

# *Virtual Reality*

by William G. Tedford

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## *One*

**R**ick Kaiser faced the towering glass doors of Armstrong High School. The setting sun dazzled against the white face of the building to either side as far as the eye could see and glimmered deep amber against the bank of bronzed windows.

He stood alone in the silence. Dreaming, he suspected, except the glare forced him to shield his eyes, and the heat of the day had sweat running down his back.

Since when were dreams so vivid?

Then why was he here? The school had closed hours ago. The doors were locked solid and the corridors inside deserted. Confused, Rick started to turn away.

A hand fell on his shoulder and spun him around,

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slamming him against the door. A knife blade flashed in his face. A point as sharp as a needle quivered an inch off the end of his nose.

“Got any money on you, kid?”

He saw the pudgy face, the mussed black hair, and the hazel eyes behind the knife, and he held back his cry of alarm.

Mort Braggs threw his head back and burst into laughter.

Shaken, Rick shoved Mort and his switchblade away. “That was real funny, Mort.”

“Kaiser, you’re such a wimp!”

Rick leaned against the door until his legs quit shaking, his eyes on the trees casting long shadows across the school grounds. Had he just walked between those trees a few moments ago? Odd that he couldn’t remember any details of that walk. Lost in a daydream, maybe.

Neither had he seen a slender girl in a long dress following. She walked with her eyes to the ground, dark hair hiding her face. When she drew closer, he saw that she was smaller than he would have thought. Petite, was the word. She stood no higher than chest height to his height of five nine.

Did he know her? It seemed odd that students should be gathering at the school so late in the evening. It would be dark soon.

A soft feminine voice spoke behind him. “Who do you think you’re looking at, Rick Kaiser?”

Confused at every turn, Rick turned to the glare of ice blue eye almost on level with his own. “You have a girlfriend,” Marla van Kirk said without smiling. “I’m good enough for you, aren’t I?”

Her name took an uncomfortable moment to come to mind. Rick draped an arm across Marla's shoulders to hide his discomfort. "I guess you'll do," he said, catering to her taste for wit and sarcasm.

"Yeah, you're darned right I'll do."

Marla gave Mort a hard look. "Are you just going to stand there and look stupid?" She gestured with a nod for the boy to try the door.

Mort gave her a mock sneer and tugged at the door handle. The door had been locked a moment ago. Now, the main entrance swung effortlessly open. Mort stumbled back and raised an eyebrow in surprise.

Another memory snapped into place. The four of them had an appointment for a special test at six o'clock. And Becky Marple was the name of the girl coming up from behind. He shared a science class with her. He especially remembered her Asian eyes. How could he have forgotten?

He looked down at his watch. Five-fifty in the afternoon. Right on time. He followed Mort and Marla inside the school. Becky slipped in like a ghost behind them.

Inside, the inner door, a barrier of glass, remained stubbornly closed and locked. A male voice spoke, the voice of Armstrong High's executive computer. "Contraband has been detected on your person, Mortimer Braggs. Place all contraband items in the drawer to your right. If an error has been made, Security will be summoned to assist you in ten seconds, nine, eight..."

"Do it," Rick said. The glass around them was shatterproof. They were trapped until Mort got rid of the knife.

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And once freed? What waited for them inside the deserted halls of Armstrong High? Rick wasn't entirely certain. He could not remember the reason for the scheduled test. Offhand, he could not even remember ever having walked the dimly lit halls on the other side of the barrier.

Something was wrong. Big time. It would be as easy to beat a hasty retreat. Or had the doors locked on the group already? He glanced longingly outside at the deepening shadows, but sudden gooseflesh ran up his back.

White buildings rose from behind the trees, but for the life of him, he could not remember where among them he lived.

## *Two*

**T**he machine demanding Mort Bragg's switchblade looked like an automated teller. With a moan of protest, Mort tossed the knife in the drawer. The drawer closed to whisk the weapon away to the main offices. The countdown ended, and the inner door of glass slid open.

Mort gave a sigh of relief, then noticed Marla frowning at him. "It was just a joke!"

The halls of Armstrong High stretched ahead, broad halls with low ceilings. Lights came on in wide white bands overhead. Like the bronze windows outside, the corridor stretched as far as the eye could see.

"Freaky," Marla said softly. "I've never seen it so quiet."

"Or so empty," Mort added.

Okay, Rick thought. We have an appointment at six.

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For what reason?

