

Alan Murphy and the Hidden Icon

By

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PRE-PUBLICATION ISSUE

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Chapter One

Brent Blakely yelled at his mother from the back porch, “Mom, we’re going to get some chewing gum. Do you need anything from the store?” As his friend, Alan Murphy, had hoped, Eleanor Blakely didn’t slow them down by offering them money and a shopping list. If she had, they would have hidden the tools of their spying trade while they visited her in the kitchen. Since she didn’t need anything this time, they grabbed their notebooks, Brent’s video recorder, and Alan’s digital voice recorder and headed out at precisely 4:47 P.M.

Brent noted the time in his notebook.

The video and voice recorders had been packaged in a weather-proof book bag that was dark green and could be easily hidden in the large, climbable tree that was about a half-block from the

market. That tree had once been a favorite for kids in the neighborhood, but with the recent improvements to the playground, few children bothered climbing the tree these days.

The boys scooted up into the tree and found a suitable hiding place for the book bag. Brent strapped the bag to the upper side of a fairly large branch using an elastic 'bungee' cord with hooks on each end. The cord was the same color as the bag, and both boys were satisfied that none of the smaller kids in the neighborhood would be able to reach where they had stashed it. Planning to return to the tree at dusk, they jumped to the sidewalk and started running full speed to Marty's Market.

Suddenly, Brent stopped, and Alan ran right into his back like one of those old comics that Alan's grandfather liked to watch on television. Brent

quickly turned and grabbed Alan's arm, pulling him into the base of a long hedge bush that ran along the sidewalk. Before Alan could protest, Brent clamped a hand firmly over his lips.

Alan stuck his neck out around Brent to see what had caused his friend to pull him into the shadows. All Alan could see was a man standing near the hedges up ahead. The man was watching Ms. Sims, an elderly lady who lived up the street a few houses past Marty's Market. As Ms. Sims reached the top step of her front porch, she looked toward the man and nodded her head slowly.

A few seconds later when the man emerged from the shadows, the boys easily identified him as another elderly neighbor, Mr. Holt, who lived in the three-story house next to Alan's house. The nod had clearly been some kind of signal, but neither boy had

a clue as to why one of these two neighbors would be signaling the other.

“She doesn’t even like Mr. Holt,” Brent protested when the man moved on, well out of hearing range. Alan nodded as he thought back to the last time the two had passed each other in the doorway to the corner market.

The glass doors at the front of the store were labeled PUSH and PULL, and Ms. Sims had been leaving the store just as the boys arrived. Although the store owner expected his customers to leave the store by pushing on the door marked PULL on the outside, Ms. Sims had pulled the other door toward the inside of the store. Before she could make her way around the door, Alan and Brent rather rudely streaked through the open door with a “Thanks, Ms.

Sims,” reaching the back row of shelves before she could voice her disapproval.

Alan remembered Marty’s daughter, Lynette, smiling from behind the counter as the boys crouched down so that they couldn’t be seen by Mrs. Sims. The old lady had released the door and looked around the store before turning her gaze toward Lynette.

Although Lynette stopped smiling when Ms. Sims looked her way, the elderly lady glowered at her, obviously suspicious that the kids were working together on some kind of prank. Brent doubted that Alan’s snickering could be heard by Ms. Sims, but he shushed him anyway.

The boys had waited until they heard the door bell ring as Ms. Sims again opened the wrong door. Standing to their full height, they watched Mr. Holt almost bump into Ms. Sims. Although Mr. Holt

apologized and backed completely outside the store, he became the victim of Ms. Sims' built-up anger.

Both boys laughed out loud as Ms. Sims marched past the cowering older man and actually smacked the top of his bald head when he bowed in deference to her.

“Watch where you're going, Edward. No wonder the children in this neighborhood are so unruly. If the mature adults don't set good examples, we can't expect any better.” Edward, the object of her tirade, muttered something under his breath before pushing open the proper door and entering the store. Ms. Sims glowered at him for at least a minute.

“So why are Ms. Sims and Mr. Holt clearly conspiring together just two days after their “run-in” at the market,” questioned Brent.

Alan agreed. "Something is just not right about those two. We'd better keep an eye on both of them for the rest of the evening."

Brent, as usual, split out the work assignments. "You follow Mr. Holt, and I'll follow Ms. Sims."

"No problem with that," responded Alan rather quickly. He wanted no part of Ms Sims and her hateful glances, especially without Brent there with his charm to smooth over any awkward situation that might arise. "Let's go ahead and separate now. We might look suspicious if they see us together."

Sometimes Brent wasn't sure that Alan's suggestions were logical at all. It sometimes seemed that his friend just had to say something to feel like he was making a contribution. Most of the time, Brent

went along without argument. This was one of those times.

Alan smiled at Brent and patted him on the shoulder before heading through Mr. Holt's backyard, apparently intending to circle around the Clemmons house and take up a position just inside the hedges in the Clemons's front yard. Brent smiled – Alan always acted in a more dramatic fashion. Perhaps that was what he liked about him – his friend always put more into life because he always expected great things to happen.

"Just like today," Brent thought, "Alan thinks we're following some international spies, but I realize that we're just snooping on two elderly people acting a little strangely." Brent would later realize that his friend's assessment of the situation had been much more accurate than his own had been.

Chapter Two

By the time Alan had circled the Clemons's house and reached the hedges beside the sidewalk, Mr. Holt was nowhere to be seen. Alan couldn't stand up to get a better look because he didn't want to be seen by Ms. Sims, who was walking up the sidewalk and was very close to where he was hiding. "I've already lost my man," he thought.

To Alan's relief, a typical ultra-polite remark by Brent provided the necessary distraction that he needed. Brent, not playing the role like Alan would have, spoke directly to the lady whom he was supposed to be watching.

"Good evening, Ms. Sims," he spoke a little more loudly than normal. "Out for a stroll?"

Ms. Sims seemed to be deciding whether to recognize the boy or to just ignore him. After taking a few steps without looking directly at him, she turned toward him and displayed a smile that the boys couldn't remember having seen before. "Yes, Mr. Brent, I'm taking a little stroll. Would you like to walk along with me? I'm going to walk around the playground track for a few minutes. Walking is very good exercise—even for young boys like you."

Alan almost laughed out loud as he ran down the sidewalk in the direction that Mr. Holt had been headed. Brent always tried to act so cool, but Ms. Sims had surprised him. Alan's usually eloquent friend had barely managed, "No thanks." Then he had fibbed, telling Ms. Sims that he had to get something for his mother at the market.

Neither boy was doing that well. Alan couldn't enjoy Brent's discomfort very long because he soon remembered that he had completely lost track of Mr. Holt. Hearing the door bell ring at the corner market, Alan hurried in that direction, hoping that his subject was still in the neighborhood. Of course, there really wasn't any place, other than the market, where Mr. Holt might have gone.

There was one other place. From a spot in the shadows on Ms. Sims' front porch, a man whose real name was Edwin Holtzman watched as Alan walked quickly down the sidewalk, obviously looking for something or someone. Since Holtzman's current job involved keeping his real identity a secret, he became quite concerned that the boy might have been following him. He couldn't imagine what might have made the boy suspicious of him, but he had no doubt

that Alan was “on to him” for some reason. It really didn’t matter if Alan was just playing an imaginary game or had really figured out that something of a grander scale was happening, Holtzman would have to do something about the boy.

Fortunately, the package he had picked up on Ms. Sims front porch was exactly what he needed to be able to do just that. His employer had invested quite a bit of money and time into this mission, and a several special items had been provided to ensure their success. The brief case Holtzman now held was just for insurance--in case something went wrong. Therefore, Holtzman intended to use it regardless of how much the Murphy boy knew —just in case.

An obvious thought struck him just then. “Where is the Blakely kid? Those boys are always together.” He looked in all directions, but didn’t see

him anywhere. "Well, I'll just take care of him as well. Can't be too careful, I always say."

Following the path in reverse that Alan had just used, Holtzman circled the Clemons house to reach his own back door. After setting the brief case in his kitchen, just inside the door, he retraced his steps, being careful not to be seen. When he spotted Alan leaving the market down the street a few minutes later, he turned and walked slowly in the opposite direction. The boy would see him and think that he had walked on beyond the store and was just returning to his house.

Holtzman smiled. "You still have the touch, Edwin," he told himself. The old spy was convinced that young Alan would be completely fooled by what had just taken place. "He'll never know where I've been."

Sure enough, Alan and Brent had been together inside the corner market, discussing just that. A change in strategy was needed because it was obvious to the boys that things had not worked out anything like they had planned. Brent had been forced to walk to the market after telling Ms. Sims that he was going there; Alan had entered the market because he thought that was where Mr. Holt had gone. Both boys were anxious to make up for their recent mistakes.

Alan had been talking to a girl behind the counter when Brent entered the market. Lynette Roberts was only thirteen, but she always filled in at the cash register while her father ate his dinner at their house next to the market. Brent heard her say, "I don't know, but I wouldn't tell you if I did."

Brent laughed to himself as he headed toward their favorite in-store spot, where he waited for Alan to join him. Wearing the I-know-something-you-don't-know grin on his face, Alan approached his friend and immediately stated the obvious. "Holt didn't come inside the market."

Brent beat Alan to the punch. "Some people say more by refusing to answer a question than . . ."

He stopped to let Alan finish one of old grandfather Murphy's favorite sayings. Alan did just that by whispering, ". . . than most people do when they take the witness stand in court."

They actually hadn't changed their plans a lot; basically the change in plans amounted to a switch in roles. Brent would try to get some more information from Lynette while Alan headed back toward the playground to watch Ms. Sims. Brent would then

wait a few minutes before walking down the street in the other direction to see if he could spot Mr. Holt.

The new plan worked about as well as their first one.

As Brent continued asking Lynette some vague questions about Mr. Holt and Ms. Sims, Alan walked quickly through the doorway and was immediately spotted by Mr. Holt. Since Brent was supposed to stick with Mr. Holt, Alan wondered whether he should go back inside and tell Brent that they needed to switch roles again or simply continue on.

The decision was made for him when Mr. Holt headed down the sidewalk toward the playground to join Ms. Sims. Alan couldn't return to talk to Brent; something important might happen while he was inside the store.

As Alan watched, Mr. Holt started walking around the track at the playground. At first, Ms. Sims

was on the far side of the track, but she seemed to get something in her shoe. By the time she removed her shoe, shook out an imaginary pebble, and retied the shoe, Holt caught up with her. He continued walking at the same pace, and neither adult spoke until they both circled the track and were facing away from Alan.

“The Murphy kid is watching us, Charlotte,” muttered Holt when he was sure that Alan couldn’t see that his lips were moving.

“So?” asked Ms. Sims, staring at the back of the man’s head. “Surely, you don’t suspect that anyone would use a child to spy on us.”

Holt kept walking. Despite the cranky way she sometimes acted, he had always known that Charlotte Sims was too soft-hearted to be in this line of work. He hadn’t expected her to support him; he just

wanted her to cooperate. "I'm just letting you know that young Murphy and young Blakely are involved, Ms. Sims. We are not in a position to take any chances."

"But you can't harm the children, Edwin. I won't be a part of that. You know how I feel."

"Yes, Charlotte; I know how you feel."

"Well?" Ms. Sims asked. "What exactly are you going to do?"

Holtzman wanted to stop, turn around, and shake Ms. Sims. Instead, he kept walking and explained carefully what he planned to do to keep the boys out of the action for the next forty eight hours or more. He described how K345 would mimic the symptoms of a common virus –that the boys would be just fine in three or four days. Most likely, their mothers wouldn't even have to take them to see a

doctor. The boys would just be kept out of school and treated at home until the symptoms vanished.

“What do you need for me to do?” she asked when he had finished his explanation. Ms. Sims didn’t like what was about to happen, but she was in no position to object – not really. She was being paid very well for her small part in this scheme, and Holt was right – the boys would be fine in three or four days if nothing went wrong.

Holtzman had to wait for a few minutes before explaining Ms. Sims’s part in the revised plan because they had made the turn on the track and the Murphy kid would be able to see that they were talking. “Of course,” he thought, “it doesn’t really matter what the Murphy boy knows now. He won’t be able to tell anyone what he knows – not if he reacts to K345 like everyone else that has been subjected to the drug.”

When they were again facing away from the bench where Alan Murphy was sitting, Holtzman told Ms. Sims what he expected her to do. "You are going to have a medical emergency at your house. All the parents," concluded Holtzman, "will be rushing to your house late tonight. While you have them occupied, I'll take care of the boys."

"After thirty minutes or so, I'll suddenly start feeling fine," added Ms. Sims. "I'll give you at least an hour to take care of your business. Don't expect any more."

"An hour will be fine," replied Holtzman.

When Charlotte Sims glanced back after a few minutes of silence, her walking companion was nowhere in sight. She started for home, clutching her stomach as if she really wasn't feeling well.

"I'm really good," she told herself. "No one will ever suspect that I'm faking." The Murphy boy remained sitting on the bench until she had passed.

When she glanced back a few minutes later after reaching her front porch, she noticed Alan near the large tree where the boys often played. "Edwin is right;" she thought, "those boys are following us for some reason. I wonder what they think they know."

Chapter Three

Alan had been able to remain on the playground bench while he watched Mr. Holt return home. When Ms. Sims finished her walk a few minutes later and headed home, Alan followed her until he heard Brent calling to him from the large tree that served as their headquarters.

“Alan, you’ve got to see what I recorded just now.”

After looking toward Ms. Sims’ porch and seeing her closing the front door behind her, Alan quickly climbed up in the tree. Taking a position beside Brent where several branches joined together, Alan took the video recorder being offered by his friend.

“Push PLAY,” Alan and Brent spoke in unison.

Brent grinned although his friend was making fun of him. "I've got to stop being so predictable," he said.

"Yes," Alan answered. "That would be nice, but nicer still . . . ?"

"What?" Brent asked.

"It would be very nice indeed if you didn't think you had to tell me how to operate the video recorder every time I use it. You've already told me twenty times."

Brent thought about the twenty-one times that Brent had almost erased a tape or failed to start the recorder or claimed that it just wouldn't work. Still, he only said, "I guess you're right. If you already know the words that I'm going to say, it really doesn't do me any good to say them."

“Wow!” Alan exclaimed. He was already watching the recording that Brent had just made. When Brent had zoomed in on the elderly couple as they walked around the track, it was quite obvious that they had been talking to each other when they were facing away from Alan.

“They’re up to something,” Brent stated and took the recorder back from Alan.

“The question is,” added Alan, “how are we going to get the evidence we need to turn them in?”

“Not so fast, my friend,” warned Brent. “They may not be up to anything illegal. Maybe they’re just flirting and wanting to keep it a secret.”

