she always work this hard?" Tommie inquired. She wanted to stall Chuck for as long as she could. She hoped the kids' plan was working and that Melissa was in disguise and out of the school by now.

RING... RING...

"That's my cell. Excuse me," Chuck said and answered it.

"What do you mean she hasn't come back yet? Did you send her bodyguards out to find her? ...I'm on my way."

"Something wrong?" Tommie asked innocently.

"It seems that our star has gone missing. I need to find her."

"We can check all the classrooms if you like," Principal Toole offered.

"I'll stay here and man the office," Tommie reasoned. She wanted to make sure the kids could easily find her.

"Okay, then I'll help too," Meredith offered. The three of them scurried out of the office.

Elsewhere...

Alex flung open the washroom door.

"Melissa! You got our message!" Kim exclaimed.

"I'm here, but I'm not really sure why? Who's the old queen bee?"

"Melissa, we think we found your grandmother!" Amy announced.

"My grandmother?"

"Yeah, she's our neighbor, Mrs. McDuffy!" Scott replied.

"What? Are you guys nuts?"

"No — really — we did a DNA test," Scott explained. "It's true. We'll tell you about it later. We have to get you out of here. Our Uncle Mac is waiting for you outside. He'll drive you to Mrs. McDuffy's."

Melissa was frozen. She didn't know what to say. She didn't know how to react. This wasn't a movie. There wasn't a script. She had no prep. She didn't know how to get into character. She had to think for herself.

"Melissa! Let's go! You want out of here don't you? You said you did. You wanted us to find your grandmother. AND we found her!" Kim lectured. She didn't know what Melissa's problem was and why she wasn't moving.

Alex thought he had the solution. He stood right in front of Melissa, clapped his hands as loud as he could and yelled, "ACTION!"

Melissa ignored Alex. She WAS thinking. She knew she needed to get away from the movie business — she knew her days were numbered since she blew the whistle on the skinny scheme, and most importantly, she hoped they had really found her grandmother.

“Are you with us or not?” Alex insisted.

She made her decision. “Let’s go!” Melissa literally cried out. Tears of joy were streaming down her face, making little gullies from her tear ducts, down her cheeks and ending up in puddles beside the corners of her mouth. The tears were washing away her mascara from her eyelashes. She looked awful.

“Wait! She has to change so no one will recognize her,” Amy ordered.

“Who’s gonna recognize her looking like that!” Alex declared.

“Shut up Alex,” Scott said. “This is serious.”

“Right, shut up Alex,” Kim parroted.

Amy gave Melissa the black wig and baggy black clothes. “Here Melissa, put these on.”

Melissa put on the wig and pulled the clothes over what she was wearing. Now she looked Goth. “What now?”

“We need to hurry,” Alex ordered. “They’ve probably sent an army out to look for you.”

The five kids ran out of the washroom, down the stairs, down the hallway, but were forced to stop in their tracks when they saw Principal Toole and Chuck coming out of a classroom.

“Cool it. There’s the fuzz,” Alex said. “Act normal.”

“Right, we’re not in class. How normal is that?” Amy replied.

“Just say we’re getting something for Mrs. Hardy. She’ll cover for us,” Scott confidently ordered.

“But we’re not even in her class right now,” Amy rebutted.

It was too late to put a good story together. They were less than twenty feet away from Toole and Chuck. The kids were sweating profusely under all of their extra clothes and make-up. Principal Toole recognized Scott, Kim, Alex and Amy. He wasn’t sure who the fifth student was — but it didn’t matter.

“Great. Some kids I can count on,” Principal Toole exclaimed. “We need you kids to help us find Melissa. She’s missing.”

“Melissa?” they all answered, including Melissa.

Chuck looked right at Melissa. They made eye contact. She thought for sure he’d recognize her — even under the wig, baggy clothes and melted make-up.

“Yes, Melissa,” Chuck said. “She seems to have gone missing. Do you kids know where she is? Have you seen her? Maybe in the second floor girls’ washroom?”

The kids’ eyes popped open wide. They were waiting for all heck to break loose.

“Girls’ washroom? What do you think I am, a girly boy?” Alex announced. “I don’t go in girls’ washrooms!”