The dark-haired girl in the long dress brushed silently past and went on alone down the corridor. Soundproofed walls swallowed the sound of her footsteps.

“Nasty little creature,” Marla said. She wrinkled her nose in distaste.

“Becky Marple,” Rick said. “She’s not a bad kid.”

Marla snorted. “She’s a nerd.”

Marla started off down the hall after Becky. The two were a study in contrast. Marla was tall and leggy with short blonde hair. Becky was small, with long dark hair. Marla chose to show off her die-for figure. This afternoon, she was wearing beige slacks and a white blouse loaded with lace and frills. Becky was overdressed in an ankle length skirt and a sweater over a dark colored blouse.

Mort stared at the sway of Marla’s body until he remembered he had company. “Lucky dog,” he growled at Rick and started after the two girls with clenched fists.

Mort had no girlfriend of his own. He had few friends of any kind. He was a short and stout boy, a natural wrestler with the face of a pit bull. And a temperament to match.

The bolts to the glass doors slammed shut behind him. Rick paused and looked again wistfully at the outdoors darkened to a twilight by the bronze glass. He glanced at a camera mounted by the door, aware of being watched. During the day, the computers kept track of the movement of thirty-five hundred students. Tonight, there would be only four.

Even when deserted, Armstrong High was a living creature. The computers monitored everyone who came into the building, and everyone who left. They knew every

student by name, by face, and by school record. They watched students in the classrooms and in the halls. They even monitored the rest rooms. For the sake of privacy, they recorded nothing on videotape, but they gave warning to the school staff if someone got sick or hurt, or broke the rules.

Mort thought Armstrong High a prison. Rick felt secure inside its walls. The computers tutored each pupil at their own pace and made learning easy and fun. There were a few human instructor-assistants on hand, and lots of security people, but Armstrong High had no human teachers.

Not a single one.

Marla turned back and called out. "Rick Kaiser! Are you coming, or what?"

Rick hurried obediently after her.

Halfway down the corridor, a janitor knelt beside a little floor-mopping machine. The machine reminded him of R2D2 from the old Star Wars movies.

Becky smiled and greeted the man as she passed.

Marla thumbed her nose.

Mort pretended to trip over the robot as he went by. The machine spun and banged against the wall. Mort laughed and followed Becky and Marla through a classroom door.

Room ninety-four? Of course. Memories snapped into place as needed. Rick thought he was going crazy.

The janitor looked up as Rick approached. Rick stopped, startled by the man's pale gray eyes. The janitor rose to his feet and gestured for him to pass. He was a lean, muscular man with cross-cropped hair.

"Sorry," Rick murmured. "They're idiots."

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Rick went on by. When he looked back, the janitor was still staring.

For what? He had ignored the others.

Becky Marple selected a seat toward the back. Marla Van Kirk took a seat front and center. Mort moved off to the far side of the room and took a desk along the wall.

Rick seated himself at Marla's side. The motors in the upholstered chair purred and adjusted itself to fit his lanky frame. The desk surface flashed on and showed the logo of Armstrong High, the blue hawk and red banner of the football and soccer team.

"Rick Kaiser," a woman's voice whispered from speakers built into the headrest. "How are you feeling this afternoon?"

Marla snubbed her own personalized greeting. Rick grinned and said, "I'm fine. How are you?"

"I'm fine, too," the cheerful voice replied, "as long as the faculty remembers to change my batteries now and then."

"How droll," Marla said in disgust.

But Rick chuckled. The computer was programmed to be user-friendly, and it never used the same stale joke twice.

Silence hung like a shroud in the room. Mort clicked his fingernails against the surface of his computer screen/desk top. Becky Marple was talking to hers. Becky Marple, Rick remembered, had fewer friends than even Mort Braggs. Marla van Kirk thought Becky strange, and maybe she was. Rick could not remember ever seeing her talk with another flesh and blood student. If you said hello to Becky Marple, she would look away, blush furiously, and say nothing.

Such a waste. She had a round face and heart-shaped lips. And those eyes. Her mother was Asian, Rick remembered. And her father? Irish, he had heard.

Mort sat hunched in his seat, looking like an unhappy gnome. “What’s this about, anyway? Anyone got any idea why we’re here?”

Marla chuckled nervously. “As often as you skip classes, Mort Braggs, you show up after school and can’t remember why? Boy, you’re losing it.”

“Don’t call me boy,” Mort growled.