“They’re way too old for that,” concluded Alan. Brent had to agree. They were pretty old – almost as old as Alan’s grandfather -- he supposed.

“I’ll take the video recorder home with me and see if I can read their lips. Maybe I can make out what they’re saying.” Brent replaced the video recorder in its bag and waited for Alan to jump out of the tree first.

“Look over at Mr. Holt’s window on the second floor,” Alan cautioned as Brent slipped from the tree to the ground. “I think Holt is watching us with some kind of night-vision glasses.”

When Brent tried to look in that direction, Alan grabbed him around the neck and pretended to be wrestling with him. “Don’t look now,” he explained. “He’ll know that we’re on to him.”

“But you just said, ‘Look over there,’ ” Brent argued. He was arguing with air, however. His fun-loving friend had grabbed the video recorder bag by

the strap and was now running up the sidewalk with his body between Holt's house and the bag.

Alan kept running toward his own house after dropping the bag beside the trash can near the playground. Brent followed him, pretending to be angry and yelling, "Come back here" over and over. As he passed by the trash can, he scooped up the video recorder bag without breaking stride.

"Boy, I'm good," he thought. He continued on to his own house without once looking toward the Murphy's.

Alan Murphy had dashed quickly to his own bedroom where he looked out the window to watch his friend scoop up the bag and head for home. He also thought a little about how clever he and his friend really were.

Mr. Holt stopped looking through the night-vision glasses that Alan had spotted, but he was hardly finished for the night. Already determined to “take care of the boys,” he was now even more concerned after seeing the Blakely kid with the video recorder. Charlotte’s remark about the boys not being used to spy on them was no longer that far fetched. These boys were doing exactly that.

He was alone in his house, but he spoke out loud. “The Blakely kid has the camera; he’s the first priority. But somehow that Murphy kid seems more dangerous overall.”

Alan would have been thrilled to have heard Holt’s words. Most kids his age would have been worried silly; Alan, already silly as Brent often pointed out, would simply have been thrilled.

Brent, on the other hand, was in his room studying the video recording. He had watched the video several times and had made out only a few words that were being said. The menacing look on Holt's face and the look of concern on Ms. Sims's face were enough to convince him that something evil was about to happen. The conversation had clearly not been one between secret lovers.

Brent moved to his computer desk and opened a file on his computer. After typing in a few notes about what he had learned from the video, he saved the file with the name "Spynotes." As was his habit he created a special icon for the file on his computer screen and wondered if Alan would notice the new icon.

Although Alan didn't understand very much about computer networks, he did know that Brent

had linked their two computers so that the computers shared the same files and the same virtual computer screen. “All you really have to know,” Brent had explained, “is that I can open any computer file on your computer and you can open any file on mine. It’s like my keyboard is connected to your computer and I’m looking at your computer screen.”

Although Alan didn’t have his own computer, Brent didn’t worry about other members of the Murphy family accidentally clicking on something strictly for the boys’ own use. The rest of the Murphy’s seldom used the computer because they didn’t even realize that it had been connected to the Internet through Brent’s computer. Alan’s father had given up on his checking program after a few long hours trying to balance his checkbook electronically.

Mrs. Murphy didn't like computers at all. They no longer paid for Internet service.

This time, for some reason, Brent decided to be more careful than normal; he used his computer mouse to hide the "Spynotes" icon under a game icon labeled "Turtles and Trucks."

Then he looked out his window toward the Murphy house. Without a phone in his bedroom or a cell phone, there was no way for him to contact Alan without anyone else knowing. He had to decide whether to wait until morning before telling his friend about the new icon, use the family telephone to call Alan's house, or to just hope that his friend checked the computer screen and noticed the edges of "Spynotes" barely visible beneath the "Turtles and Trucks" icon.

If he called now, his dad or mom might not ask him why he was calling, but Alan's mom was sure to ask Alan what his friend had wanted as soon as he hung up the phone. Brent would then have to coach Alan about what to say so that both boys had the same story if their mothers happened to meet each other during the next few days.

Mothers seemed to have a sixth sense about such things and wouldn't be easily distracted if the two stories didn't mesh. They would presume the worst — well not the absolute worst, but they would imagine something far worse than the boys could easily explain away.

Brent decided to wait. Besides, if he studied the recording a few more times, he might figure out exactly what the couple had been talking about. If he only knew what concerned Ms. Sims, what menacing

matter Mr. Holt had mentioned, or what their timetable was; he'd know how to plan out a strategy for Alan and himself to follow.

Chapter Four

Later that evening, Brent was concentrating so thoroughly on the video that his mother's voice barely registered. He had figured out another phrase that Holt had spoken and added "something is going to happen in exactly forty eight hours" to the "Spynotes" file on their "shared" computer. Only when he had finished hiding the icon on the computer screen again did he realize that something might just be amiss. He looked out his bedroom window and saw his father and mother rushing down the sidewalk toward a house where an ambulance was now parked with its lights flashing. Brent was pretty sure that the house belonged to Ms. Sims.

What his mother had said finally registered. "Your father and I are going to check on Ms. Sims. Keep the doors locked and don't leave the house.

We'll be back as soon as we're sure that everything is okay down the street."

Brent took the video cassette out of the recorder -- holding it in his hand as he headed down the stairs to the hall where his book bag was usually hanging -- still convinced that he could wait until the next morning to tell Alan what he had found.

Without thinking, he checked the front door to make sure that it was locked. It was.

As he turned back toward the hallway, Brent was startled to see someone across the hall, sitting on the living room sofa with a small leather brief case in his lap. Brent recognized Mr. Holt's voice before he walked close enough to him to see the man's features.

"Your mother asked me to stay here with you until they return. I was standing on my porch watching the ambulance, and they realized it might

be a while before they would get back. I told them I didn't mind at all." He smiled, and Brent felt something in the pit of his stomach that he hadn't felt since the time Mom had "surprised him" with a visit to the dentist office rather than the barber shop.

Brent was stubborn enough to argue. He told Mr. Holt that his mother had told him to keep the doors locked. "How did you get in, Mr. Holt? I'm pretty sure my mother wouldn't have forgotten to lock the door."

Mr. Holt held up a set of keys and smiled at Brent as he provided a reasonable answer. "She gave me her keys. Told me to lock the door back and keep it locked. Mothers never change, do they?"

Although he didn't get a clear look at the keys Mr. Holt was holding, Brent was pretty sure that his mother's driver's license and credit cards were not

attached. Knowing that it took her at least five minutes to disengage her house key or car key from that set, he doubted that Mr. Holt actually had his mother's set of keys. Even his mother was not likely to have given Mr. Holt her credit cards.

Holt pointed at the video cassette in Brent's hand. "What kind of video have you been watching?" began Mr. Holt. "Let me have a look at it," he continued as he stood up and began to walk toward Brent.

"Sure," Brent answered. Holding the cassette up as if he was going to toss it to Mr. Holt, he tossed it just out of the older man's reach and behind the couch. As the man's eyes followed its flight, Brent headed for the front door to make his escape. When he reached the door, he failed to realize that a wedge had been placed under the door near the floor. Even

after Brent twisted the safety knob to unlock it, the door wouldn't budge.

Brent continued jerking frantically on the door — pulling with all his might. Looking around for an alternate route, he noticed that Mr. Holt hadn't gone to retrieve the cassette but had returned to the sofa where he had been sitting before. He wondered why Mr. Holt hadn't kept coming toward him and didn't notice that the briefcase was now lying open beside him on the sofa.

Brent didn't stand still very long. He bolted for the kitchen door which was to his right and further away from Mr. Holt. This time he noticed the wedge underneath the seal of the door because the kitchen door was white and its color contrasted with the natural wood color of the wedge. What he didn't

notice was the gadget that Mr. Holt had removed from his leather briefcase.

As the boy began kicking the wedge with his shoe to dislodge it, he heard a whirring sound and then a little dart stung him in the back of his right shoulder near his neck. At least, he would later explain that he thought then that it must have been a dart. Regardless, he never quite made it through the kitchen door.

Chapter Five

While K345 spread through Brent's blood stream, he managed to unlock the kitchen door, but that was all he managed to do. Somehow he couldn't remember why he wanted to open the door. After a few more seconds, he couldn't decide whether he was on the inside or outside of the kitchen door. He was terribly confused.

Mr. Holt's soothing voice seemed to calm the panic that he was feeling. The older man gently, but firmly, gripped the boy's shoulders and turned him back toward the living room and the hallway. Brent could walk, but he didn't seem to understand where he was going. Amazingly, he was so confused that he wanted to thank Mr. Holt for supporting him.

They passed the opening to the living room and headed toward the stairs that led to the second

floor of the house. Mr. Holt was saying, "Let's get you back to your bed where you can lie down a while. I don't believe you're feeling very well right now."

Brent actually tried to say "Thank you" but he couldn't say those two simple words. He tried to cough to clear his throat and was able to do that, but he couldn't make his mouth say the words that he wanted to say. He looked at Mr. Holt, who seemed to understand his distress.

"That's okay, Brent. Don't worry if you can't talk right now. I've given you a sedative and it may be making you a little light-headed. You won't need to talk until you feel better anyway. You just need to rest."

Brent actually managed to say, "Rest." He seemed to be able to repeat words that he was hearing

but couldn't quite figure out how to transfer new words from his brain to his vocal chords and lips.

"Yes, you need to rest," Mr. Holt assured the boy as he turned him around next to his bed and pressed down on his shoulders. Brent didn't even look back; he just sat down on the bed and let the older man guide him to a resting position. The pillow felt so good, but he didn't go to sleep immediately.

Mr. Holt walked over to the computer on the desk in the boy's room and moved the mouse to cause the screen to 'wake up.' Brent was able to see the screen and could tell which programs were being accessed, but he had no idea what the man might be trying to do.

"You have a pretty powerful computer for an eleven-year old, Brent. I may need to borrow it a little later on. Will that be alright?"

“Alright,” Brent responded although he really didn’t mean to be giving Mr. Holt permission to use the computer. He would not have banned his neighbor from using the computer in any case, but he was merely repeating the last words that had been spoken.

Mr. Holt seemed satisfied. He pulled the blanket up around the boy’s shoulders and said only one word before leaving. Brent repeated that word every few minutes until he finally fell asleep.

Even as he dreamed, that single word – fever -- seemed to be the focal point of the dream. He must have repeated that word a thousand times during the night.

Chapter Six

Mr. Holt gathered the wedges he used to block the doors to the Blakely house and placed them into his leather brief case before leaving. The cassette that he had retrieved from behind the sofa was the only thing new in the briefcase. The device used to inject Brent with K345 had been placed carefully inside a separate leather pouch and returned to the briefcase before Holtzman had left the sofa.

When Holt left the house, Alan spotted him almost immediately. Alan had followed his own parents down the street toward the Sims house a few minutes after Mr. Holt first entered the Blakely's using his special set of keys. If Alan's parents had realized that their son was following them, they would have sent him home immediately. As it was, they were rushing to see what the problem was with

Ms. Sims and didn't notice their son behind them. He had followed them all the way to the big tree where he quickly climbed up and out of sight.

Alan's focus was on the Sims house — he was no different than any of the others in the neighborhood. He watched as the paramedics and Ms. Sims came out of her front door and walked together onto her front porch. Brent's parents followed them from inside the house, and Alan watched them greet his own parents coming up the front steps.

Everyone seemed to be urging Ms. Sims into the ambulance, and she was obviously resisting. Alan was probably the only one around who noticed Ms. Sims's eyes during the argument. He would have expected Ms. Sims to be looking toward the people who were arguing with her. She might even have

closed her eyes to give added emphasis to what she was saying. He could think of no reason for her to have been looking to see what was going on elsewhere in the neighborhood.

Perhaps the others noticed, too, but thought she was out of her head. Perhaps that was what caused her eyes to wander toward Brent's house while she was arguing with the paramedics on her own front porch. Maybe so, but Alan turned and looked where she had been looking--in the direction of Brent's house--and was surprised to see someone leaving that house in a very suspicious manner.

If Alan and Brent had not been talking about Mr. Holt earlier in the evening, the boy might not have recognized the figure leaving the house quite so readily. Concern for his friend added to the sense of adventure that was starting to build inside him. He

immediately leaped down from the tree and headed up the street to see what was happening at the Blakely household.

Somehow he sensed that he shouldn't yell out at Mr. Holt and ask him what he was doing at Brent's house. He had never been afraid of old Mr. Holt, and he couldn't quite believe that Holt had harmed his friend.

The strong sense of adventure pushed his feeling of alarm to the background. He would follow Mr. Holt and see for himself what was happening. When he had a chance, he would alert his friend and let him in on the action; for now, he needed to keep close to this neighbor who no longer seemed to be just a grumpy old man.

Mr. Holt walked away from the Blakely's two-story house and seemed to be heading back to his

own older three-story house. Alan ducked behind a tree as Mr. Holt turned to look down the street toward the crowd at Ms. Sims's house. When Alan turned to look in that same direction, he was a little surprised to see that the ambulance lights were no longer flashing, and the crowd was dispersing.

Ms. Sims was standing alone on her porch and was smiling as she waved to her good neighbors who still seemed reluctant to be leaving her alone. Again, Alan noticed that Ms. Sims seemed to be looking over the heads of her neighbors and concentrating on either him or Mr. Holt.

Since he was pretty sure she couldn't see him where he was hidden, Alan guessed that she was watching Mr. Holt. She might have again nodded her head, but it was really hard to see. Turning back to where Mr. Holt had been a few seconds before, Alan

was surprised to see that the old man had not continued down the sidewalk toward his own house—he was walking quickly through Alan’s own front yard toward the back of Alan’s own house.

Where was Mr. Holt going now?

Chapter Seven

Alan quickly ran to Brent's yard but didn't keep going to Brent's house. He doubled back along the route he normally took when traveling between their houses. He knew that he could keep out of sight that way.

If Mr. Holt was just passing through to keep out of sight of the neighbors returning from Ms. Sims's house, Alan might lose him, but an awkward feeling was growing inside him. Somehow he knew that Mr. Holt intended to check in on him that very night. He expected to see the older man staring through his very own bedroom window.

Alan was able to get pretty close to Mr. Holt without being seen. The older man was obviously stronger and in better shape than one might have expected. After carrying a rather heavy wooden chair

to the window, Mr. Holt had retrieved his leather briefcase from the ground where he had laid it and had climbed up into the chair where he could reach the window easily.

Alan almost laughed out loud when he remembered the scene that he had arranged in the room beyond that window. Suspecting that he and Brent might join up while his parents were out, he had carefully placed his life-like magician's dummy in his bed and pulled the covers up around it so that only its arms and head were visible.

