

**Breaking News!**  
**Kids Opinions Count**

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Written by: MAKS

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Story Editing by: get it write. - [www.jennygates.com](http://www.jennygates.com)

Layout and Design by: Diana Larkin Graphics - [dlgraphics@mts.net](mailto:dlgraphics@mts.net)

Cover Design by: Diana Larkin Graphics

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# Breaking News!

## Kids Opinions Count™

AGENTS OF  
**CHANGE™**  
PUBLISHING

*Introduces Our Fiction Series  
For Teens  
Our Inaugural Trilogy Contains*



Diamond  
in the Ruff




Playing with  
Fire



Stupid  
Cupid

Trilogy  
by  
**MAKS**

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# Breaking News! Kids Opinions Count

## This is How it all Began...

It was a typical day for Kim and Scott Campbell... until their dog Max pooped out a diamond – the media finds out – and all H E double hockey sticks breaks loose.

Scott and Kim, with the help of their best friends, Amy and Alex – set the media straight and end up uncovering a corporate conspiracy with global consequences.

Every Action has a Reaction. Things will never be the same.

## Who Knows How it will End...



## What our Readers are Saying



### Diamond in the Ruff

**Savannah 15 - U.S.A.** The whole plot line of a dog pooping out a diamond that causes a global controversy and completely takes down the whole diamond industry just highly amuses me. ...It's pretty cool the way the book pivots off of the decisions of the kids.

**Jackson 12 - U.S.A.** The tricks Scott and Kim played on each other were hilarious. ...I can't wait to read the next book.

**Ashleigh 14 - CANADA** That was amazing!!! I loved it. Keep it coming.

**Kai 13 - U.S.A.** The whole time I just wanted to keep on reading... I couldn't stop.

**Stacey 18 - CANADA** Great book. It's cool how it's a mystery that twists a lot. ...There was team work in the family, but also the kids' independent work, which I believe will make young readers feel confident themselves.



## Playing with Fire

**Kai 13 - U.S.A.** The books you write get better by the sentence and you always make the ending so interesting that you just have to read the next book. ...The characteristics of the four kids are expressed so thoroughly, I could probably guess what they would do in a certain situation. ...I think they could maybe qualify as a Blue Spruce.

**Jackson 12 - U.S.A.** I love the series so far. ...It's amazing how far you think ahead to plot these story lines, unbelievable. ...I can't wait to read the third book.

**Savannah 15 - U.S.A.** "Playing with Fire" entertained me because of the way the kids reacted to everything that was going on around them. ...I'm sure that all of the "young male" readers will get a kick out of the whole gaseousness of the book.

**Stacey 18 - CANADA** Smart ending, it really makes you want to read the next one in the series and peaks interest in The Ring Master referral.



## Stupid Cupid

**Jackson 12 - U.S.A.** This is the best book so far. ...The tension grew perfectly and broken pieces came together. It connected all the enemies from books 1 and 2 together. ...It was genius. Great Writing!!!

**Savannah 15 - U.S.A.** I liked this book. It was funny because of the way the kids tried to "save" their parents' marriage. ...I'm sure plenty of kids have thought their 'rents were on the rocks and tried to "help".

**Ashleigh 14 - CANADA** Wow! What can I say? This book was amazing. I loved it. So far it's my favourite!!

**Kai 13 - U.S.A.** The third book was really interesting because I learned about pheromones. ...I liked the part when Max jumped on Tommie. I thought that was very funny.

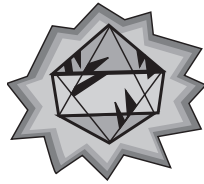
**Stacey 18 - CANADA** The characters are evolving with the books. ...I really think Alex will be the popular one with the readers. ...I like how the boys win the election without pheromones, and Alex gets a glimmer of a descent side.

**Jodi 18 - CANADA** I really enjoyed the books and the originality of the plots. The educational content made it even better.



*Dedicated to  
You know who  
My Inspiration!*





Diamond in the Ruff





## One

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Kim felt a little guilty. “Are you okay?”

“Gotcha,” Scott laughed.