Marla gave Mort a crooked grin. “Then what, if not boy? Are we a man already?”

“And you anything more than a spoiled brat?” Mort said. “How about just keeping your mouth shut?”

Marla wrinkled her nose. “Or what? You going to shut it for me?”

Mort glared at her. He dared not openly threaten her. Not inside a classroom.

“Give it a rest,” Rick suggested mildly, speaking to neither in particular.

Marla jerked her head around, outraged that he dared to criticize her.

Rick sighed. “Let’s just get this over with. Okay?”

Marla decided against a tantrum. She shrugged. “Yeah. I guess I’m a little uptight myself. What’s this all about, anyhow?”

Rick looked back at Becky Marple. Becky would know, as smart as she was, but Becky looked quickly away.

The answer popped into Rick’s head. There had been a parent-teacher conference earlier in the day. Rick had visited the front offices and had seen his parents in one of the conference rooms. They had smiled at him. His father

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had waved at him. His mother had blown him a kiss. “It’s a psychological evaluation.”

Marla looked astonished. “Oh, yeah! I forgot!”

“Great,” Mort muttered. “Just what I need. Another maggot-gagging psych evaluation. You’d think they’d get it right first time around.”

Rick was thinking that it had been good to see his mom and dad. They worked swing shifts. Sometimes, he didn’t see one or the other for days on end. They were like strangers to him.

“No big deal,” he called out to Mort.

“Man, you’re not the one in hot water,” Mort said. “You and your preppie friends here got it made. You know what they told me the last time I got one of these psych evaluations? One more screw-up and I’m out.”

Marla picked her nails. “I never screw up.”

“Yeah, well, maybe you did and don’t know it,” Mort said. “You ain’t here to be crowned prom queen, that’s for sure.”

Marla looked up and stared off into space with mock concern. “Did I mess up?” She shook her head decisively. “Nah, I never do anything wrong. My mother and father would never tolerate anything less than absolute and total perfection.”

Mort looked at Rick, eager for someone to back up the possibility that they were all in trouble. Rick didn’t think so. “I pretty sure it has something to do with that parent-teacher conference this morning.”

“Oh, great! My old man was drunk. I’m sure he made a great impression on everyone.”

Marla grinned wickedly.

“Don’t push too far,” Rick said softly.

Marla glared at him. "Or what?"

"Not with Mort," Rick said. "Use some common sense."

Marla joined Mort in drumming her fingers.

Rick stared at her. "What are you so uptight for?"

"I'm edgy," Marla said.

They were all edgy. "Why?" he wanted to know. He didn't know, but maybe she did.

Marla looked at him again. This time, she looked thoroughly upset. She had been hiding it. "I don't know. Something's wrong with me. I can't remember things. It only lasts for a second..."

Rick nodded understanding. "Same with me. I found myself at the front door and couldn't remember how I got there."

"Maybe they got us tranqed," Marla said.

Rick shook his head. The Supreme Court had declared all forms of student manipulation unconstitutional in the year 2014, including the use of psychotropic drugs. "It's gotta be something else."

"Look at the nerd," Marla whispered. She gestured back to where Becky had begun to weep quietly to herself. Becky was hunched over the computer screen. Her shoulders shook. Tears dripped to the glowing screen.

And the computer was soothing her. "All is well, Becky Marple. I will place a note in your counselor's folder to speak with you in the morning. Truly, there is no reason to be frightened."

Mort leaped to his feet, unsettled by Becky's tears in the nerve-racking quiet. "I'm getting out of here! I'm not playing games with these ignorant dweebs!"

Mort spun about and started toward the door in long strides.

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He stopped abruptly and took one step back.

A black man with gray eyes stood in the doorway. The janitor stood in the hall behind him, looking over his shoulder. Both men stood six and a half feet tall. The janitor wore blue coveralls. The instructor-assistant wore a black suit and tie.

Both had the same pale eyes.

“Is there a problem?” the newcomer said with a voice like rumbling thunder.

## *Three*

The instructor-assistant took his place at the podium in the front of the classroom. His face also filled Rick's computer screen, and his voice sounded from the speakers built into the headrest. "My name is John Malone Mangrove. You may call me Mr. Mangrove. Who do we have with us this afternoon? Becky Marple? Which one are you?"

Marla jerked her thumb behind her. Beck shot her hand up, then stuffed it back into her lap.

"Mortimer Braggs?"