The dummy had been purchased just a few months before and was used for illusions when heads, arms, or legs needed to be visible while the magician's assistant was secretly moving to a new location. Strings had been provided to allow the magician to remotely wiggle each arm or leg or even

shake the head from side to side. On this occasion, these strings were out of sight under the covers.

When Mr. Holt withdrew a smaller leather case from the brief case, Alan watched closely. After setting that case on the window ledge, Holt took another gadget from the briefcase and placed it against the lower right window pane. After just a few seconds, that gadget was returned to the briefcase, and the smaller case was opened. From that case, Mr. Holt must have removed something, but Alan couldn't see what it was. It must have been tiny.

Holt seemed to place that tiny object against the window where he had been working a few seconds before. Then the man looked at the open briefcase and seemed to be operating some controls. Perhaps there was a laptop computer in the briefcase.

Perhaps he had placed a tiny camera or recording device on the window. Alan waited.

During the next two minutes, Mr. Holt looked up a few times to see through the window, but he looked at his briefcase for the biggest part of the time. Apparently satisfied with his work, he reached up to take something from the spot on the window, placed it back in the smaller case, and then returned that case to the larger briefcase.

Although the voices of Alan's and Brent's parents could be heard just a few hundred feet away, Holt took the time to return the wooden chair to its spot on the patio. He then returned to pick up his briefcase before circling the rear of Alan's house toward his own house next door.

Alan didn't bother following Mr. Holt; he wanted to see what he would find at his own

bedroom window. Perhaps Holt had left some evidence around the window. There could no longer be any doubt that Mr. Holt was up to no good. There was no valid reason why a good neighbor would have been inside the Blakely house and snooping around the Murphy house on a night when the rest of the neighbors were concerned about Ms. Sims down the street. Had they been lured away?

“First things first,” he said to himself. He wanted to check for evidence immediately. If he found anything at all, he knew that he should be able to use his own camera from inside his bedroom to take a picture of whatever he found on the outside of the window. He intended to make a quick look around the area below his window before going inside the house while his parents were still outside.

The street light provided enough light for him to check out the area pretty well. He could see the marks in the grass where the heavy chair legs had been placed. When he looked up at the window pane, he could hardly believe what he saw. Hoping to see some residue of glue or some scratches on the glass, he was amazed to see that a tiny hole had been drilled through the glass. The hole couldn't have been bigger than a pencil lead.

"Or a needle," he said to himself. Suddenly, he was very concerned for his friend just two back yards away.

Chapter Eight

Lynette Roberts had been doing her homework at her kitchen table when the commotion started up the street. She went to the kitchen window and looked out but couldn't see anything from that vantage point. She had left her father at the corner market about an hour earlier, had finished putting up her father's supper dishes, and had worked twelve science problems related to changing temperatures between Fahrenheit to Celsius. She needed a break.

Quickly passing through the house, she came out the front door after switching on the front porch light. From there she could easily see the flashing ambulance lights at the Sims house, and her concern for her father vanished.

Feeling a little guilty that she had felt relief that Ms. Sims might be in some kind of distress, she forced

herself to feel badly for her elderly neighbor. Having transferred her own guilt to a more positive emotion, she decided to check on Ms. Sims. Perhaps by actually doing something good, she could completely erase the memory of how self-centered she had been a few seconds before.

Lynette didn't like to feel badly, especially about herself. She worked extremely hard for the little praise she received from her father. Her teachers were quite different. Very rarely did a student like Lynette come along; her teachers were quick to praise her, and she basked in their praise--she craved it.

Although her father might later criticize her for leaving the house, she decided that she could explain that several sets of parents were at the Sims house. Effectively she was chaperoned. Regardless, she had gone too far to turn back; it was too important for her

to hear someone say, “That Lynette is the most caring person.”

She could almost hear those words being spoken as she walked down the sidewalk. As she passed the market, she looked inside and noticed that her father was on the phone with a customer. She hadn’t expected him to close the store, even for a few minutes, to see what was happening in the neighborhood. Ambulance lights were flashing. Didn’t he care?

Reaching the front steps to Ms. Sims front porch, Lynette joined the Murphy’s who were arriving a little later than the others. She looked beyond them and noticed their son Alan climbing the tree further up the street. Realizing that the parents were probably unaware of their son’s whereabouts,

Lynette smiled to herself. She kept the secret and followed the Murphy's up the steps.

Inside the living room on the antique sofa, Ms. Sims was lying back with a wet cloth across her forehead. Eleanor Blakely was holding the rag, but Lynette moved right in.

"Let me hold that for you, Mrs. Blakely," she said as she knelt by the couch and placed her hand on the cloth. "How are you feeling now, Ms. Sims; your color certainly looks good." She smiled at Mrs. Blakely.

Eleanor Blakely was taken aback, but realized that it really didn't matter who held the cloth on Ms. Sims's forehead. She managed to return Lynette's smile and awkwardly stood up without bumping the arm of the teenaged girl. When she saw her husband talking to the Murphy's on the other side of the living

room, she joined them as he finished getting them up to speed on the situation.

Ms. Sims took advantage of being left with only a child attending her. While the adults were looking elsewhere, she quickly grabbed the wet cloth from Lynette and got to her feet. Approaching the two paramedics who had also been conferring together, she announced that she now felt perfectly fine.

A minor uproar followed.

Ms. Sims was clearly going to win this battle. She was being rather firm about her drastically improved condition and came just short of throwing them all out of the house. Lynette suspected that the only one who would be remaining in this house to provide the praise she so desired would be Ms. Sims.

While Ms. Sims was ushering the paramedics out onto the front porch with the other neighbors following close behind, Lynette headed back toward the kitchen to see if there might be some obvious cleaning she could do for Ms. Sims. Although she wouldn't have admitted it to herself, Lynette really didn't want to do much—just enough to be noticed for her efforts and good intentions. With Ms. Sims's words of praise ringing in her ears (and perhaps a piece of apple sauce cake in her hands) she would be glad to leave for home.

That shouldn't take more than a few minutes. She'd easily be back at home before her father closed the store for the night.

Chapter Nine

As Alan approached his friend's house, he realized that he had no way to get inside if the doors were locked. He could simply ring the doorbell, but that would only work if Brent were able to come to the door and open it. In that case, he would most likely be alright, and Alan had nothing to worry about.

On the other hand, if Mr. Holt had used a needle to somehow drug Brent, Alan would need to get up to Brent's bedroom or wherever he might be. If he waited for the Blakely's to leave his own parents, he would have to explain what he was doing out so late, and they might not let him go up to Brent's room this late without some kind of explanation. His own parents might get involved and order him to return home with them.

Unexpectedly, a solution popped into Alan's mind. Alan chuckled to himself as he realized that the tale he was going to share with the two sets of parents was actually the truth—well close enough considering the circumstances. They might not believe him, but he wouldn't be telling a lie. He was confident that the scheme he had just hatched would get him into Alan's room without either set of parents being aware that was what he really wanted to happen.

"Mr. Blakely, Mrs. Blakely," he shouted as he approached the four adults. "I just saw a suspicious-looking man leaving your house. I think he's been inside although I can't be positive about that. Is Brent in the house?"

As adults always do, they countered Alan's concern with logical reasons why he was most likely

mistaken. However, Alan kept insisting that he saw someone, and his own mother and father could tell that he was rather upset that they didn't seem to believe him.

"Could we just check out his story, guys?"

Alan's mother insisted. "After all, you are planning on going back inside aren't you, Justin? Len and I don't mind tagging along. It won't take five minutes."

Since Joyce Murphy's argument made too much sense even for adults to argue with, the two men simply shook their heads knowingly and headed for the Blakely's front door.

"Thank you, Mom," Alan whispered in his mother's ear as he gave her a big hug. Eleanor Blakely, starting to consider her own son's safety, was close behind them. The two men had to increase their

pace to reach the house before she did. Alan held his own mother's wrist and was almost pulling her along. Finally he let her go when Justin Blakely unlocked the front door.

Once inside the front door, Eleanor began calling her son's name, but received no answer. The father was not yet concerned, but Alan didn't wait for an invitation. "I'll go check Brent's room," he shouted as he dashed up the stairs.

"Wait, son," his father called after him. Finally beginning to realize that there might have been an intruder in the house, Len Murphy didn't act quickly enough to stop his son. He was left to follow the boy up the stairs with Brent's father close behind. Mrs. Blakely stayed at the foot of the stairs wringing her hands. Joyce Murphy placed her arm around Eleanor's shoulders and spoke softly.

“Everything is going to be just fine. Alan said he saw someone leaving. They probably didn’t get inside. The door was locked. You saw that.”

During the two or three seconds it took him to race up the stairs and into Brent’s room, Alan had concluded that his friend would not be “just fine.” He couldn’t think of any reason for Brent not answering his mother’s calls unless he had been tied up and gagged – or worse.

Flipping on the bedroom light from the switch by the door, he was relieved to see Brent lying in his bed with his mouth clearly free of any gag that might have prevented him from responding. Perhaps he was just deep in sleep and hadn’t heard his mother call.

When Alan reached the bedside, he heard Brent saying something and noticed that his friend

was perspiring heavily. Like his own mother would have done, he placed his own hand on Brent's forehead. Then he realized what his friend was saying.

"Fever, fever, fever."

Alan let himself be scooted aside as Mr. Blakely squeezed beside his son and tried to talk to the boy in the bed. Brent's response changed occasionally, but Alan noticed that he never said more than the last few words that he had just heard spoken to him. When his father asked, "Do you feel bad?" – Brent started saying "feel bad" over and over.

Mr. Blakely turned to Alan and asked if Brent had been feeling ill earlier that evening. Alan told him that Brent had been fine when they were together. When his father responded, "Well, he's not

fine now," Brent began to say "fine now" over and over.

"Let's go get his mother, son," Len Murphy suggested. Alan could tell that it was more than a suggestion. He hated to leave his friend in such a state, but he thought that he had seen enough. He didn't know what to do for his friend, but he thought there might just be one thing he could do that might help his friend out.

Figuring out a logical sentence that ended with the word "bathroom" was not that easy, but he accomplished the desired effect. Brent's father was helping his son down the hall toward the bathroom as the two Murphy men descended the stairs.

Alan spoke to Brent's mother when they reached the bottom of the stairs. "Brent's sick, Mrs. Blakely,"

As she dashed up the stairs, Len Murphy filled his wife in on Brent's condition as he saw it. No one seemed to remember that Alan had said he'd seen someone leaving the house.

As Alan would later realize, adults can only handle one emergency at a time. Unfortunately, he was soon to find out that multiple emergencies must be handled by eleven-year old boys.

"Controlled panic," his grandfather Aldus had always said. "That's the best way to deal with a number of things at one time. Just clear you mind and react as fast as you can." Alan had thought his grandfather had just been kidding. It wouldn't be long before Alan would have to give his grandfather's strategy a try – not that long at all.

Chapter Ten

“Controlled panic” was not a phrase that Lynette Roberts had ever heard in her thirteen years on this earth. It was, however, a feeling that developed as she stood in Ms. Sims’ kitchen and finished folding the same three dish towels for the thirteenth time.

Getting rid of her neighbors had not taken Ms. Sims very long, but the paramedics had presented her with a bill which she seemed reluctant to accept. Lynette heard her telling them that she had been okay and that she had not called 9-1-1. The paramedics had insisted that someone had called them.

Finally, Ms. Sims must have taken the bill. Lynette heard the front door being locked and picked up the last of the three dish towels and headed for the living room to greet Ms. Sims. She could already hear

Ms. Sims saying, “Why, Lynette, you shouldn’t have done that. You’re such a considerate young lady.”

Lynette never heard those words. Instead, she heard Ms. Sims talking into her cell phone with a very agitated tone to her voice. Although Lynette didn’t hear every word that was spoken, she did hear something about Alan Murphy being outside in a tree while Brent Blakely was being drugged. Shocked by what she was hearing, Lynette rushed back into the kitchen before Ms. Sims turned her way. The next few words spoken by Ms. Sims could be heard by Lynette as she was leaving the kitchen headed for the garage.

“Remember that you promised not to harm the children, Edward. I expect you to keep that promise. Good bye.”

Lynette had already entered the 'controlled panic' mode when she stepped back into the kitchen. She knew that Edward was Mr. Holt. She knew that Alan and Brent had been asking about Mr. Holt earlier that day. It had become crystal clear to her that the two boys had jumped into dangerous waters way over their heads, and she suspected that she might be in pretty deep water herself since Ms. Sims was obviously involved as well.

She adopted Grandpa Aldus Murphy's advice without ever having heard him speak. After reacting to the situation by slipping out the back door into the garage as quietly and quickly as possible, she turned on the garage light only long enough to get her bearings. With the layout of the garage burned into her short term memory, she hurried out of the garage.

The only sounds she had heard were the cats Ms. Sims kept in her garage. "Sorry kittens," she apologized as she slipped out the side door of the garage still clutching the dish towel. Seeing a trash can near the door, she placed the towel on top of it and kept going without looking back until she was safe on her own front porch.

Once there, she thought about Brent and Alan. Lynette had seen Alan Murphy climbing into the tree earlier that evening, but she didn't know why that had concerned Ms. Sims and Mr. Holt. However, the remark about the Blakely kid being drugged was the most troubling to her.

"What can I do?" she asked herself. Again, she had to deal with a growing sense of guilt. Finally, she called the Blakely's and asked about Brent.

“He’s pretty sick, Lynette,” answered his mother. “It’s nice of you to call.” She continued, “Did you notice that he was ill earlier today.”

“He just wasn’t himself,” Lynette fibbed. Telling herself that she really wasn’t lying, she added, “I hope it’s not contagious, Mrs. Blakely. Do you think he might have caught something from Ms. Sims?”

“Oh, I don’t think so,” Eleanor Blakely began, but then realized that she was dismissing what Lynette was saying without really thinking it through. “Could be, I guess. I think I’ll call Ms. Sims and see if she’s had a relapse. Right now, Brent is a whole lot sicker than Ms. Sims was. I thought perhaps Ms. Sims was having a heart attack or something like that, but she seemed fine when we left.”

Lynette wished Brent a speedy recovery and hung up the phone just as her father was unlocking their front door. “Never seen so much excitement,” Marty Roberts remarked as he noticed his daughter standing by the phone.

“You’ll never know,” Lynette thought to herself. At least she hoped she never had to tell her father all that had happened that day. Had she realized that Ms. Sims was standing beside the trash can at that moment glancing back and forth between the dish towel in her hand and Lynette’s house, she would have blurted out everything that she knew to her father. As it was, she was unknowingly following Alan’s Grandpa’s ‘controlled panic’ strategy for dealing with multiple emergencies.

Unlike Alan, and even Brent in his confused state, Lynette didn’t have a clue about the

emergencies that she would soon be facing. Brent knew but couldn't even react. Alan had reacted pretty well so far, but night would bring inaction and time for thinking. "Most people think too much," his grandfather had said.