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

“You’re so right,” Scott replied. He closed the fridge door and

complained. “There’s never anything good to eat around here.”

The squabble was over. They were on to more important matters – food.

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

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

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

“Hey, give me some!” Kim begged.

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

“It’s not that good,” Kim declared.

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

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

“Look at that idiot!” Scott exclaimed. “He almost hit the dock.”

Kim redirected her attention from her snack to the window, but was too late. “I don’t see anything.”

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

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

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

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

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

“Shut your pie hole, Scott,” Kim replied.

“Don’t you mean ‘cake hole?’”

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

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

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

“The word is constipated,” Kim advised, as she moved back to the window to see what he was talking about. “Maybe he ate something he shouldn’t have. He’ll force it out eventually.”

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

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

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

SLAM...

That was the door from the garage into the house.

BANG...

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

"Mom must be home," Kim declared. "Sounds like she's mad."

Kim was right – Tommie was upset. "I swear, I'm going to make that Buck Huckster pay me what he owes me," she muttered to herself.

"MOM!" Scott shouted at the top of his lungs. He wanted her immediate attention.

"WHAT?" Tommie bellowed back.

"Max looks sick," Scott replied.

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

"Who's sick? What are you kids talking about?"

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

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

RING... RING...

"Come on. Where are they?"

RING...

"Answer the darn phone!"

RING... RING...

"Dr. Chester's office. Lisa speaking."

"Dr. Chester, please."

"I'm sorry. He's with a patient."

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

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

"I'll be there in ten minutes," Tommie said, as she handed the phone back to Kim.

Max was in pain and having difficulty walking.

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

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

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

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

SCREEEECH...

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

Tommie lowered the driver's side window and called out, "Sorry, Mrs. McDuffy!"

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

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

"No need to explain. I hope he feels better soon."

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

Scott was upset. "Come on, Mom. Hurry up!"

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

"Would you two just keep it down and let me concentrate."

Max's body began to shake. "AWOOOO..." he howled.

Tommie stomped on the gas. She made it to the vet in less than five minutes – half the time it usually took.



## Two

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Kim stuck her tongue out at him.

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

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

“AWOOOO...” Max’s howl worked as a reality check. They sobered immediately and waited in silence.

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

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

Dr. Chester walked to his desk and picked up a clear plastic baggie with something in it. He held it up to the light and explained, “Right after I took the X-ray, Max passed this rock. This was causing the blockage and bleeding.” He handed the bag to Scott and said, “I thought you might want a souvenir.”

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

“Oh,” Tommie said, feeling embarrassed.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Kim nodded.

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

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

“Well, it almost did,” Scott announced.

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

“Mr. Klein gives me the creeps,” Kim commented.

“Yeah, Mom. I think he’s strange,” Scott added.

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

“Those aren’t dogs – they’re people-eaters!” Scott exclaimed.

“Scott’s right, Mom. Dobermans are really vicious,” Kim added.

Dr. Chester interjected. “Actually, Dobermans make very good pets. They almost never eat their owners – only their neighbors.”

Tommie chuckled. Scott and Kim were embarrassed now.

Max decided it was time to go home. He stood up and walked over to the door. “It looks like he’s trying to tell us something,” Scott said. “Can we take him home now?”

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

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



## Three

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Scott, do you believe everything you see on TV?”

“This was a documentary – those are all factual, Mom.”

“They’re fact, mixed with a little bit of sensationalism, otherwise, no one would watch them,” Tommie explained.

“What if Scott’s right, Mom?”

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

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

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

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

“Shut-up, Scott,” Kim barked.

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

“He was really cool. He said he worked with the FBI to monitor Internet breaches in security and violations of the Privacy Act.”

“Wow, that’s pretty heavy stuff,” Tommie replied. “What was he telling you kids?”

“He said that we need to know about Internet spies,” Scott explained. “He told us about how spies develop search engines to watch for key words, and then they do a trace to the source of the query.”

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

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

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

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

“Great. That certainly explains it,” Tommie said.

“Explains what?” the kids asked in unison.

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

“Speaking of spies, maybe Mr. Klein is a spy,” Scott offered.