Mort muttered protest. Mort hated his own name. Mort hated everything about himself. He hated the world he lived in.

Mr. Mangrove eyed the only blonde in the room. "By a process of elimination, you must be Marla van Kirk."

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“Duh,” Marla murmured, and defiantly crossed her arms against her breasts.

“And Rick Kaiser. Is Rick a nickname? I prefer not to use nicknames.”

“Just Rick.”

“Do you know why you’re here? Miss van Kirk? Will you look at me and answer the question?”

Marla looked at him. “What does it matter? I’ve taken psych evaluation before. I don’t know why it was necessary to drag us down here after school to do another one.”

“Do you know what this test is about, Miss Van Kirk?”

“I know it’s not mandatory, Mr. Mangrove. I’ve taken all the mandatory tests. My mother demanded to know what this was all about, and I don’t think she got a straight answer. Both of my parents were quite angry.”

Mr. Mangrove stared at her.

“I wish you would leave them alone,” Marla said in a quieter tone of voice. “Bothering my parents is like poking sticks at zoo animals. It gets them all riled up. They can really make my life difficult when they get that way.”

“Do you know what our meeting is about, Miss van Kirk?”

“No,” Marla said. “I don’t know what any of this is about.”

“Mortimer Braggs?”

“Ah, man, what’s wrong with a nickname?”

Mr. Mangrove stared him down.

“Okay, so my old man was drunk at the parent-teacher conference,” Mort said. “He made a fool of himself. He always does that.”

Mr. Mangrove waited for his answer in silence.

“He was a cop, you know,” Mort said. “My mom was a cop, too. She got herself shot dead, and my old man hasn’t been the same since. So what has any of that got to do with me? I ain’t done nothing. The blade was just a joke. I got all the warning I need to play it straight.”

“Do you know what our meeting is about, Mr. Braggs?”

Mort’s voice got louder. “Some cheap excuse to weed us out? Is that it, Mr. Mangrove? You already got it figured that I’m going to mess up, so you’re going to get rid of me before I get around to it?”

“Do you know what our meeting is about, Mr. Braggs?”

Mort sighed, on the verge of tears. “No. I don’t know what I’m doing here.”

“Thank you, Mr. Braggs. Miss Marple? How about you?”

Becky shook her head without looking up.

Mr. Mangrove surprised them all by accepting Becky’s silent response without comment. He then eyed Rick.

Rick wondered if the meeting had anything to do with problems they were each having with their parents. Marla’s parents were in Europe. They had conducted the conference earlier in the day by close-circuit television. They were cold people who had once told Rick what a precious daughter they had without once acknowledging Marla’s presence in the room. It had been the first and only time he had ever seen tears in Marla’s eyes. They had no use for a daughter, except as a possession that cast glory upon themselves.

As for Mort, Rick was surprised Social Services allowed him to live with his father. His father had been

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kicked off the force for excessive violence following his wife's death. Rick had never had the courage to ask Mort for details. Mort seldom talked about his parents and their sordid past.

Rick had heard stories about Becky Marple. She was a genius and had attended private schools. Some kind of mental breakdown had left her with failing grades and a fear of the crowds at Armstrong High.

"I have an antique computer that can access information quicker than you, Mr. Kaiser. As you may have noticed, a simple yes or no answer will suffice."

"It's got something to do with our parents," Rick said.

Mr. Mangrove gave him a cold smile. "Very good. Yes, it has something to do with your parents. Tell me, Mr. Kaiser, are your parents perfect human beings? Have you been raised to be a flawless young adult?"

Hardly. Rick was proud of his parents. They were generous and loving people. If only they were around to help more often. On his own, he had done well. He played on the school's football and soccer teams. He maintained a high point grade average.

But he felt like a rudderless ship adrift at sea. He let Marla boss him around. He had been told that Mort would get him into serious trouble sooner or later. Mort and Marla were both badly in need of friends, but they were also friends who used and abused him. He didn't know how to put a stop to it. He was a wimp, just like Mort said.

It all boiled down to decisions and choices. Rick was a stranger to himself. He had no sense of direction. He didn't know what was expected of him. He didn't know where he was headed in life. He was adrift in life with plenty of potential and no idea of what to do with it.

“Nobody’s a perfect human being,” Rick said in answer to Mr. Mangrove’s question.

“Exactly,” Mr. Mangrove said. “We are each responsible for our own behavior. Unless they’ve been shown to us, we don’t always know the full range of options available to us. We may encounter influences that overpower us. A tree will bend in a high wind, but a hurricane can uproot even the most flexible.”