That night, Alan couldn't sleep and couldn't stop thinking throughout the night. "Luckily," according to his grandfather, "situations change quickly and sometimes the well-thought-out plan has to be abandoned." The plan and backup plan and backup to the backup plan that Alan had developed during the night lasted only until noon the next day. Then, when he received a telephone call from Lynette Roberts, Alan joined Lynette to use controlled panic as it had not been used since Jack fell from the beanstalk and hurriedly grabbed the axe.

Chapter Eleven

Alan's initial plan had been to pretend to be just as sick as Brent had been the night before. His plan wasn't that illogical. He had correctly presumed that the hole in his bedroom window had been intended for some kind of miniature dart which most likely carried the same drug that had been used to put his friend Brent in such a dazed, feverish state. Fever was hard to imitate, but he had done the best he could.

After soaking his tee shirt in the shower for a few seconds, he staggered into the hall and called to his mother. "I don't feel good, Mom," he said. He wisely left it up to his mother to decide that he had "caught" what Brent had. One thing he knew for sure – he would rather be faking what Brent had than actually experiencing it.

Fooling his mother under the circumstances was not that difficult. Dealing with Mr. Holt would be much harder. He still didn't have any idea what Mr. Holt was planning to do or how Brent was involved. Then he remembered the cassette. Had there been something important recorded on the cassette? That must have been the reason Brent had been drugged!

Alan's well-thought-out plan involved monitoring Mr. Holt's activities very closely to see exactly what that special old gentleman was plotting. He hoped that Mr. Holt's guard would be down since he should be thinking that both Brent and Alan were out of commission.

Alan's plan also involved him redirecting the video recorder that Brent had taken to his room the evening before. By nine o'clock, Alan had slipped out

of his back door and was heading out to monitor Mr. Holt's house when he noticed a taxi pull up in front of that same house. Alan stayed out of sight to watch.

Carrying the same leather brief case from the night before, Mr. Holt paid the taxi driver and headed toward the front door of his house. Alan doubted that he had given the driver much of a tip based on the way the taxi took off before Mr. Holt had taken his hand off the passenger side door handle. Holt made a kicking motion at the car and yelled something at the driver.

Alan was prepared to return to his house as soon as Holt made it inside. One thing he knew for sure: Mr. Holt would not get a chance to be alone again with Brent. If Brent required a booster shot to keep him in that confused state, he wouldn't be getting that shot if Alan had anything to do with it.

Seeming to think of something he needed from the store, Holt abruptly headed down the street toward the little market. Alan checked his watch and realized that his mother would be home soon. He headed home to get back in bed before his mother returned from work for her lunch time check on her sick son.

After slipping on his wet tee shirt and slipping under the covers, he pretended to be asleep. When his mother came in the room to attend to him, Alan gulped down the hot soup and smiled at the kind words that his mother provided. Under other circumstances, he might have enjoyed pretending to be sick. He didn't have time for that today. He, too, had a sick friend, and that friend needed his help.

His mother had already returned to work when the phone rang. He started not to answer it, but

realized that it just might be Brent. Perhaps his friend had recovered enough to call and explain what was happening. He might not yet be strong enough to come over, but he might be able to talk on the phone.

The caller was Lynette and she had something important to tell him. Even Alan with his over active imagination could not quite believe that what she was telling him was actually the truth. He had to believe her though for it provided an explanation for the tiny hole in the window pane of his bedroom.

Chapter Twelve

“They’ve infected your whole fifth grade science class using a robot mosquito.” Lynette was firmly into the controlled panic mode. “They’re all going to be sick like Brent.”

Catching her breath, she added a question which must have just entered her mind. “How did you know to stay home today?”

“I’ll tell you later, Lynette. It’s a long story.” Alan wondered why his fifth grade science class had become targets. He understood why he and Brent were involved; they had taken the video, and Mr. Holt must have spotted it with his night-vision glasses.

Lynette voiced the same question. “Why would they infect that many students? What do they have to do with what you and Brent have been up to

lately? What has this got to do with Ms. Sims and Mr. Holt?"

"I'll tell you later," Alan repeated. "When I figure it out myself," he said to himself. To Lynette he added, "Keep your eyes open. He may have seen you talking to us."

Lynette's next question was one that Alan really hadn't thought about although he should have. "When are we going to the police or to one of our parents about this? This is way too serious for us to handle by ourselves."

Alan still hoped to earn a cash reward. Going to the police now might get them a pat on the back or even a plaque from the mayor, but they wouldn't get any reward money. He didn't share those thoughts with Lynette. Instead, he reminded her of a real obstacle.

“We don’t have any evidence, Lynette. They wouldn’t believe either of us. Do you have one of the little mosquitoes to show them?”

Lynette was quiet for a minute. She was obviously thinking about what she should do. Alan was thinking that she wouldn’t tell her father what she had seen without someone else to back her up. Nobody was going to believe such a story. It was unbelievable. What were they going to do?

“What are we going to do?” asked Lynette.

“Controlled panic mode,” Alan responded.

“What?”

Alan quickly explained. “We’ve just got to react to what is happening. Things will be happening too quickly to develop a plan – we just have to react.”

Lynette answered, but Alan had already hung up and dashed toward his own front door. Lynette’s

“You’re crazy!” may have been the truest words she had ever spoken, but they were not heard by Alan Murphy.

Chapter Thirteen

Alan had suddenly put everything together.

Holt didn't want Brent's illness to be unexplained; he wanted to keep the Blakely's from taking Brent to the hospital for more extensive testing. By increasing the sick folk population, Holt would be able to take advantage of the situation. Most likely he was on the phone right now impersonating one of the local doctors with a false report to the school nurse.

Nurse Brackett would then check each student's files, call the parents listed in those files for each student, and tell them what "Brent's doctor" had told her about the disease that was just about to 'break out.' That had to be it.

Alan stopped at his own front door. He had suddenly thought about Brent's parents? Who would be telling them that Brent's illness was not too

serious — that he only needed to rest at home and drink plenty of fluids? There would be no reason for Brent's doctor to be calling until the Blakely's actually became concerned enough to take him to see the doctor.

Alan knew that Brent's mother would be home with him; she didn't have a job like Alan's mother. He knew that if he showed up at her house, she would wonder why he wasn't in school. He might just have to confide in Eleanor Blakely. Besides, Alan really didn't know that Brent was not in danger from the drugs Holt had given him. Brent's mother might want to take her son to the emergency room, but that would probably be for the best. Alan headed out the door.

After crossing their adjoining back yards, Alan circled the Blakely house and rang the front door bell.

He was ready for Brent's mother to answer the door so that he could get this whole affair off of his chest. He really hadn't felt good about keeping this between Lynette and himself, but he knew that he had been right. Nobody would have believed them.

However, Eleanor Blakely would certainly act on the safe side when it came to her son. She'd take Brent to the emergency room to have him checked out whether or not she really believed Alan or not. He rang the door bell again. Surely they hadn't left Brent in the house alone with nobody to look after him.

To his surprise, Mr. Holt opened the door and quickly pulled him inside.

Chapter Fourteen

Lynette had stayed in the school office during lunch to make the phone call to Alan. She hadn't wanted to be overheard or to be asked to explain why she was making a personal call on the school's telephone line. After seeing what she had seen in the school library that morning, she had lost her appetite.

Morley Middle School Library had several programs intended to reach out to the community. Preschoolers and older adults were two groups that were given limited access to the library facilities. Lynette hadn't noticed her neighbor, Mr. Holt, enter the community access section of the library that morning, but she had become aware of his presence while sitting in the student section preparing a book report.

The sections of the library were separated by partitions which allowed someone to look between the sections if they placed one of their eyes right up against the narrow openings between the partitions. Of course, there wouldn't have been any reason for Lynette to be curious about another section of the library unless something strange had happened to arouse her suspicion.

Lynette had seen flashes of magenta and aqua out of the corner of her eye as she sat at the library table. Having spent many hours working with the student files on the school computer system, she was very aware that those were the background colors for those files.

In fact, she had been the one to change the background colors to magenta and aqua. Due to security concerns, changing the background colors

was the only option left to ‘personalize’ that particular program. Being a typical 13-year old, Lynette had taken advantage of that option and made the background colors as exotic as possible. The school secretary, Mrs. Hicks, had complained but had not yet been able to change the background colors back to the more standard black on white that adults seemed to prefer.

As Lynette looked more directly at the opening between the partitions, she could clearly see that particular color combination coming from the other side. As she pressed her face closer to the opening, she audibly gasped when she saw a man on the other side accessing the school’s student files on a laptop computer screen.

Realizing that the man might have heard her, Lynette quickly backed away from the opening so

that she was hidden by the partition. She made a point of noisily leaving the area so that she wouldn't arouse further suspicion. After waiting at least a full minute, she crept back into position to check out what was happening on the other side.

By that time, the man had shifted positions slightly although he still had the student file program visible on his computer screen. She almost gasped again when she saw him taking something between his thumb and forefinger and placing it on the library table top. This time she was able to stop herself – she wanted desperately to see what was happening because she now recognized that the man was the neighbor that lived in the three-story house up the street from the corner market.

Being so close to the table, although on the other side of the partition, Lynette could clearly see

that the tiny object Mr. Holt had placed on the table resembled an insect. It looked more like a mosquito than anything else, and to her surprise, it lifted off the table top and headed out of the cubicle where Mr. Holt was sitting.

Mr. Holt punched some computer keys and the screen split into two images. On the student file side of the screen, five of the student's photographs were displayed. On the other side, a view of the hallway outside the library was displayed. The right side of the screen was being updated about once per second as a camera moved down the hallway.

Lynette recognized the science lab doorway when it appeared on the screen and became extremely concerned when the inside of the science lab and the students in the classroom appeared. For

some reason they didn't seem to notice that a man with a camera had entered the lab.

Suddenly, Lynette understood. The tiny mosquito had been some kind of robot. Mr. Holt was guiding it through the school using the keypad or the mouse on his laptop computer. "But why?" she wondered.

As she continued watching, Lynette learned more. Mr. Holt guided the robot mosquito so that it circled one of the students toward the back of the classroom. Somehow Holt made the camera zoom in on the face of Charlie Weedemeyer. Next, he scrolled through the pictures on the left side of the computer screen to find Charlie's face from the student file. He had a match.

As Lynette watched in horror, the bug-side of the screen zoomed in on Charlie's neck. After just a

second at that position, Mr. Holt quickly zoomed out as Charlie's hand smacked on the very spot where the camera had zoomed in. Lynette realized that the camera hadn't been zooming; the mosquito had been landing. She feared that Mr. Holt had been injecting something into Charlie's neck using another of the mosquito's special tools.

Should she go to the librarian? Mrs. Connors would be no help. Lynette would end up being mocked and sent to the office. She thought about trying to push the partition over. She looked around for some of the football players, but she was the only student in the library.

She quickly checked through the partition opening and verified that Mr. Holt was landing the mosquito on each student in the lab. She again looked at the pictures on the other half of the screen

and noticed that two student pictures had been dragged to the top of the screen – separate from the others. She was hardly surprised to see that those two student photographs were of two other neighbors, Alan and Brent.

Walking quickly back to the office, she tried to think of what she should do. Who would believe her? She knew that no one would. By lunchtime, only two or three of the science class students had become ill enough to be sent home. Others were undoubtedly in the school infirmary, and still others might not yet be showing the effects of the drug Mr. Holt had used. She still didn't know what to do, but she knew that neither Alan nor Brent had come to school that day. She had seen their names on the list of absentees.

After calling Brent's home phone and getting no answer, she had called and told Alan Murphy

what she had observed. His sudden hang-up had not allowed her to find out how much he knew about Mr. Holt. She knew that the boys knew something or they wouldn't have been asking questions yesterday. Alan seemed to be healthy; maybe the drug wasn't even dangerous. She went on to her fourth-period class to turn in her book report three days earlier than required.

Chapter Fifteen

Inside the Blakely's front door, and still in the surprising strong grasp of Mr. Holt, Alan Murphy remembered how easily the older man had moved the heavy wooden chair the day before. He tried to pull free but wasn't too surprised when Holt just gripped him more tightly and smiled.

"You are a surprising young man, Mr. Murphy – very surprising indeed. Do you know what makes you so remarkable?"

Someone else might have refused to answer Mr. Holt. Not wanting to give away any information, a more cautious person might have been silent. Alan just didn't have that in his nature. He tried to bluff Mr. Holt.

"Of course, I know what makes me special, Mr. Holt. I'm not really an eleven-year old boy; I'm an

agent for the police department, and I've been assigned to this case since the beginning."

The older man chuckled although he didn't loosen his grip on his captive. "Well, is that so? That certainly explains a lot of what has been happening, doesn't it? There's only one thing that it doesn't explain."

He stopped talking and waited for Alan to take the bait. Alan couldn't resist. "And what is that one thing, Mr. Holt — as if I don't already know?"

"You probably do, young man, but I'll tell you anyway. What I can't figure out is how you were immune to the drug that my little buddy injected into your arm last night. We've tested that drug on over one thousand subject, and not a single one has been immune to its effects."

Alan beamed despite the seriousness of the situation. "Nobody?" he asked.

"You're the only one. Why do you think that is?"

Alan thought about the life-like dummy that still lay in his bed under the covers. Magicians never revealed their secrets, and he wasn't about to reveal this one. Looking Holt directly in the eye, he answered, "I guess I'm just the one in a thousand."

"Perhaps you are, Alan; perhaps you are."

Holt slipped one end of a set of handcuffs around Alan's left wrist and forced him over to the heavy kitchen table. Pushing him down to a sitting position, he wrapped the chain of the handcuffs around the table leg and then clamped the other handcuff around the chain. Alan wouldn't be able to move away from the table unless he could lift the table to free himself.

Holt sat down on the edge of the table to make sure that didn't happen.

Holt opened his leather briefcase and showed Alan that it contained two syringes in addition to the tiny leather case he had seen before. "One of these will be used to get a sample of your blood for the guys in our lab. They'll be able to figure out why you were able to resist K345."

Alan didn't like needles. "And what is the other needle for?"

"We have other drugs than K435, my boy. This syringe is filled with K888. In most subjects, it causes a complete loss of short term memory. That should do just fine in your case. We would have preferred to have you appear to be sick like your buddy Brent, but that won't be absolutely necessary. As long as you

don't remember anything at all about what has occurred in the last twenty-four hours, we'll be fine."

Alan tried to bluff again. "Oh, I know much more than that, Mr. Holt. Didn't you believe me when I told you I'd been working on this case for a long time? I'm not a school boy – I'm an agent."