“Yeah, there’s no way we’d let this idiot go in the girls’ washrooms. He’s a pervert,” Kim declared.

Scott added, “Right, and I don’t hang out with guys who...”

Principal Toole cut them off. “Okay, we get it. You haven’t seen her and you weren’t in the girls’ washroom. I still need you to help us look for her.”

“Okay, we’ll check outside,” Scott said.

“Sounds like a plan,” Chuck replied. He was still looking right at Melissa.

“Okay kids. Let us know if you find her,” Principal Toole ordered.

“Will do,” Scott said. They tore off down the hallway to the front doors.

Once they got outside, they saw Mac’s car parked on the street. They ran to it and Mac flung open the door. Melissa stopped in her tracks. Reality set in. Now she had so many questions... Some she asked out loud and others she just thought to herself. “What’s my Grandma like? Will she like me? Will she want me? Will I like her? Will I live with her? Will I go to school? Will you guys be my friends? What will I do for money? Will the studio sue me? Will they ruin my life? Can I play basketball?”

“There’s no time for this now. Just trust us. Your Grandma will want you and she’ll love you and you’ll love her. Just go — before it’s too late,” Kim ordered.

Melissa finally jumped into the car. “She’s all yours Mac. Take good care of her — and we’ll see you later tonight!” Scott said.

Mac sped off and the kids breathed a huge sigh of relief. “Man, that was close,” Kim said. “I thought Chuck knew.”

“Yeah, I can’t believe Alex actually saved the day with that washroom act,” Amy laughed.

“Act? What are you talking about?”

“Is he kidding or what?” Amy said.

“Forget him. Let’s go back inside and see what’s happening,” Kim directed.

Chapter Thirty-Eight



The kids went directly to the office to tell Tommie that Melissa's escape was a success. Chuck, Meredith and Principal Toole were still looking for her... well... at least Meredith and Toole were...

Tommie was monitoring the CCTV telecast and the web cast in Principal Toole's meeting room. Unbeknownst to Tommie, a shadowy figure was watching as well. Unexpectedly, the kids burst into the room. "Mom! We won! Honey bee is free and The Conglomerate's skinny scheme is destroyed!" Scott exclaimed.

"You kids did one heck of a good job. I'm proud of you."

Things can change overnight. Things can change in a minute. Things can change in a blink of an eye — and they did.

KHHHH... KHHHH... EEEE....

The TV screen and the computer monitor went black.

"What's happening?" Kim exploded.

Somewhere in a posh office, Dick Vertola laughed hysterically to himself and declared, "It's not nice to fool with The Conglomerate."

Back in Principal Toole's office, the figure moved out of the shadows and announced, "You have NO chance against big business."

The whole gang, including Tommie, quickly turned around. It was Buck Huckster. He recognized Tommie from HucksterCo and the kids from their confrontation with the Parent Council.

"YOU!" Huckster exclaimed. "I suppose these are YOUR brats!"

Tommie wasn't surprised. "I was wondering when you'd show up."

Huckster went on the attack. "I should have guessed you were involved in this. Don't you people understand how business operates? You can't run around saying whatever you want and get away with it. There's repercussions. There's the trickle down effect."

KHHHH...

“The TV’s back on. And so is the web site!” Alex shouted. “...What the heck?”

The KidsOpinionsCount site was transmitting a picture of Dick Vertola. Scott turned and faced Huckster. “You pirated the KidsOpinionsCount Internet site! Kids have rights! Kids can say whatever they want.”

Huckster was grinning ear to ear and laughing. “We businessmen have rights, too. A little thing called Freedom of Speech and the First Amendment and we’re exercising it, right now.” Huckster pointed at the TV and the PC and then ordered, “Now, watch and learn!”

Vertola: This is Dick Vertola of Dream Destroyer Production. I hope you all didn’t mind our little publicity stunt. We were so excited about our new movie, *What’s the Skinny*, we decided to create a little media event and show you some of the outtakes. Pretty hilarious aren’t they. Just wait until you see the movie!

And to make things even better, we’re announcing today, the launch of a new health food regime called Magic Meals. These products were actually tried, tested and found to be fantastically successful at turning F A T kids into P H A T kids.