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

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

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

“NOOOO!” Scott and Kim both moaned.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Ugh. Please spare us!” Kim and Tommie both groaned.

“So, Scott, tell me about this fire,” Tommie probed.

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

“You mean the element?”

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

“What a waste of good oatmeal.”

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

“Inflammable,” Kim corrected her brother’s grammar.

“We could combust!” Scott exclaimed.

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

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

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

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

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

“No way!”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



## Four

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

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

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

DIIIING – DOOOONG – DIIIING...

Bark... Bark... Bark...

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

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

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

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

CREEEAK...

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

"Scott Campbell. What a surprise. To what do I owe this visit?"

Scott froze. He didn't even look at Mr. Klein. He just stared at the dogs.

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

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

"Are you in need of more dog food?"

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

As Mr. Klein reached toward the can, his sleeve rode up, revealing tattooed numbers on the inside of his forearm. Immediately, Scott associated the numbers with World War II. ‘Oh, man,’ Scott thought to himself, ‘he was a prisoner of war, not a Nazi.’

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

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

“Yes, I go in it every year.”

“Awesome.”

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

“How do you know that?”

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

“I didn’t know that,” Scott admitted.

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

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

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

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

Scott told Mr. Klein the story of Max and the mysterious crystal. When he was finished, Mr. Klein assured Scott that it

was unlikely the crystal would have been in the Hot-Dog Dog Food. “I have used this pet food for years, and have never had any trouble with it. But tell your mom, Scott, that I strongly advise HER to change pet food brands.”

“But our vet told us we should only feed this brand to Max.”

“Scott, tell your mom, I think she should find an alternative.”

Scott realized Mr. Klein was serious. “Okay, I’ll tell her what you said.”

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

“Where are you going? Another competition?”

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

“What do you do, Mr. Klein?”

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

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

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

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

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

Scott addressed an email to a well-known scientist at The Spaced Channel, and typed a note asking for his assistance in identifying the crystal. Scott explained that the crystal had been found in Max’s poop. He added that he knew there had been a meteorite shower recently and asked if the crystal could be a piece

of meteorite. Scott attached the digital images to the email and pressed, Send.

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

As Scott played crappy, Kim played with crap.



## Five

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Scott! Are you home?”

“What do you want?”

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

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

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

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

“My bike!” Scott screamed, as he ran down the stairs and bolted by Kim into the backyard. Kim followed closely behind. She couldn’t wait to see his reaction when he stepped in the puddle.

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

SPLAT...

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

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

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

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

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

“I give up! Cut it out, Scott! Please!”

Tommie headed out the patio door – right into the path of Scott’s water assault. Scott shouted, “Whooooo!” at the same time Tommie screamed, “What the...?!”

All three of them were now drenched.

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

Tommie was fuming. “Scott! What do you think you’re doing?”

Scott threw down the hose and tried to beg his way out of trouble. “Mom, I can explain. Kim made me fall in that stinky puddle of water.”

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

PLOP...

Tommie hit the water, butt first.

Kim now had two unsuspecting victims.

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

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

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

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

“Okay, Scott,” Tommie whispered, as she rinsed herself off with the hose. “It’s time we joined forces and went after Kim.”

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

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

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

“Where’s Scott, Mom?”

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

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

Mom. What do you want?”

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

Kim tried to explain. “Mom, it wasn’t my fault.”

“Kim, I asked you to come here.”

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

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

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

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

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

SPLAT... SPLASH...

Scott and Tommie had pulled Chris and Kim into the mess.

Victims three and four. The entire family was now wet and wild.

Chris couldn’t wait for the explanation.



## Six

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

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

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

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

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

“Dad, he fell in all by himself,” Kim explained.

“You made me!”

“Did not!”

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

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

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

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

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

were squeaky clean and smelling ‘Zesty’.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chris played along. “I’ll take Kim and you can have Scott.”

“And who gets Max?” queried Tommie. The kids thought they were serious.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Surprise! No tuna!”

“Way to go, Mom!”

“Chris, could you get the barbecue going, please?” Tommie said, as she kissed his cheek to show Scott and Kim that everything was okay. “Kids, it’ll be about thirty minutes before supper’s ready.”