Holt laughed, but it wasn't a happy laugh. "You've certainly caused us a lot of trouble, but you definitely are just a boy. Do you think a real agent would have been as afraid as you were when you first saw those needles?"

Alan's expression changed when he realized how obvious he had been. He didn't argue; he just held up his bare right arm to the man with the needle.

"It's too late now, but thanks for cooperating, young man."

A half-hour later, Alan was freely roaming the neighborhood. Holt had released him as soon as he had verified that K888 did indeed have the desired effect on this young neighbor. By the time Mrs. Blakely returned from her shopping trip, Mr. Holt had made the necessary hardware changes in Brent's personal computer and re-connected it so that it looked like it was connected to the local cable company.

To the contrary, it was now connected to a high-speed fiber modem which could 'talk' to a similar device that Ms. Sims had installed in her boss's computer room three blocks away. Taking care of the boys had required some extra effort on his part, but Holt was convinced that the turn of events had worked to their advantage. They now had computer access that would never be traceable to the three-story

house down the street. Once they finished this highly secretive assignment, Holt could administer K888 to the Blakely kid, and he and Ms. Sims could continue undercover operations at this location for years to come.

Chapter Sixteen

Ms. Sims had been concerned about Lynette Roberts ever since she realized the girl may have overheard her phone conversation with Edward Holt the day before. Charlotte Sims had not mentioned Lynette's eavesdropping to Edward or to anyone else because she really didn't believe the girl could have heard anything important. She had replayed the phone conversation in her head and knew that she had mentioned the drug and the Murphy kid being outside, but that could have meant anything, especially since the Roberts girl could not possibly have an inkling of what her message to Edward had really been about.

She had made it clear since the day she was hired by The Blackstone Group that she would never participate in any scheme which could result in injury

to another person. She had been assured that The Blackstone Group would never permit that to happen.

Although their secret operations might actually violate some obscure financial regulations, The Group had assured her that they were not criminals and could never be involved in any kind of criminal activity. Charlotte had been satisfied at the time.

During the preceding three years, Charlotte Sims had moved into her current residence and secured a part time job as a housekeeper for Roger Dickens, a brilliant computer analyst for Global Digital Data Systems. When she jokingly asked Dickens what a computer analyst did, he had replied that he made computers do what he wanted them to do.

Of course she had already known all about Roger Dickens's skill with computers. Her other

employers were paying her quite well to be a part-time housekeeper for Roger Dickens. Due to his brilliance, he was allowed to work from home when he wished. After all, the Dickens Anti-Spy Software Version 5.1 was state-of-the-art and Dickens had Version 7.2 on his personal computer system. Everyone at Global Digital Data Systems thought Dickens was still developing Version 6.1. Because of the secrecy, Dickens was convinced that it would be impossible for any hacker to break into the code that only existed on the computer in his home office. That is, of course, unless the hacker's partner was the lady who cleaned up that office, who dusted the computer diskettes that were sometimes scattered across that disk, and sometimes even picked up a diskette by sticking it to the underside of her dusting cloth where

two-sided tape had been applied for just that purpose.

Charlotte Sims didn't steal the diskettes; she only copied the data from them before returning them to the same desk where that had been laying when she 'borrowed' them. She had passed the new diskettes with the copied data to Edward Holt during a seemingly chance meeting at the corner market.

Although deep down she knew that she was taking something that didn't belong to her and giving it her accomplice, she stuck to the illusion that she really wasn't stealing anything. After all, the data on the diskettes could not actually be seen. How could it really be considered stolen property?

She convinced herself again that she had been right not to tell Edward Holt about the Roberts girl, especially now that he had actually used K345 on

some ten or eleven year old boys. Charlotte hadn't liked Plan B when it was explained as a remote possibility in the unlikely event that someone became suspicious of their activities. She liked it even less when Edward decided that two boys shooting a video from a tree in the neighborhood meant that Plan B had to go in effect. Now she would do all she could to keep Lynette Roberts unharmed.

Chapter Seventeen

Alan Murphy's name had been on the 'Absentee List' at Morley Middle School, and he had been at home when Lynette had called at noon. Now as she walked home after school, she was surprised when she saw Alan climbing up into the big tree that served as a clubhouse for him and his buddy Brent.

She had assumed that Alan had the same illness that the other boys in their science class had. Had she known when she called that the illness made its victims unable to talk intelligently, she would have realized that Alan wasn't sick like the others.

Since she was wearing jeans, she climbed up in the tree to get the answers that she had wanted earlier after Alan hung up on her. He looked very surprised to see her.

"What are you doing up here?"

Lynette didn't answer Alan but continued with their earlier conversation. "What did you find out?"

"Find out about what? Really, what are you doing up here?"

Lynette reminded him about her earlier phone call. When Alan acted as if she hadn't called him, she reminded him about Mr. Holt and the tiny robot mosquitoes. Alan laughed so much that Lynette actually wondered if she might have gotten the wrong number at lunch time.

While she was mentally rehashing both sides of that phone call and convincing herself that Alan had to have been the one she had talked to, he slipped past her and jumped out of the tree. She could hear him laughing as he headed back up the street.

Now Lynette was mad. She would have expected such a reaction from an adult, but there was

no way she expected Alan to doubt that she was telling the truth. He had sure acted like he believed her earlier that day. Something must have happened to change him. Maybe Holt had threatened him, and he was just pretending that he didn't believe her. Perhaps she should act the same way herself. After all, she didn't want that little mosquito robot landing on her neck. Her hand automatically went to her neck — she could almost feel something there. Looking around she realized that she was imagining it. Holt was no where to be seen.

She could see the market easily from the tree. As she watched the front of the store, she saw Ms. Sims walking toward the market. Thinking about her father inside the store, she realized she needed to prepare supper for her him. At five o'clock he would be expecting her to relieve him behind the counter so

that he could eat his meal at home. After that she would be expected to do her homework and clean up her father's dishes while he finished up at the store. Then they would watch television together until time for the news.

That's exactly what she did. That evening proceeded just the same as every other evening in their neighborhood – every evening that is except for the one the day before. No ambulance came to Ms. Sims house this night; no secret nods were passed between secret agents; no eleven year old boys were injected with K345.

At the Blakely household, Eleanor's only son was neither better nor worse than he had been the day before. Although the other children infected by K345 would show marked improvement by the following day, Brent would not. He had been given a

booster shot by Edward Holt earlier that day while Holt was “taking care of him.”

In the Murphy household, Alan’s mother and father were relieved that their son no longer showed any of the symptoms from the contagious disease that had so far only affected the fifth grade science class at Morley Middle School. His short term amnesia was viewed as a minor side effect from the disease. Holt, as Brent’s alleged doctor, had described the disease shared by those in the science class as Parmley’s Palsy, a very rare disease that could not even be found using the best search engines on the Internet.

In the three-story house where Edward Holt had lived for the past two and a half years, Edwin Holtzman was eating a TV dinner. For one of the few times in the last thirty months, Holtzman’s face was free from the aging makeup that he wore when he left

the house. He would apply that makeup early the next morning after a very good night's sleep.

At the Dickens household, a computer expert would be planning to access the highly secure computer system that he had designed for Global Digital Data. The task would be performed the next evening at a time only he knew about for security reasons, but he doubted that a real threat existed. His anti-spy software had secondary backup routines to backup the primary backup routines. Other hidden routines provided additional backup protection. Because he was confident that hackers would never break his computer codes, Dickens would also sleep well that night.

Chapter Eighteen

When Alan Murphy awoke the next morning, he did not remember that he had missed school the day before. The K888 drug's active ingredients continued to wipe out his memory of recent events. As a result, he went by Brent's house, expecting to walk to school with his best friend.

Entering Eleanor Blakely's kitchen as he did most mornings, Alan sat down at the table, asked if it would be okay for him to take the last piece of toast, and gulped down the glass of milk that Brent's mother placed beside him on the table.

When it became apparent that Alan had no idea that Brent was sick, Eleanor Blakely was stunned. However, she was not nearly as shocked as Alan was when she told him that he had visited his sick friend the night before.

Up the stairs Alan went to see Brent.

Brent was lying on his bed with his eyes wide open saying the last words that he had heard the night before – over and over. Alan walked over to the side of the bed and looked down at his friend.

“Why are you saying ‘good night’? Look out the window. It’s morning now; you can see the sun shining.”

“Sun shining,” Brent repeated several times.

“Boy,” Alan said more to himself than to Brent or his mother who had just entered the room. “You really are sick.”

“Yes, Alan, he’s really sick. I thought you were, too, but I’m wondering now if you two had the same thing. Maybe I’d better take Brent to see his doctor. Maybe I shouldn’t have listened to the school

nurse; maybe Brent has something quite a bit more serious.”

Both Alan and Mrs. Blakely turned at the sound of another voice in the room. Lynette Roberts was speaking. “I hope it was alright for me to come up. I wanted to check on Brent; I can’t believe that he and Alan have been affected so differently.” To Alan she added, “Do you still not remember what I told you on the phone yesterday?” Alan didn’t have a clue, and his blank expression gave that away.

She looked at Mrs. Blakely and came to the same conclusion that Alan had on the previous day. Eleanor Blakely was probably the one adult that might believe her story about what had happened at the school library.

Even if Eleanor Blakely didn’t believe Lynette’s eye-witness account, the concerned mother wouldn’t

allow herself to take the chance that the girl might be telling the truth. Having been considered an air head for most of her life, Mrs. Blakely no longer had confidence in her own judgment. She would do something even if logic told her that nothing special was happening.

During the night when Lynette had trouble sleeping, she had decided to tell a limited version of what Mr. Holt had been doing if she encountered an adult who would listen. That limited version was the one she provided to Brent's mother.

"You need to keep Mr. Holt away from Brent, Mrs. Blakely. I'm certain that he has given Brent some kind of drug that has caused him to be sick."

Both Mrs. Blakely and Alan responded almost simultaneously. "But why would he do that?"

“You know why, Alan; at least I think you did yesterday. I believe that he has drugged you as well.”

“What?” Alan blurted out. “You’re crazy. I haven’t been around Mr. Holt.”

Eleanor Blakely actually caught on rather quickly. “No, Alan, you just don’t remember that he drugged you. Either the drug is affecting you differently, or he has used a different drug on you.”

“Right, Mrs. Blakely,” Lynette added, quickly feeling so relieved that someone was finally believing her. Then she explained her dilemma. “But I don’t have any idea why he’s drugging them.”

“Drugging them,” Brent repeated. They had almost forgotten that he was listening to them.

Alan looked at his friend and remarked, “He knows more than any of us about what Mr. Holt is up

to. If only he could tell us, we might be able to figure out what to do to stop him.”

Again Mrs. Blakely surprised them by suggesting they could use Brent’s video recorder. Lynette didn’t quite understand at first, but she did when Mrs. Blakely explained more fully. By that time, Alan had forgotten the conversation from just a few minutes before.

Lynette was excited. “We’ll catch him doing something on the video or hear him saying something to someone on the phone. I just know we will.”

They agreed to wait until later in the day to set up the video recorder. Holt might have seen Lynette and Alan enter the house, and he would expect to see them leave.

Leaving Brent behind, they headed down the stairs. Had Alan’s mind been as sharp as usual, he

would have left Brent with an appropriate parting phrase. As it was, Brent kept saying “know we will” over and over until they returned about an hour later.

Chapter Nineteen

Satisfied that he again looked the part of a seventy year old man, Edwin Holtzman walked through his own front door to monitor the neighborhood. If he spotted anything abnormal during the next eight hours, he was obligated to call off the project. It could be rescheduled for a later date, but Holtzman definitely wanted to “make it happen” later today if at all possible.

As Edward Holt, the man leaving the three-story house at 411 Hickory Avenue faced another boring day. Unless he chose to visit the senior citizen center or the library, he typically spent the morning sitting on a bench at the playground watching the birds and the squirrels.

On this particular day, Holtzman carried a bag of nuts for the squirrels and a partially used loaf of

bread which would provide bread crumbs for the birds. He really had no interest at all in the animals. His primary interest was to verify that the only abnormal happenings in the neighborhood were those that his special project had caused.

If Brent Blakely had recovered from his illness or if Alan Murphy suddenly seemed to remember a little too much, the elderly Mr. Holt would take the necessary actions. Otherwise, he would feed the birds and the squirrels and wait until evening.

His heart and his mind were racing, but he looked like he didn't have a care in the world. When he sat down on the bench and began tearing up the first slice of bread, he was a little surprised to see the Roberts girl and the Murphy boy coming out of the Blakely house.

Eleanor Blakely followed them outside, thanking them rather loudly for checking on Brent. She even waved at him and yelled, "Good morning, Mr. Holt." That woman was as nice as she could be, but Holtzman thought to himself, "She doesn't have a clue."

The two young folks turned toward the playground. Lynette waved, but the Murphy kid didn't bother. Holtzman chuckled. The poor fellow probably didn't even remember who he was. Everything seemed to be perfectly abnormal. The situation was under control.

Unless Ms. Sims noticed something at her end, the project was 'full speed ahead.' "Well," he thought considering the apparent ages of himself and Ms. Sims, "slow speed ahead anyway."

Chapter Twenty

Mrs. Blakely's loud greeting was intended more as a warning to the youngsters than anything else. She wanted them to be aware that Mr. Holt was sitting on the park bench and might overhear anything they said. Of course, with Alan's memory loss, that would be like Lynette talking to herself.

They headed toward school and had made it about a block away from Brent's house when they heard Mrs. Blakely's call out again. They both stopped and looked back where Mrs. Blakely was holding what seemed to be Brent's notebook; she was calling to them.

"Do you mind taking Brent's notebook and copying down his assignments today, Alan? There's also a book report in there that he finished over the

week end. I think it's due today. Do you mind turning it in for him in English class?"

"I don't remember any book report," Alan murmured to Lynette. "Okay, Mrs. Blakely," he called to Brent's mother. "I'll be glad to."

When Alan reached her, Eleanor Blakely whispered, "I found something strange on Brent's computer screen. I printed out the file that Brent was working on last night. It's in the notebook, but I'll show you the computer when you get back. Perhaps you'll find something I missed." The woman without a clue hoped Alan could remember what she'd told him for at least the few seconds it would take for him to walk back to Lynette.

She looked again at Mr. Holt and shuddered. Her anger at him for drugging her son was becoming harder and harder to deal with. Wondering again if

she was doing the right thing, she told herself that she didn't really have a choice. No one would believe her. She had no more credibility than either of the kids. "In fact," she thought, "Lynette probably has more credibility than I do."

After watching the young boy and girl head back toward school, Mrs. Blakely returned inside to nurse her son. Unaware that the plan they had hatched would involve another booster shot of K345 for her son, she helped him change his pajamas and served him breakfast in bed. Determined to put a stop to Mr. Holt's malicious scheme, Brent's mother told her son that he was going to be just fine.