“Fine,” Mort called out. “Then let my old man take the test.”

Mr. Mangrove eyed Mort with a solemn look. “Another social agency will have to deal with your father, Mr. Braggs. We are here this evening to see how well you will bear the pressures of your life. You are not being accused of wrongdoing. You are being evaluated for problems that may arise because of your special circumstance.”

“Yeah, like being pegged delinquent?”

“You will not be punished for crimes you have not committed, Mr. Braggs. But it would be in our best interest if we can help you avoid committing crimes, if they are indeed in your future.”

“We could have taken the test during the day,” Marla told Mr. Mangrove. “We take tests all the time.”

“Miss van Kirk, you are not a stupid girl. You have a keen insight into the workings of the human mind despite your age. You are what, sixteen years old?”

“Seventeen. I’ve been seventeen for a whole month now. We are all seventeen.”

“You have taken psych evaluations in the past,” Mr. Mangrove said.

“Lots of them,” Marla admitted.

“None have shown evidence of serious problems.”

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Marla gave the man one of her icy smiles.

“Because in a written test, you can tell us what you think we want to hear. A young woman as smart as yourself, Miss van Kirk, can fool us.”

Some of Marla’s smile faded away.

“We’ve found a way to keep from being fooled. We have a new kind of test to give you. Surely you have all heard of virtual reality.”

Marla smirked.

Virtual reality was old hat. Rick had one at home. He donned his headset and gloves, fired up his computer and modem, and played baseball in Yankee Stadium with Kim Chung of Seoul, Korea. Or any of a hundred other friends worldwide. The visual illusion of the playing field was close to perfect. He could see the ball coming and dive for it. He could feel the ball impact with his glove, but if he stepped past the red lines, the illusion was shattered by the four walls of his basement playroom.

Virtual reality was virtual, almost, but not quite, the real thing.

Mr. Mangrove began pacing. Rick relaxed when the gray eyes set in the dark face moved off the face of his computer screen.

“You are all familiar with virtual reality and its applications,” Mr. Mangrove said. “You are entertained by virtual reality programs. You are educated by them. But existing technology does not completely fool you. Virtual reality cannot absorb you, mind and body, one hundred percent.”

Marla drummed her fingers on the screen. Mort looked agitated. Becky had her hands over her head, as if trying to retreat into a virtual reality inside her own head.

“Until tonight,” Mr. Mangrove said.

Everyone looked up in surprise.

“We have a new technique,” Mr. Mangrove said. “We disconnect the body and its physical senses. We tap directly into the brain. Think of it as a waking dream that you will not be able to distinguish from reality.”

“I don’t remember volunteering for this,” Marla said. “I’m no guinea pig.”

Mort waved his hand. “I’ll have a go at it. Sounds like a trip.”

“The test is strictly voluntary,” Mr. Mangrove said quietly. “You may leave this classroom any time you wish, if you dare.”

Marla slid out the side of her desk and stood. She held out her hand. “Rick. Let’s go. Now.”

“The evaluation is physically harmless,” Mr. Mangrove added. “You have no more reason to fear it than you have reason to fear yourselves.”

Mr. Mangrove was throwing loaded statements at them. For the first time in his three month relationship with Marla, Rick balked. An opportunity was being offered. If he left with Marla and Mort now, there would be trouble down the line. If this was a chance to deal with it now, he had to take it. “I think we should go along with this,” he told Marla. “It may be important.”

“We’re all screw-ups!” Mort yelled at him. “We’re about to have our heads chopped off! We’re dog meat, Kaiser!”

Mr. Mangrove waited to see which way Rick would turn. The others waited for his decision. If he followed Marla out, Mort and Becky would be gone like a shot as well. Becky looked close to panic. Mort was terrified.

And Rick was faced with his most important decision

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ever.

“Don’t cross me, Rick Kaiser,” Marla said in a biting tone of voice. “I want out of here, and I want you to come with me.”

Rick made his choice. “Don’t let your parents off the hook so easy,” he said, trying to sound cool. “Let’s poke a few sticks through the bars at the zoo animals. What harm can it do?”

Marla stared at him in surprise, shaken by his betrayal. Rick didn’t know if she was capable of any real depth of feeling. Even her anger was an emotion as cold as a block of ice.

Ice Queen, Mort called her.