Chris went outside while Tommie assembled salad ingredients. Scott was just about to head back upstairs, when Chris called out, “Hey, Scott. Let’s see that crystal.”

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

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

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

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

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

“Mr. Klein!” Scott exclaimed. “I almost forgot! He told me we shouldn’t be feeding the Hoppy Pet Food to Max. He said we should use another brand.”

“When did he say that?” Chris asked.

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

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

Scott hadn’t finished. “Mr. Klein is really cool. He was in the Senior Iron Man competition in Hawaii. He said to call him if we

ever needed anything. And he's going away again. I told him we'd get his mail."

Tommie listened in disbelief. "What happened to your theory that he's a Nazi?"

"That was Kim's dumb theory. I always knew he was cool."

"You did not. You were the one that was scared of him!" Kim protested.

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

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

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

As Scott sat at his computer,

TING...

... a message popped up on the screen.

"KIM! There's a response to my query!" Scott shouted.



## Seven

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

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

"A DIAMOND!" Scott shouted. He smirked at Kim. "Max is one special Wolfhound! Dog food goes in and diamonds come out – just like the goose that laid the golden eggs!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

nuts on him.” Kim headed back to Scott’s computer.

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

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

“Diamond? What diamond?” Tommie asked.

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

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

“There is no diamond action,” Tommie replied.

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

“What mine?” Chris quizzed. “There is no mine. There are no diamonds. These people are nuts.”

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

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

“What’s an IPO?” Kim asked.

“An Initial Public Offering,” Chris answered.

“Okay, I give. What’s an Initial Public Offering?” Scott asked.

“I’ll field this one, Chris,” Tommie offered.

“Be my guest.”

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

Scott thought he had an answer. “Just borrow the money from a bank.”

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

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

Tommie continued. “We would sell a portion of the mine to other people. That way, we could raise the money to buy the

mining equipment and get the diamonds out of the ground.”

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

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

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

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

“So companies go public to raise money?” Scott questioned.

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

Kim was really confused now. “What are you talking about?”

“Okay, if one family owns a mine and the government won’t let them build a road to get to it, then it’s only one family against the government.”

“Oh, I get it. If a company is public and there’s tons of shareholders, all the shareholders can put pressure on the government.”

“Right, and that’s just one of many reasons why companies go public.”

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

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

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

“Right.”

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

“That’s very likely,” Tommie replied.

“What’s this about Dr. Chester?” Chris asked.

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

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

“How about an estate in Palm Beach?” Kim inquired.

“I don’t think so,” Chris replied.

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

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

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

It was Scott’s cell phone.

“Hello?” Scott answered.

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

“I am?”

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

“Who is it?” Tommie asked.

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

“Good grief!” Tommie cut him off. “Hang up right now. It’s a darn telemarketing scam.”

“Kim, where’s your phone?” Chris asked.

“Here. Why?” She pulled it out of her pocket.

RING... RING...

Kim looked at the number.

“Who is it?” Chris asked.

“I don’t know,” Kim said. “The number’s blocked.”

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

“You two – turn off your phones!” Chris directed.

Scott and Kim did as they were told. Scott put his phone in his

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I just told you, Mr. Newman, there is no story. We don't have a diamond mine."

"But, Mr. Campbell, we'd be prepared to pay you for the story."

Chris was shocked by the editor's total disinterest in the truth. He hung up the phone and turned it off.

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

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

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

RING... RING...

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

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

It was the warning that sounded before the fire alarm went off.

"The fire alarm is going to go off!" Chris shouted. "Everyone out of the house!"

The family bolted from Scott's room. As they reached the top

of the staircase, they could see smoke billowing from the patio.

“False alarm. It’s only the steaks,” Chris announced, as he rushed downstairs to shut off the alarm. He didn’t want the fire department showing up unnecessarily.

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

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

The house reeked of smoke.

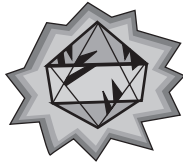
“We need some fresh air,” Tommie said, as she opened the windows in the kitchen.