Brent was still as confused as he had been when the drug had first entered his bloodstream. He could function normally, but he had no initiative whatsoever. "Just fine," he repeated to himself the

rest of the morning because those were the last words
his mother had said to him. Unlike her, he really
didn't have a clue.

Chapter Twenty-One

For some reason, Alan's short-term memory returned to normal while they were walking toward their school. Although he would never again remember what had happened in the last twenty-four hours, he somehow remembered what Mrs. Blakely had told him a few minutes before.

Now, Lynette didn't have to keep reminding him that they only needed to walk a few blocks toward school and then double back. Of course, that didn't keep her from reminding him; she just didn't have to do it.

In sight of the school but out of Mr. Holt's line of sight, Lynette and Alan slipped into a covered school bus stop shelter. Alan opened the notebook, and they both looked at the printed sheet of paper that Mrs. Blakely had slipped into it. Alan told

Lynette about the computer icon that Mrs. Blakely had noticed on Brent's computer screen.

"She's the secret agent," concluded Alan.

"Whatever else is going to happen will happen late tonight (forty eight hours after Sims and Holt met on the playground track)" surmised Lynette.

"Doesn't really change anything," remarked Alan, but they both realized, perhaps for the first time, that more than their two elderly neighbors might be involved.

"It could be dangerous," warned Lynette.

"Doesn't really change anything," Alan reminded her. He took the lead as they doubled back to the house to set up the video recording equipment. They had to slip past the market, being careful to avoid being seen by Lynette's father, then cross over to the next block to prevent Mr. Holt from seeing

them as they approached Brent's house. "We're going to get the evidence we need, and then we'll turn our two neighbors in to somebody bigger than they are."

Lynette was impressed with his determination. "Again," she thought, "another positive side effect of the drug."

Chapter Twenty-Two

Charlotte Sims watched the birds scatter as she approached the playground bench. The man sitting on the bench didn't turn to look her way, but she wasn't surprised at that. Holding one peanut in its paw while feasting on another, one squirrel remained nearby. None of the others, if there were any around this particular day, had ventured out of the trees.

"He's a robot," Holtzman remarked in a matter-of-fact manner.

"You're not dealing with children now, Edward." Charlotte picked up an empty acorn shell and tossed it toward the squirrel. When the squirrel merely looked up at her, she lifted an eyebrow. Was this some kind of omen? Were they not "scary" enough for the project they had taken on?

Holtzman finally looked up at his associate. Perhaps while he was distracted by her, Alan and Lynette were sneaking back into the Blakely house through the garage's side door. Perhaps the two children wouldn't have been noticed by Mr. Holt even if Ms. Sims had not chosen that particular time to check in with the man on the bench.

"Everything is under control here, Charlotte. Go back to your house and get ready to go to work. We need to know that everything is under control at that end, too."

"Don't worry, Edward. I haven't had to drug half of the neighborhood to keep control. Do you really think you needed to drug those young people? I think they were just playing around. They weren't a real threat to the success of our project."

“Maybe not, Charlotte, but it’s already been done. Besides, it gave me the opportunity to use the Blakely boy’s computer for the fiber link to Dickens’s computer.”

“Yes, I suppose so.”

“That reminds me, Charlotte. I want to check out the fiber link sometime today. Make sure that it’s activated as soon as you get to work this afternoon. I’ll manage to get into the boy’s room.”

“Don’t make the boy’s mother suspicious, Edward. You’ve never been so concerned about helping out before. I’d wait until she calls you, if it were me.”

“Don’t worry, Charlotte. That lady doesn’t suspect a thing. I’d bet my share in this whole project on that.”

Ms. Sims was thinking that he probably was doing exactly that. As for herself, she didn't care that much about the success of this particular project. Unlike Edward, she wouldn't share in the financial gain – she was paid by the month. Her salary was quite adequate, but all Edwin Holtzman had done, in her opinion, was to risk her security and potentially harm a number of young people.

Satisfied that she had done her duty by warning him, Charlotte Sims headed back home by way of the corner market. She intended to pick up some items for her own lunch before going to the Dickens house that afternoon.

Holt didn't watch her leave. Instead he was attracted to a movement of the curtain in Brent's bedroom window. Had someone been watching him from there? "No way," he muttered to himself.

Charlotte just had him spooked. There was no way that Eleanor Blakely had enough sense to suspect that anything out of the ordinary was going on around her.

Chapter Twenty-Three

“Get away from that window; he’ll see you.”

Alan jumped back – not because Lynette had yelled at him but because Mr. Holt had started looking that way.

“I hope he didn’t see me.”

Lynette didn’t say what she was thinking. Instead she bit her tongue and stepped back to a spot beside the computer to inspect their work. She was satisfied that the video camera would not be seen by Mr. Holt when he came into the room.

In order to assure that Brent didn’t know where the recording device was placed, Mrs. Blakely had taken him for a bathroom visit while they had finished up in his bedroom. They were careful not to mention anything in his presence that might alert Mr.

Holt if he unknowingly repeated the words that he heard.

The video camera did not have any moveable parts and therefore did not make any noise at all. The only drawback was that the jump drive memory stick would last for a few hours at best. They would need to continuously record what Mr. Holt was doing in the room.

The solution was suggested by Lynette. Right before Mrs. Blakely left for the store, she would bend over Brent and kiss his cheek. At the same time she would switch the video recorder on using the remote switch that they hid among the covers on Brent's bed.

"Even if he see's it later," Alan assured them, "he will think it's the remote for the stereo most likely."

With Brent asleep, the stereo on, and everything in place, they left the room. In the hallway, Alan left them to hide in the master bedroom closet where he could hear Brent if he became alarmed. He had agreed not to come out of hiding unless Brent's safety was in danger.

Lynette's position would be in the large pantry closet downstairs. The only thing remaining to be done was for Mrs. Blakely to call to Mr. Holt and ask him if he would stay with Brent while she made a trip to the drug store.

She just couldn't do it.

"I can't leave Brent with that monster another second," she said.

Lynette was not too surprised. Mrs. Blakely's cooperation had been something that Lynette wouldn't normally expect from an adult – at least one

who would think the matter through. She had realized that Mrs. Blakely's anger had overridden her good judgment. Also, Brent's mother truly wasn't as gullible as everyone thought when they first met her.

After calling to Alan and waiting for him to arrive from his hiding place, they both explained to him that their plans were changing. Surprisingly, Alan was not that concerned. He didn't argue or try to persuade Mrs. Blakely to leave Brent in their care. He was quietly considering the problem, and he suddenly perked up like the cartoon character when the light bulb above his head comes on.

"There's two ways we can go on this, ladies," he said.

Neither lady answered. They both waited for him to explain himself. Although Lynette was frowning and Mrs. Blakely was smiling, they both

waited patiently as Alan seemed to be going over each option in his mind. After almost another minute of silence, Alan spoke again.

“I don’t think the first way will work, but I’ll tell it to you just in case you don’t like the second way.”

Lynette was getting impatient and it showed in her expression and her body language. “Get on with it,” she seemed to be saying.

In another situation, Alan would have delayed even longer just to aggravate Lynette. Knowing their predicament was way too serious for that, Alan quickly outlined the first option.

“I’ve got this life-size, realistic-looking dummy that I use for magic tricks. I’m pretty sure it fooled Mr. Holt once — that’s why I didn’t get injected with the drug that he used on Brent and the others.”

Neither of his listeners understood at all. Brent quickly explained further, "I had it in my bed under the covers. Only the head and one arm were visible. Mr. Holt cut a hole in the glass of my bedroom window, and he must have sent his little robot mosquito through that hole to inject that drug in me. He's never suspected that I wasn't in that bed."

"Oh," both listeners responded. Alan suspected that only Lynette's "oh" meant that she understood. Regardless, he started giving them the second option.

"If we don't think we can fool Mr. Holt with the dummy — make him think it is Brent — we can just leave the house so that he can break in and do what he needs to do with no one around. We can still have the recorders set up to record what he does. We can

still get the evidence we need to turn him in to the police.”

Lynette looked at Mrs. Blakely then back at Alan. Before the girl could speak, Mrs. Blakely grabbed Alan and hugged him. “You’re a genius,” she said. “Isn’t he, Lynette.”

“He’s something alright,” Lynette responded – not exactly sure what to think of Alan’s proposals. “But how do we know that Mr. Holt needs to get back into this house. I thought we were just hoping to record him saying something on the phone that would incriminate him.”

Mrs. Blakely shook her head. “Now Lynette, you knew we had the video camera aimed at Brent’s computer screen. I thought you understood that we suspected Mr. Holt was going to use Brent’s computer if we got him back in the house.”

Alan walked over to the screen and pointed out a new icon to Lynette. "Check this out, Lynette." After moving the computer mouse pointer over a picture of a tiny telephone pole on the screen, Alan clicked the right mouse button and made a little box appear on the screen.

Lynette realized immediately what the other two had already learned. That particular icon related to a computer program that had been installed the previous evening when only Brent and Mr. Holt were in the house. The time and date were displayed in the "Properties" box labeled "HFM."

"What does 'HFM' mean?" asked Lynette.

"I'm not sure about that," Alan responded, "but that program wasn't there two days ago. Brent's computer screen and mine are identical – except for that icon. I know that Brent didn't add it, and Mrs.

Blakely said that her husband wouldn't have been using Brent's computer. It has to be something Mr. Holt added."

Mrs. Blakely again proved she wasn't the "air head" everyone thought by asking a very pertinent question. "Can't you connect to Brent's computer from your own computer, Alan? Didn't you guys install a network so that you could both play the same computer games even though you were at your house and Brent was over here?"

Alan was slow to understand how MBN, the Murphy Blakely Network, might help them out with Mr. Holt. Lynette was a little quicker. Of course, she had two more years of computer classes than Alan did.

"She's saying that you can monitor what Mr. Holt is doing on Brent's computer if you log on to this

computer from the computer in your house. We won't even need the video recorder if you can see what's happening on your computer screen."

"That's plan number two with a slight change," announced Alan. We just dump the dummy idea, and all vacate the premises. That's plan number two."

Lynette smiled at Mrs. Blakely. "You're the genius, Mrs. Blakely." Then to Alan she said, "Don't worry, dummy; we won't dump you. However, you've got to get back to your house without Mr. Holt seeing that you're not at school. As for that matter, I can't let him see me either."

Again Eleanor Blakely had a plan. "Why don't you guys just duck down in the back seat of my car when I take Brent out to see his doctor? I'll let you

out a couple of blocks past your house, and you can double back without Mr. Holt seeing you.

All were in agreement. Even Brent said, “Sounds like a plan.” Of course, he didn’t say those words until Alan said them first. They all laughed – feeling optimistic. Alan helped Brent downstairs then into the garage and the Blakely’s car.

When the automatic garage door opener opened the door, Alan and Lynette were bent over at the waist and looking down at their own shoes. “Sounds like a plan,” repeated Brent reminding them that they hadn’t spoken a word since leaving the bedroom.

Chapter Twenty-Four

When Holtzman saw the Blakely sedan leave the driveway with Brent sitting up in the passenger seat, he jumped to his feet. Had something or someone spooked, Mrs. Blakely?

He looked up at Brent's bedroom window again, but didn't see anyone looking down at him. He hadn't seen anyone else enter the house. Perhaps he should walk over and ring the door bell just to make sure. After all, any good neighbor would be concerned about Brent. It would be perfectly normal for him to check to see if Brent had gotten worse. Realistically, she might be taking him to a hospital.

"It's too late now," Holtzman said to himself. "By the time they figure out that he doesn't have Palmer's Palsy or whatever I called it, I'll have

completed this little mission – this four billion dollar mission”

No one answered the door bell. Holtzman rang it twice to be sure. He wondered how long he could expect Mrs. Blakely and the boy to be gone. They could reasonably be expected to stay away for two hours, but he couldn't guarantee himself that they'd be away for the four hours he needed to complete the project. If Mrs. Blakely was taking him to a doctor's office and not the hospital, they might return home as soon as a nurse took a blood sample and his vital signs.

“This, too, may actually work better than the original plan,” Holtzman thought. He had intended to offer his Brent-sitting services that afternoon to allow Mrs. Blakely to take care of any business that needed to be taken care of. If she had flatly refused,

he would have administered K345 and K888 on her — obviously her husband would have concluded that she had caught Palmley's Palsey from her son. With K888 also in her system, she wouldn't remember a thing.

Of course, he needed to get a shot of K888 into Brent before the other drug wore off. If Brent regained his ability to speak with his memory intact, he might convince Mr. Blakely that something sinister had been going on and that Mr. Holt, their previously nice old neighbor, had been involved.

"Well, that's not going to happen for a few days," Holt reflected. If necessary, he knew that he could hack into the medical records at the local hospitals to find out where Brent was being kept. Otherwise, the boy would be back home where

Missile Mosquito could easily reach him under remote control.

Pulling out the set of keys that he had used to get into the Blakely house the night the ambulance arrived at Ms. Sims's house, Holtzman entered the front door with two different brief cases — one in each hand.

Quickly and efficiently, he installed a transmitter in Brent's bedroom window as well as another module in a spare port on Brent's computer. When he turned the computer 'off' then 'on,' the computer displayed a message that new hardware had been detected.

After about ninety seconds, the computer screen automatically added another icon to the screen with the label 'HFM(2).' He double-clicked that icon with the left mouse button and seemed satisfied.

Again he went to the window and adjusted the transmitting device that he had placed there.

Returning to the computer he noted that the red light beside his new module had turned from flashing red to flashing green. “Perfect,” he said aloud. After another few clicks of the mouse, the screen looked almost the same as it had before.

He started to leave then had second thoughts. Returning to the screen, he used the mouse to move the ‘HFM’ and ‘HFM(2)’ icons to a vacant space between two existing icons – one on top of the other. Then he moved the last icon on the screen to a position on top of his two icons. Unless some one inspected the screen very carefully, they wouldn’t realize that his two new icons actually existed.

“I should have done that yesterday,” he remarked. “Doesn’t matter; there’s no one around here smart enough to figure out what’s going on.”

What Holtzman should have noticed was a change in the icon that he had moved to cover his ‘HFM’ icons. The ‘MBN’ icon flashed and a new bar appeared on the task bar at the bottom of the screen alongside the two for HFM and HFM(2).

If Alan and Lynette had known that Mr. Holt would be leaving the Blakely house, they would have waited until he had left before bringing up the Murphy-Blakely Network. As it was, they brought it on line early, thinking that Holt might not yet have made it to the computer.

Their timing couldn’t have been better. Mr. Holt thought too little of his opponents and too highly of himself to have been alert to what else was

happening on the computer screen. “Not smart enough” probably fit him better than anyone else involved.