Wait until you see the movie!

You kids will be able to order Magic Meals by phone or Internet — and start your metamorphosis! Remember those disgusting kids we showed you on the outtakes? Well, just watch and see what they look like after only ten days on Magic Meals!

The picture cut away from Dick Vertola, to outtakes of the film shot on Saturday and Sunday — the days the kids were active, happy, healthy and having a great time.

“NO!” Kim shouted. “They’re using our Pudgy Plot against us!”

Huckster laughed. “Like I said. Watch and learn.”

Vertola continued,

Vertola: And one more thing, we’re sorry to say, that Melissa Mastrianni has decided to retire from the business. This will be her last movie. We’ll miss her, but I promise you, our new teen star — and I have her right here with me — is hotter than hot. She’s sizzling, and I’d like to introduce her right now. Here’s ELIZA!

The picture was now showing a voluptuous young girl with long black hair and a body to die for. Literally. She was even skinnier than Melissa.

“Man, she IS hot!” Alex exclaimed.

“She’s hot all right,” Kim said sarcastically. “She’s a matchstick.”

Amy laughed at Kim’s joke.

“I guess they don’t even want Melissa anymore. They probably don’t even care that we...” Alex caught himself.

Vertola continued.

Vertola: And guess how Eliza got to look this fantastic... You guessed it... Magic Meals. She’s our poster girl for Magic Meals. The movie and the Magic Meals will be out on the market in two weeks. Be ready to change your life!

Kim verbally fought back, “You mean MAL - nutritious meals, don’t you, you jerk!”

“How can they pirate our signal?” Scott declared.

“And my dad’s transmission. I’m sure he didn’t put this on!” Amy said. She pulled out her cell and called him.

RING... RING...

“Amy, what do you want? What’s happening at your school?”

“That’s what I wanted to ask you! You’re transmitting the bad guys!”

“I know that Young Lady. They’ve somehow taken over. We can’t do a thing about it.”

“Can’t you just pull the plug?”

“We tried that. This is the darndest thing. Lasowich is transmitting pictures from the school one minute and the next; this Vertola guy is on. I have to go Amy. I’m trying to get through to the Federal Communications Commission,” he said and hung up.

“What did he say?” Kim insisted.

“My dad doesn’t know how this happened.”

Tommie, Kim, Scott, Amy and Alex watched as Vertola’s message was repeated, time after time.

Huckster triumphantly strutted like a peacock, toward the office door. Before he exited, he turned to the group, looked directly at Tommie, and declared, “The Conglomerate One, KOC Zero. And if you think you have a hope in heck with your so-called legal case against me, or that Federal Prosecutor can get a conviction on that stupid no-speak suit... think again.”

“We’ll blast your skinny scheme on KOC with our opinions. Then it will be The Conglomerate One and KOC One!”

Huckster laughed maniacally and declared, “You people are beyond belief.” He turned to leave but stopped in his tracks as Scott’s cell rang.

RING... RING...

“Hello?”

“Honey bee is in the hive. Honey bee is happy. Worker bee, out.”

Scott excitedly shouted, “Honey bee is safe and she’s happy.”

“The Conglomerate can’t take that away from us! WE DID IT!” Kim exclaimed.

“We kids already won!” Scott shouted. “And together, KidsOpinionsCount can take on the world!”

“You’ll get yours in the end,” Tommie added.

“Don’t hold your breath,” Huckster laughed, turned around, shook his butt at them and announced, “Bite me.” He then proceeded to walk away. For a second time, however he was waylaid as something flew right by his ear.

“What was that?” he said.

“A bee!” Amy shouted as she pointed at the biggest honey bee she’d ever seen. “It’s the size of a hummingbird!”

“A bee!” Huckster panicked and screamed as it zipped around his body. He was swatting at it to keep it away.

“Stop swinging at it, you idiot. You’ll make it mad and it’ll...”

“OOOOWWWW!”

“To late,” Alex laughed. “Mrs. C was right, you really DID get it in the end!”

“Like I said, what goes around... truly comes around.”

We hope you enjoy the next book!
What Goes Around