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

Chris was starved. “How about Pop’s Restaurant?”

“Great idea, Chris,” Tommie approved.

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



## Eight

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

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

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

"Hey, they called me a geologist!" Scott said.

"As if," Kim scoffed.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Let's try for fifteen minutes of peace and quiet," Chris

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

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

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

"So much for the fifteen minute theory," Tommie announced.

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

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

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

"You're forgetting, we don't own a diamond mine," Tommie countered. "Therefore, we don't deserve this attention."

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

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

"Quiet, Kim," Tommie said, "before you know it, they'll think we did that, too."

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

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

"Poop!" Kim said.

"Hey, that's what got us into this mess," Scott laughed.

"Maybe we should get out of here," Tommie said.

"Okay – and quiet! No one say a thing," Chris warned. The

Campbells stood up to leave.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“So, you’ve already sold your mine to Mr. LeHops.”

Chris looked at Kim. “This isn’t working.”

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

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

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

“Scott, shut-up,” Kim ordered.

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

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

“Then have you found an alluvial deposit?” the reporter asked.

Chris totally lost it. “NO! Let me make it easier for you to understand!” He paused for a second and then surprised the heck out of everyone.

“There really are no diamonds, Sir.

We certainly are not millionaires.

We did not find them anywhere.

We wish you would get out of our hair!

We did not find them in the ground.

We did not find them lying around.

They did not fall out of the sky.

I did not find one in my pie.

We did not find them anywhere!

Why is it you don’t seem to care?

...Why aren’t you people listening?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



## Nine

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

‘He’s acting so stupid – to heck with telling him,’ she thought.

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

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

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

“I’m not admitting anything. You’re crazy. You probably just saw someone’s blue jacket and red hat hanging on a hook and thought it was a body.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“It’s a diamond!” Scott insisted.

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

“Why would he lie?” Scott asked.

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

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

Tommie said.

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

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

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

"No, Mom. I plan to be thorough. I'll contact both companies."

"Yes, you're probably right, Kim. You should check out both," Tommie admitted.

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

"If she's coming over, then Alex gets to come over, too," Scott insisted.

"I don't want that idiot over," Kim barked. "He's such a dumb jerk."

Scott defended his friend. "He's not dumb. He's just... different."

"Right," Kim replied. "He's SPECIAL."

"Hey, watch who you're calling special. He's my best friend!"

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

"MOM!" they both shouted.

"I think you both might be on to something," Chris declared. "When you get hold of Alex and Amy, ask if I can speak to their dads. Maybe they can help us straighten out this mess." Their friends' fathers were both involved in the media – Alex's dad was editor of the Center City Communicator newspaper and Amy's dad was head of Center City TV.

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

Kim took the phone and placed the call.

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

“You have reached 555...”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Well, is he coming over or what?” Kim asked.

“No, something really weird is going on.”

“What?”

“He’s out with his family. They went to the Jets game.”

“What’s so strange about that?” Tommie asked.

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

“Well, maybe it was a last minute thing,” Chris replied.

“It must have been.”

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

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

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

All four of them said, "I'll have..."

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

The rest of the family placed their orders.

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

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



## Ten

Chris had been thinking the same thing.

“Really, Dad. What was he doing over there?” Kim asked.

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

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

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

“How would you know?” Tommie asked.

“Or do drug deals in,” Scott suggested.

“How would you know?”

“Or run an organized crime family from,” Kim speculated.

“How would – oh, never mind.”

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

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

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

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

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

devices.

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

Now Tommie was a little suspicious. "He's a bit off, wouldn't you say?"

"Maybe he's just busy," Chris suggested.

"Maybe he's ticked-off because the news people bothered his customers," Kim said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Okay, we're history."

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

The family hurried out of the restaurant to their van.

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

BLINK... BLINK...

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

“See what?” Tommie asked.

“I saw it, too,” Scott declared.

“Saw what?” Chris asked this time.

“Lights blinking on and off in our house.”

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

SCREEEECH...

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

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

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

BLINK... BLINK...

The lights flashed again.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

And it was about to get more bizarre.