Chapter Twenty-Five

"It's gone," announced Alan as Lynette looked from his bedroom window toward the Blakely house.

"What's gone," she replied.

"That 'HFM' icon. Holt must already be in the house. He has either moved the icon or removed the program. It's not where it was a few minutes ago."

Alan was puzzled, but he was gamely searching his own computer screen which should have been identical to the one in his pal's bedroom.

Lynette interrupted his search. "That's not the only thing that's gone. Holt is leaving Brent's house right now. He's already been there, and he's leaving. We won't be able to monitor what he's doing because he's already done it and left."

Alan looked up for a few seconds, but his attention had already been captured by something he

had seen on the screen before Lynette's announcement. "Here it is; he didn't remove it—he hid it."

"What do you mean?" asked Lynette as she moved to look over his shoulder at Alan's computer screen.

Alan was separating the icons that had been stacked on top of each other. "I noticed that the 'MBN' icon had been moved from where it had been earlier. Holt moved his icon and then covered it up with our icon. Something still looks funny."

As Alan moved the 'HFM' icon to the right, the new 'HFM(2)' icon became visible on the screen.

"He's added a second program to Brent's computer. It looks like the same kind of program—just another version of it. He's up to something, but why would

he be leaving? Doesn't he have to do something this evening?"

Alan rechecked Brent's "Spynotes" file using his own computer and confirmed the forty-eight hour timetable again. "Maybe he's coming right back," Lynette remarked. "All we can do now is wait here and see what happens. "

"What does "HFM" stand for?" wondered Alan aloud. "I could try to start the program from here and see what I can figure out."

"No," Lynette warned. "That would be too dangerous. Holt might be able to detect that the program has been used. If he waits until tomorrow, you can pretend to be sick another day if necessary; I'm the one who doesn't have a good excuse."

"Yeah, Lynette, as if anyone at Morley Middle will ever question whatever excuse you dream up.

You could tell them an eagle picked you up and dropped you in the Grand Canyon, and they'd believe you. Tell them anything – tell them you've been there all day. It won't matter; they'll believe whatever you tell them."

Lynette smiled. Of course he was right. She'd make up something for today and something else for tomorrow if necessary. "I'll go make us some sandwiches at my house, and I'll be back in about half an hour. You keep your eyes on that screen."

"Don't have to, my friend." Alan was smiling as he hit a few keys on the computer keyboard and pressed the enter key. "I've just set up my computer to beep when it sees any key on Brent's or my keyboard pressed. If Holt types anything at all, my "Spymaster" program will beep every four seconds until I click on the 'acknowledge' button. I can relax

and wait for you to bring my lunch. I can even go to sleep.”

“Don’t go to sleep, dummy; you might miss something,” joked Lynette. She headed out the back door as soon as she was sure Mr. Holt was inside his own house and wouldn’t be able to see her. “I’ll be back in a minute.”

Chapter Twenty-Six

Holtzman had been busy for the first thirty minutes after returning to his three-story house. His own transmitter had already been installed and was now communicating with the one in Brent's bedroom window. However, he was hungry too, and he had fixed himself his favorite lunch. After all, getting his share of four billion dollars would make him a very wealthy man—he could afford whatever he wanted to eat. Money would never be a problem for him again.

With a steaming bowl of chili and a large bottle of his favorite soft drink beside his computer on his own desk, he had clicked on his own 'HFM' icon and started the program which would make him a rich man. Immediately, his computer screen displayed a second screen just barely inside the computer window labeled "HFM Home Screen."

The new window was labeled “HFM Remote Screen.” That new window displayed the icons on the Blakely kid’s computer screen. “Funny,” he thought. “The icons have become separated again.”

He wasn’t too concerned. From his experience, computers often seemed to have a mind of their own. Sometimes the computer seemed to reshuffle the icons to suit the machine rather than the machine user. He continued.

Clicking on the “HFM” icon on Brent’s computer screen produced a third window. This one had a similar label to the one that surrounded it except that the computer again added a “(2)” to distinguish between two otherwise duplicate windows. Holtzman poured some of the soft drink into a glass filled with ice cubes and began watching “HFM Remote Screen (2).”

The icons within the borders of “HFM Remote Screen (2)” looked completely different from any of the other screens. It belonged to Global Digital Data’s Roger Dickens. When activity occurred on that screen, Holtzman would call Charlotte Sims on his cell phone and immediately hang up. After that he would simply watch and wait for a return signal before doing anything else.

Charlotte, the person who would receive Holtzman’s signal and provide one in return was just entering the house where she worked four hours each day. She had her own key. She entered quietly, but no one would have been alarmed had they noticed her entering. After all, she came to work that same time each day.

Normally she would begin preparing a meal. After getting the meal in the oven, she would clean

up the kitchen and possibly do some light work in one of the other rooms. Sometime she entered the computer room where her employer worked and asked him if he wanted a soft drink or reminded him of what she was preparing for lunch.

Typically, Mr. Dickens would do something to make his computer screen invisible when she came into the room. She didn't mind that at all. Much of the information from his computer had already been picked up from the backup disks during cleaning. The computer disks had already been returned after being copied by the Blackstone Group. The data on those disks had been the basis for the plan recently developed to steal four billion dollars from five different very large banks.

Ms. Sims often thought of better ways for doing things, but Holtzman usually ignored her

suggestions. "We'll soon see how smart Edward Holt really is," she wondered to herself. I can play as dumb as he needs me to be as long as they pay me what they're paying me."

She wondered again about her brother, Paul, whom she often talked to by email using her own computer. She might have been foolish to keep him informed about the secret job she was working on for the Blackstone Group. Well, she wanted some insurance just in case.

She smiled as she thought of her last message to him. Knowing that she might appear helpless to Holtzman or others at the Blackstone Group, Charlotte Sims had described each day's discoveries to her brother along with any notes she found on Roger Dickens' desk. The previous evening she had sent him a list of the funny words that she had found

scribbled on the scrap pages in Roger Dickens' waste basket.

She laughed out loud when she recalled the list. To her it sounded like the characters in a weird nursery rhyme or children's story. She hadn't heard back from Paul; perhaps he had figured out what they might have meant. Although they really didn't expect to, she and Paul would have been glad to double cross the Blackstone Group if they figured out enough of the plan. They would have been glad to have skipped town with the money and left Holtzman holding an empty bag.

Considerably more brilliant than Edward Holt, Charlotte Sims, or Alan Murphy was the man who sat at his computer desk and prepared to reset the codeword for much of the world's banking corporations — at least all that subscribed to Global

Digital Data Services' hacker-proof, virus-proof, and embezzlement-proof software.

Roger Dickens was the super computer programmer who had developed the program, and one of his jobs was to reset the access password once each month. He had performed this job each month for the past seventeen months without incident.

If this month's job went smoothly, Dickens expected another twelve percent of the banking corporations to sign up for the service. Since his computer company consisted of himself, a few college students whom he hired for only three months at a time, and his housekeeper, Charlotte Sims; he pocketed most of the one hundred thousand dollar monthly fee from each of the subscribing corporations. "Eight million seven hundred thousand

dollars a month was not too shabby,” he thought.

“Perhaps I should give Ms. Sims a raise.”

Of course, the hard part had already occurred when Dickens had written the computer program which now governed much of the world’s financial transactions. Today he would spend less than forty-five minutes resetting the access password to allow each subscriber to update their individual passwords that they had selected for their computer systems. When the forty five minutes was over, he would terminate the password and start an elaborate monitoring program which would detect any further attempt to use that password.

Although the password would no longer be useful, attempts to use it would indicate a lessening of security within one of the subscribing corporations. Dickens would spend as much time as necessary to

track and identify the culprit. Although he enjoyed the challenge, identifying hackers who had infiltrated one of his subscriber's computers brought him a separate million dollar fee when necessary. Most corporations were eager to learn about their own employees who might be trying to hack into their company's computers.

Dickens checked his watch and prepared to start the forty-five minute time period. He typed in his own user name and then typed in the new password. "FOG4BEARS," he thought. "That's a good password." He was amazed at how brilliant his own mind actually was.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

For the seventeen previous times that Roger Dickens had run this particular program, no alarm had gone off to indicate any problem whatsoever. Before allowing any of it's users to begin changing the passwords for their computer systems, Dickens's program checked all computers attached to his master station to see if the new password had been included in any emails or internet traffic into and out of that system.

This spy routine was the critical element of the program. Had anyone somehow discovered that "FOG4BEARS" was the password, they might have been able to hack into his master station computer and start an unscheduled cycle of the program for their own benefit. Such a breech of security had never happened before.

The flashing message startled Dickens.

“FOG4BEARS has been used 1 times,” the screen informed him. All users would be blocked until he determined who had improperly used the password. While he had access to all of the subscriber corporations’ computers, they would have no access to their own systems until he reset the master program to allow them normal access. Only after a thorough investigation would Dickens allow that to happen.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Sitting at his own computer desk, Holtzman was even more startled than Dickens to see the alarm flashing the message that “FOG4BEARS” had already been used. He certainly had never typed that set of letters on his computer keyboard. His scheme to have Ms. Sims carry the disks out of the house had been designed to prevent triggering such an alarm.

As he watched the activity on Dickens’s computer, Holtzman realized something wonderful. If Dickens still had access to all subscriber’s computer systems then Holtzman did as well. He would still need Ms. Sims to distract Dickens for a few minutes, but he had the access that he needed to transfer a few billion dollars into some special accounts for his own benefit.

Holtzman couldn't imagine that any of the subscribers had used the password prematurely. Probably, the word had been used for some innocent purpose purely by accident. By the time Dickens got to the bottom of that little mystery, Holtzman would have his own computer disconnected and be on the way to collect his money.

Holtzman signaled Ms. Sims by dialing her cell phone number. After a single ring, he hung up. Ms. Sims would read his number as a "missed call" and immediately delete his number from the historical list.

Ms. Sims would then enter the computer room to serve lunch or to ask Dickens if he wanted a soft drink. Right before entering, she would dial Holt's cell phone and let it ring a single time. That way he would know that Dickens would be hiding his

computer screen from Mrs. Sims's view for as long as she stayed in the room.

She had been directed to stay for at least two minutes. If she could stay longer, she would, but two minutes was all Holtzman needed to get his job completed.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Lynette had just returned with the sandwiches and soft drinks when the alarm on Alan's computer started beeping. Having seen the sandwiches, Alan was slow to respond, but Lynette urged him to check the screen.

"I'll bring the sandwiches to the desk. You'd better check out the computer; the alarm is going off."

Although he had been waiting for just that alarm, Alan didn't seem to understand. The appearance of the sandwiches had set off an appetite switch that was hard for him to reset. Finally, he realized what was happening and headed back to the computer desk.

Letters and numbers were screaming across the screen. "What is happening," Lynette cried out as Alan studied the display.

“Someone is changing a whole lot of numbers in a whole lot of different computer files. It looks like they’re decreasing some amounts and then increasing others by the same number.”

Lynette knew who must be doing it, but she asked anyway, “Do you think it’s Mr. Holt. He sure can type fast for an old man.”

“What can we do?”

Alan was good with numbers. Almost a mathematical genius although he downplayed it as often as necessary, he could see that the values being changed were very small compared to the total amounts in each account, but would be sizable if each of the changes was totaled. He also noted that the account numbers being decreased seemed to be random numbers, but only five different account numbers were being used for the increases.

Alan tried typing on his own keyboard. A message window appeared asking him for the password. He quickly entered "FOG4BEARS" and was provided with an access screen that seemed to allow him to make any changes he desired.

"What are you going to do?"

After thinking for a few seconds, Alan entered one of the account numbers that he had seen being used to store the increasing amounts.

"What are you going to do?" Lynette repeated.

"You can't tamper with those accounts; there's no telling what might happen."

Alan didn't know if Lynette had figured out what was happening, but he didn't have time to explain. At the speed Holt was entering data, he wouldn't need long to steal a whole lot of money and store it away in those five accounts.

Suddenly the typing stopped.

Chapter Thirty

“That should be enough,” concluded Holtzman as he rested his hands. He had finished transferring over four billion dollars in less than two minutes. The next step would be to transfer the funds in those five accounts to a designated private account outside the reach of Global Digital Data Services and their super software.

For those five extra transfers, he didn’t need to use Dickens’s computer. He simply needed to access those accounts using a standard banking software program that most people could obtain for less than two hundred dollars. He didn’t have time right then to disconnect both his and the Blakely kid’s computers.

The basic banking program took over his computer screen after a simple double-click of his

mouse on another icon. One at a time, he accessed each one of the accounts and transferred all of the money except for one dollar to a private account.

When he was through, he swung around in his swivel chair with his bowl of chili in his lap. It had cooled off while he typed. Considering how much money he had just made for himself and his partners, he knew that he deserved to be eating hot chili rather than this bowl which had become cold. Intending to warm it up in the microwave, he started for the kitchen.

Ms. Sims was leaving Dickens's computer room about that time. As soon as she left the room, Dickens brought his program back to the screen and prepared to investigate the previous uses of "FOG4BEARS" to identify which connected computer had improperly used that password.

To his surprise, words and numbers were scrolling across and down his computer screen. The data wasn't being entered all that rapidly, but he soon recognized that some information in several accounts was being changed. Since he thought his was the only corporate computer with access to these accounts, he couldn't believe what was happening.

Of course, it was possible that the individual account owners were making changes to their own accounts. His program didn't block normal banking functions from occurring. Checking more closely, he realized that something very strange was happening - - very strange indeed.

Five different accounts were being accessed. Each account had a balance of exactly one dollar. Even more suspicious was the fact that the name of each account owner was being changed to "Edward

Holt.” The address for Mr. Holt was being changed to an address just down the street from where Dickens lived.

As he watched, someone entered different zip codes for each account, but Dickens knew they weren’t the zip codes for their local post office. Two ‘zip codes’ were entered as “11450” and two were entered as “65889”. The other zip code entered was the proper zip code for the local area. It was as if someone wanted him to know that they knew the right zip code – the other numbers had to mean something else.

Quickly, Dickens requested a history of the five accounts and was startled to learn that transfers in the last few minutes had increased those accounts drastically before decreasing each one of them to exactly one dollar.

But where had the money in these accounts been transferred? And who had stolen the money?

Someone knew and was trying to tell him — someone connected to his computer right now. He didn't know how that had happened, but he certainly knew why. If Mr. Edward Holt actually lived down the street, then Dickens wanted the police to ask him some very important questions. But someone else had some answers as well. He wondered who that could be.

As his computer printer ejected page after page of documentation, Dickens dialed up his friend in the computer crime section. He wondered again exactly what the strange zip codes meant. What was somebody trying to tell him?

Chapter Thirty-One

Ms. Sims saw the flashing lights from the police cars and knew that her job in this neighborhood was over. As the cars surrounded the three-story house up the street, she quickly packed a few things and called a taxi.