She looked around at Mort. For a moment, Rick thought she would leave with Mort. Mort was a temptation for her. Mort would do anything she asked. Anything. He had no conscience at all.

They would make a dangerous pair. In the end, Rick knew they would destroy one another.

Mort half rose to his feet with an expression of astonishment.

“Marla, use your head,” Rick said softly. “It might even be fun.”

“Doubt it.”

But she sat back down.

Devastated by Marla’s change of heart, Mort glared in anger at the girl, and then at Rick.

“I have waited for your cooperation before I stated the fact,” Mr. Mangrove said. “The fact is, the four of you have a problem, and you know it. You need this. We are not here to hurt you.”

“Told you so,” Mort muttered unhappily.

Mr. Mangrove eyed Mort and continued. “The psychological evaluation will provide us with information we can use to help both you and your parents. Before a problem can be resolved, it must be brought into the light of reality, even the light of virtual reality. How you react to our scenario will tell us the exact nature of your individual problems. After that, the process of healing can begin...

“...if you have the courage to face yourselves. If you are strong enough to deal with what you find. You may have the sense of being on the horns of a dilemma, damned if you do and damned if you don’t, but I promise you will not be harmed. So, what’s it to be?”

It was far more than they had expected. Mort gawked at Mr. Mangrove. Marla looked stunned. Becky’s lovely eyes were wide with astonishment. Mr. Mangrove broke the moment of silence before Rick could work up the courage to leave. “Then we shall begin,” Mr. Mangrove said.

By that time, it was too late to back down.

## *Four*

**B**ecky raised her hand. “I think I’m going to be sick.” She rose from her desk and ran from the room, gagging as she went.

Marla’s cruel laughter followed her.

Mr. Mangrove sighed. “If anyone else has a personal matter to attend to, do it now.”

Rick stood. “Gotta go to the john.”

Rick expected Mort to follow, but Mort had his eye on Marla and the opportunity to be alone with her. Rick stepped into the hall in time to see Becky hurry into the nearest girl’s room. She glanced around to see if she had been followed. Rick smiled reassurance. Briefly, warmly, she smiled back.

Rick locked himself in the first stall of the boy’s room and took out the cigarette stuck in his shirt pocket. Mort

had given it to him earlier in the day. Cigarettes were against the law, although people still smoked in their own homes. He wasn't sure what he intended to do with his.

The restroom door opened and closed. Footsteps shuffled on the tile outside his stall.

Rick kicked the stall door open.

The pale gray eyes of the janitor stared back at him. The temperature in the room dropped ten degrees.

"Do I know you?" Rick said. It seemed that he did.

"I don't think we've met before," the janitor said.

The janitor continued to stare at him. Rick had to say something. "Did you get your floor-washer fixed?"

"He wasn't broke. I was just getting his log." The janitor held up a microchip and grinned. "Records for two years of washing floors. Exciting material." He noticed the cigarette and frowned. "You going to smoke that it here?"

"I don't think I'd get away with it."

"Hardly."

Rick chucked the unlit cigarette into the toilet. He flushed and tried to slip past the janitor.

"You kids are having a rough time with this evaluation thing. You can relax, though. Things will work out."

"I take it you've seen other groups come and go."

The janitor nodded. "Lots of them. It's no big deal."

"Mangrove's got us spooked."

"You wouldn't be here if you couldn't be helped."

Rick didn't quite agree. "Mort's not going to change. Neither is Marla."

"I'd agree that you could use a better class of friends, kid."

"I like the friends I got."

"Selecting friends is a skill, like reading or writing."

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You still have a few things to learn, it seems to me.”

Rick wondered who the janitor thought he was talking to him like one of the instructor-assistants. It didn't surprise him, though. In the past, it hadn't taken much in the way of brains or education to swing a mop. Now, janitors fixed the machines that mopped the floors. They were technicians, and they were smart people.

“Mort and Marla aren't all bad,” Rick said in self-defense of the two.

“You're sensitive to their feelings,” the janitor said.

“Yeah? So?”

“They don't return the favor. They care only about themselves.”

“Yeah, well, I must have a few problems of my own, or I wouldn't be here.”

The janitor nodded. “What you think about yourself put you here. What you think about yourself largely determines the things that happen to you in life. Keep that in mind and you'll breeze through this evaluation of yours.”

Rick walked away wondering if the janitor was just flapping his gums, or if he had inside information worth keeping in mind.