A few minutes later as she left in the taxi, special agents were escorting Edward Holt out his front door and into a waiting agency car. Lynette Roberts was standing on the sidewalk, and she noticed Ms. Sims in the taxi. Although the young girl smiled and waved, Ms. Sims didn't wave back.

"Such a nice girl," she thought. Lynette would have liked that.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Alan would have liked to call Brent or Mrs. Blakely to give them an update on what had happened. After making the changes to the computer banking accounts, he and Lynette had wondered if they'd done anything that would get noticed.

The two youngsters had no way of knowing that Dickens had seen the inputs as they were making them. Their only hope was to leave a trail that might eventually be found by the authorities. Making sure that trail led to their very suspicious neighbor was all that came to Alan's mind as Lynette kept asking, "What are you doing?"

He finally answered, "Probably not enough."

They didn't have to wait long—probably less than fifteen minutes. Flashing lights on official-

looking cars started coming toward them, and they soon realized that all of the cars had stopped at the three-story house where Mr. Holt lived.

“Wow,” Alan stated. “I must have done quite enough.”

“Let’s go see” is all that Lynette said.

Outside the Holt house, they both watched intently. Alan was desperately hoping to find someone who would need the information only he and Lynette could still provide. He hadn’t given up hope of getting a reward. Certainly he and Brent deserved one; they had broken the case. Whether or not they could convince someone in authority of that fact was another question altogether.

Mr. Dickens, from a few blocks away, was talking to a woman with a badge, and he was very excited. Lynette knew him because he often came by

the store to pick up some items. She also knew that Ms. Sims worked for him.

When she thought of Ms. Sims, she looked back in the direction the taxi had gone. Dickens also worked for a computer company, she seemed to remember. "That's our connection, Alan. That man right there is the one."

Dickens turned at a slight disturbance. A policeman was trying to turn two kids around who seemed intent on reaching the front porch where he was talking to Madeline Stevens.

Madeline also looked their way, but turned back around when she realized that only kids were involved. However, Dickens saw something in the expressions on the faces of those kids which kept his attention.

“Tell him to let them through, Maddy. I think they may know something.”

Frustrated, Alan had already started back to where they had been standing on the sidewalk. Lynette was still arguing, but Alan had given up. When he heard the lady call out to the policeman who had stopped them, he couldn't believe what he was hearing.

To his surprise, the gentleman they wanted to see was waving them forward. The policeman was stepping aside to let them pass.

“Are you kids the ones who ratted on Edward Holt?” asked the lady. The man beside her was watching Alan and Lynette intently.

Before Lynette could answer, Alan asked the question he most wanted answered, “Is there any kind of reward?”

The next thing they knew, they were both in the back seat of a police car headed down the street past the corner market. Lynette wanted to duck her head as she passed her father, but she waved lamely as she went by.

Brent's mother's car was parked by the store. Brent seemed to be talking to his mother and pointing at them. Had the drug worn off? Turning to them, he shouted, "We'll bail you out, guys. Don't worry."

They worried.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Eleanor Blakely's answers to the investigator's questions kept Alan and Lynette from being arrested as accessories. When she agreed to let the police search her house, they found the communications equipment that Holt had installed. Similar inspections of the Dickens and the Holt residences solved the questions related to how different individuals were accessing Roger Dickens's personal computer.

Since the boys' access was through a network link that was perfectly legal, no charge against them would be filed. However, they were warned that if they failed to "come clean" and "tell all," they could be held at the station as material witnesses.

When Mr. Roberts and Mr. Murphy began mentioning lawyers, Ms. Stevens backed off of that

threat, but insisted that the two youngsters would be better off if they revealed all they knew.

Unfortunately for Lynette, she had already told all she knew. She hadn't been as quick as Alan to see what was happening on the computer screen. She had simply watched him enter the account data. She didn't know any more than she had already told the investigators.

Dickens finally settled down and realized the two youngsters had saved him a lot of money. Even if he was unable to recover the money that had been stolen this time, he would certainly be able to prevent this kind of thing from happening again. If it hadn't been for the two kids, the man they now knew as Holtzman would have gotten away and would have been free to do it again at any time he chose to do it.

“How does ten thousand dollars sound?”

offered Dickens.

“I don’t care about any reward money,”

insisted Lynette. “I just want to go home. I’ve told you all I know.” Suddenly she remembered Ms. Sims’s rapid exit from the scene.

“Well, there is one more thing,” she said.

Mr. Dickens and Ms. Stevens stared at her in shock. How could she suddenly remember something after all the questioning that they had put her through.

Looking a little embarrassed, Lynette volunteered what she assumed about Ms. Sims. “She does work for you, and she did leave in a taxi right after the police cars arrived.”

The light bulbs clicked on above Dickens’s head. Suddenly, a lot of things made sense to him.

Madeline turned to a police officer and asked him to begin looking for Charlotte Sims.

“Thank you, young lady,” responded Roger Dickens. “Ms. Sims must be involved. I’ll be glad to give you that reward.”

Lynette beamed, but Alan insisted that he knew even more. “If you’re willing to give her ten thousand dollars, then you need to give Brent and me at least twenty thousand dollars.”

“Who’s Brent?” asked Ms. Stevens.

Chapter Thirty-Four

Brent's parents were not too happy to see Brent in an interrogation room with Alan. A little confused due to the small amount of the drug still in his system, Brent didn't say all that much. He did, however, support his friend. Every time Alan made a statement, Brent nodded.

"What else do you know, young man?"

Madeline Stevens asked.

"How much reward will we get?" countered Alan. Brent nodded in agreement and added, "How much?"

Turning to Dickens, Stevens asked, "What can they possibly know that's worth twenty thousand dollars?"

"I don't know. It's unlikely that they know where the funds were transferred. They've already

identified the thief. Holtzman won't tell us where the money is because he knows he'll get his share eventually if he keeps quiet."

"You're saying you don't think they know anything worth twenty thousand dollars?"

Dickens sighed and replied, "Yeah, I guess that's what I'm saying. My insurance company is going to be out over four billion dollars. My reputation is ruined. Personally, I'll lose millions of dollars in lost earnings, but I need to offer a bribe to Holtzman if I expect to get that back.

"You can't offer a bribe to a criminal," insisted Ms. Stevens.

Alan could hold it in no longer. He was tired and frustrated with these super cops and super programmers. "We're the ones who stopped your super computer criminal. All I'm asking for is twenty

thousand dollars. Surely if you're about to lose several million dollars, you can afford to pay us twenty thousand."

Brent chimed in. "All Alan wants is enough money to purchase the best magic kit that money can buy."

Knowing that this opportunity was about to end, Alan tried one last time to win an award from Roger Dickens. "Okay, okay," he said. "I'll just tell you what I know and you can decide how much it's worth. Do you agree to that?"

Alan had seen his father and mother outside, ready to enter the interrogation room with their lawyer. Since he was pretty sure his father would order him to tell what he knew, he tried to get a commitment before he lost the opportunity.

Brent joined in. "That certainly seems fair to me. Doesn't that seem fair to you, Mr. Dickens

Dickens was tired of the ordeal as well. Doubting that the boy actually knew anything important, he agreed to evaluate the information Alan provided and reward him with an appropriate amount.

He almost fainted when Alan told him that the numbers he had entered as Zip Code data were each one half of the account number to which the money had been transferred.

Ms. Stevens picked up a telephone and spoke to someone on the other end. "Has Holtzman talked to anyone yet?" She must have got the answer she wanted.

She smiled at Dickens and said, "You're okay, but you'd better act quickly. If Holtzman gets that

information to the outside, the money will be gone in a few seconds.

Dickens dashed from the interrogation room yelling something that Alan couldn't quite understand. "You're free to go," Ms. Stevens told them. "Thanks for your cooperation."

Brent had been closer to the door when Dickens had left in such a hurry. "Did you hear what Mr. Dickens was saying when he left?"

Even if he were still a little confused, repeating something he had just heard was not a problem for Brent. "He said, 'You can have a million dollars.'"

"A million dollars," Alan repeated. "A million dollars," he said again in disbelief.

"Must you repeat everything I say?" responded his buddy, apparently more cured than anyone suspected.

Chapter Thirty-Five

Most of the Morley Middle School students had taken their seats in the gymnasium bleachers when Alan and Brent followed Mr. Dickens and Lynette onto the stage at the south end of the building. The four of them remained standing while the school principal, Mr. Taylor, took his place behind the microphone at the front of the stage area.

At the principal's signal, everyone sat down. Alan and Brent looked at each other; each was smiling broadly. Both knew that some kind of presentation was about to take place, but neither knew exactly what was about to happen.

Glancing at the boys, Lynette couldn't help but smile. The smile quickly disappeared. Of course, Lynette knew exactly what was about to happen. In

fact, she had made most of the arrangements on behalf of the school.

The principal began. "We are gathered here today to honor three of our own students." He paused as all eyes took in the three students on the stage.

"Most of you already know that Lynette Roberts, Brent Blakely, and Alan Murphy were instrumental in breaking up an espionage ring that was operating right here in our community. You probably already know that they were the ones who discovered that some of you were being drugged as part of the scheme."

There was buzz in the gymnasium as each victim took the opportunity to tell someone else that they had been the victim of the drug. Somehow, the

size of the group infected had now grown in an exaggerated manner.

The principal turned to face Alan Murphy as he continued. “Yes, most of you already know what has been accomplished by the three students sitting here because Alan has probably talked to each one of you to make sure that you know what he’s done.”

Looking back to the audience, the principal joked, “I’m not sure what is left to tell. Perhaps we should all just go back to class.”

Lynette couldn’t stop herself – perhaps she was the only person in the gym who didn’t realize Mr. Taylor was joking. She whispered rather loudly so that the principal and most of the students near the stage could hear her. “Mr. Taylor, we still have the video and the award presentation.”

“Oh yes,” Mr. Taylor pretended to remember then laughed with those in the audience who had heard Lynette’s unnecessary prompt. “Lynette has just reminded me that there is still a video for us to see.”

Thankfully, the lights were dimmed before Lynette’s face grew bright red. A large screen to the side of the stage began showing a video presentation entitled, “Channel Three (WRRZ) Episode – Local Youths Catch Computer Crooks.” The man who next appeared on the screen was the reporter for the local television station.

“That’s the real reporter from channel three,” Alan whispered to Brent after elbowing him a couple of times.

“I know, Alan; I know.”

“You don’t have to repeat everything anymore, Brent,” quipped Alan. Although Brent was getting pretty tired of that particular joke, Alan never missed an opportunity to remind him of how he had been affected by the K345 drug.” This time he turned back to the screen because the reporter was beginning to speak.

“We have a very unusual show tonight, ladies and gentlemen. As you know, we usually present an unsolved crime so that some of our viewers can call in to help our law enforcement personnel solve that crime.

“On this show tonight, we’re going to show you a crime that has already been solved.” After a pause for effect, he continued. “The suspected criminals have already been arrested and, thanks to

three local students, over four billion dollars has been recovered.”

Brent and Alan were thrilled beyond belief. Even though Lynette had known what was about to happen, she was clearly affected as well. The students rose in unison – well as close to unison as middle school students can manage. They applauded – obviously proud that what Alan had been telling them was really true.

The video continued with Mr. Dickens being introduced. He proceeded to describe as much of the crime as he could without revealing any of his company secrets. The students took their seats, but the video clearly didn’t hold their attention while the “technical” details were being presented.

The gymnasium lights came back on as the reporter who had been on the video walked onto the

stage with his camera man taking a kneeling position in front of the stage. Apparently, the video had not yet been completed and was now being filmed “live.” The reporter continued and now had everyone’s attention.

“I’d like to introduce to you each of the students who helped solve this particular crime of the week.” As the student audience applauded, the reporter began by presenting Lynette.

Lynette stood as she was introduced and couldn’t help admiring the words being used to describe her efforts. After all, she had written them herself.

The camera man moved his camera to focus on Brent. As the reporter described him, Brent stood but kept his hand on Alan’s shoulder. All of the students had heard about Brent being drugged and several

were familiar with the effects of the drugs. There seemed to be a genuine look of concern on many of their faces as he appeared to be using Alan for support.

Then the spotlight turned to Alan – literally.

Lynette screamed as Brent released his hold on the life-sized, life-like dummy that had been sitting beside him on the stage. Apparently Alan had switched places with the dummy while the lights were dim.

The dummy fell forward out of the chair with only a slight nudge from Brent. A roar went up from the crowd. Suddenly, the gymnasium lights were dimmed again, and an actual spotlight appeared at the north end of the gym. Everyone gasped when they turned to see Alan standing in the middle of the spotlight.

Brent laughed out loud and was soon joined by most of the students. Although the camera man had been quick to aim his camera at the spotlight, the reporter seemed to hesitate. He looked anxiously at the principal who seemed to be deciding whether to stop the show or let it go on. Finally, the principal shook his head and began smiling. Sweeping his left arm toward Alan at the other end of the gym, he seemed to be saying, "Go ahead; it's his show."

The reporter was glad to describe the events as they unfolded. He had already suspected that this particular episode would go national due to its unique appeal. "Now," he thought, "it will go global."

All eyes were on Alan Murphy as the reporter described the young magician who had used his amateur magic as well as his computer skills to "foil

the villain.” Suddenly, a large brightly colored box dropped over Alan, hiding him from view.

“Help me; help me,” yelled Alan from the box.

A few of the students rushed to lift the box and free Alan. Two pair of feet became visible at first. When the box had been completely removed, everyone could see that Brent had joined Alan in the box.

Lynette was bothered by Alan and Brent taking over “her show.” The presentations she had written were excellent and should have been presented. The boys were taking an unfair advantage of the situation—calling all of the attention to themselves.

Suddenly, she felt someone touch her on the shoulder. There beside her stood Alan with a big smile on his face. Grabbing her hand, he raised both her arm and his over their heads. At the same time, Brent again let the dummy at the other end of the

gym fall to the floor. This time, as the students gasped, Brent swept his arm toward the stage where Alan stood with Lynette.

Realizing that the boys had always intended to include her in their little show, Lynette was beaming. Alan quickly dropped her hand and retreated out of the spotlight. Tears were glistening in her eyes.

Epilogue

Edwin Holtzman and several other members of the Blackstone Group were convicted during the next few months. Charlotte Sims had cooperated with the authorities and had received a shorter sentence although she did have to spend some time in jail.

Trust funds were created by the parents of Brent, Alan, and Lynette for each of their children's reward money. The boys had never dreamed that one of their schemes would have earned one third of a million dollars — each one's share of Mr. Dickens's gift to them. What meant more to them than the money was their realization that they had accomplished their goal — one of their schemes had actually worked.