The man called out after him. “You could help the Marple girl. She could use a friend.”

“She had her chance once,” Rick said without looking back. He had accidentally knocked Becky's books out of her hand last semester. He had tried to be friendly. She had gathered her things and run away without a word.

“She hasn't had much practice being sociable. She's planning on bumping into you before you return to your room, hoping she'll have a second chance.”

Rick left the boy's room. It had no door, just a brief maze of tiled walls to block a direct view. He walked in nervous circles in the hall, taking a moment to calm down.

They were all edgy, Rick reminded himself. Mort had panicked and tried to run away. Becky had gotten sick. On a gut level, Rick knew there was something especially frightening about their late afternoon evaluation. There was more going on around them than met the eye.

Rick paused before entering ninety-four. When he heard the soft sound of footsteps near, he looked up. Becky Marple stopped in front of him and looked quickly down at the floor.

Rick decided to give it a try. "The last time I bumped into you, I was never forgiven."

Becky blushed, smiled, and nodded, all without looking at him. She tried to slip through the door and escape.

"Becky, look at me," he said.

Becky looked up in surprise.

"You've got your mother's eyes. I've got a thing for Asian eyes. I hope you don't mind."

Her voice was a whisper. "How do you know about my mother?"

"Gossip gets around, doesn't it? Don't tell me you haven't overheard things about me. I got a rep for being a jock and all. I'm not."

"You go steady with Marla van Kirk!" Becky said, clearly awed by Marla's reputation as a high society girl.

"Things aren't always what they seem."

"Do you love her?"

The question sounded naïve and unrealistic. "I like

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her. I understand her.”

“Oh.”

Becky edged closer to the door. Inside the classroom, Marla and Mort were talking. Yelling, actually. It was Marla’s way of getting to know people. Rick saw nothing of the instructor-assistant, Mr. Mangrove.

“Looks like we’ve got some time to kill,” Rick said to the girl as his side. “Want to walk down the hall and talk?”

Becky looked up at him in alarm.

Rick had to laugh. “Hey, I don’t bite. I’ve been known to nibble, but not with strangers.”

Becky laughed unexpectedly. It was the most cheerful sound Rick had heard in ages. He would never have guessed she had it in her.

“Okay,” she said. “I guess we can talk.”

“That’s great.”

But she said nothing as they headed down the broad hallway toward the main entrance. “I heard your mom and dad are computer programmers,” Rick said to get things going. “You probably know more about the new virtual equipment than the rest of us.”

Becky shook her head. “I don’t! I’ve never heard of such a thing before! I didn’t know it was even possible, at least not complete virtual reality! But it must be okay. My parents must have wanted me to do this, or I wouldn’t be here.”

“Marla said she was having trouble remembering things,” Rick said, hoping Becky would have an explanation. “I was having the same problem. How about you?”

Becky looked up at him and held his gaze for a longer moment. It seemed a crime the way she wasted her

Eurasian beauty staring at the ground so much. “I thought it was just me,” she said breathlessly.

“Marla thinks we’re drugged.”

Becky shook her head. “My mom and dad would never allow it.”

“I guess we’ll have to wait and see how things go.”

Becky hugged herself as she walked.

“We’re all scared,” Rick said.

Becky glanced at him. “Your friends scare me.”

Rick was about to say that they were all bark and no bite. He thought better of it. “Are you going to be okay?” he asked instead.

She stopped. She stood in silence with her head hung low. When she looked up at him, she had tears in her eyes.

“I don’t think so.”

Rick reached out to put his hand on her arm. Becky stepped quickly back. “Please, don’t touch me.”

“I only meant...”

Becky became agitated. “I’m sorry. I don’t deal well with people.”

She turned and hurried back to room ninety-four.

Mr. Mangrove was waiting for them. Rick took his seat.

“Shall we proceed?”

Again, Mr. Mangrove paced as he talked.

“The new virtual reality equipment is built into the special desk consoles where you are sitting. There are no helmets or bulky gear to wear. Everything is done by direct electrical interface with the brain.”

Mr. Mangrove stared at each of them in turn. “When you are ready to begin, lay your head back and relax. The

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evaluation will take only a few minutes. Your sense of time may be distorted. Hours may seem to pass. Or even days. But we will be out of here sooner than you think. You have my word.”

Rick could not tell what was happening with the others. For a long time, he refused to lay his head back against the headrest. He looked back at one point in time, certain that he was being watched.

The janitor was at the door. He gave Rick a thumbs up.

“I know this is going to sound strange,” Mr. Mangrove said quietly, as if from a great distance. “For each of you, it’s going to begin with an entirely arbitrary stimuli. For no special reason, we have chosen a cat. It begins now...”

With that, Rick found himself in another place and time. He stood in darkness, in a jungle or a forest. Animals stirred in the underbrush. Stars glimmered in the night sky overhead. In the distance, an animal wailed, lonesome and calling to a mate, or maybe dying in the jaws of something larger than itself.

From close by, one of those larger animals growled low in its throat.

## *Five*

**M**ortimer Braggs screamed. It didn't seem likely that his reputation among his friends would be damaged any. He was suddenly and completely alone. There was nobody to hear, and nobody to know how much he feared the dark.

In time, he would have recovered his initial moment of panic. The cat never gave him a chance. It attacked from the dark. Mort heard it snarl. He heard the crackle of twigs on the ground as it launched itself. And then he saw the dark shape arc through the moonlight. He brought his arms up in time to keep the animal from tearing his face off.

He tried to toss the hot, wiry body of the animal away. First, he had to dislodge its claws from his face. He could not.

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And then he got angry and filled with rage. The whole world was against him. He was a misfit. Everywhere he turned, he was attacked.

He fought back. His screams of fear turned to screams of anger. He found the cats neck with both hands and he squeezed. The cat squirmed in his arms like the wild animal it was. Its claws dug even deeper into his flesh. But Mort felt himself squeezing the life out of the animal. His fingernails dug into its skin. He felt its blood on his hands.

In time, the cat quivered and went limp. Mort felt the heat of its body drain away. When the claws let loose from his skin, he flung the carcass into the darkness and shoved his way through the underbrush. If he stayed in the jungle, he'd be attacked again.

In an instant, he stumbled into the open. The ground was now concrete beneath his feet. He looked up in surprise, down a city street lit by rows of glowing streetlights.

He felt no safer. This, too, was the jungle. He had been hurt just as bad in dark alleys. There were men here far more dangerous than the cat that had attacked him.

He ran down the middle of the unfamiliar streets. Gang-bangers hooted and laughed at him from the sidewalk and alleys. A bottle smashed at his feet. A rock bounced off a car as he passed.

Lost, he ran through the city streets, turning every corner at random until his breath burned in his lungs, and a sharp pain stabbed in his side. At the very moment he was ready again to drop to his knees and let fate take its course, he recognized the street he was on.

He was home.

As if home was a place of sanctuary against the jungle and the night.

Exhausted, he went up the stairs to the main entrance of a windowless building, keyed in his ID number, and went down the hall to the end apartment. He paused at the door. Inside, he heard his father knock something to the floor. Whatever it was, it shattered, and his father cursed.

Mort tapped out another security code on the lock, hoping his father hadn't changed it. Mort had no other place to go, but sometimes his father locked him out. Sometimes, his father changed the code in a drunken rage and locked himself out as well.

The door opened. Mort turned just inside and tried to slip unnoticed to his own room.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Gunther Braggs muttered at him.

The lights were out everywhere except the kitchen. His father stood backlit in the doorway, leaning heavily against the frame.

Gunther had a bottle in his hand. His eyes were bloodshot, and he looked about ready to pass out. Mort wished he'd hurry up and get it over with.

"I said what are you doing here?" Gunther said.

"I live here, too, pops," Mort said. He wished his voice didn't sound so whiny.

"Well, you won't for much longer."

His father staggered and turned away.

Mort thought about it. He'd be out of school next year. He still didn't know where he would go, or what he would do. He was failing most of his classes. If he got into trouble again, they'd put him in the Army. For the young

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and the healthy, the prison system and the Army had become one and the same. It was the only thing society figured it could do to get people to follow rules and finish their education. There wasn't enough money for the old style prison system, and the world had no use for the infantry anymore. Wars were fought by machines to keep down the bloodshed, their operators secure in underground bunkers, or in high orbit around the world.

His father drank up the money that would have put him through vocational school. Gunther called it room and board. He rambled on in the kitchen. "You'll be out in the streets next year, running with the gangs."

What would his father say if he knew he ran with them now? They were the only friends he had outside school. They hadn't let him in yet, not a kid with a cop for a father.

Mort took a moment to look around the dirty apartment. They'd get the health department called on them if this kept up. Gunther refused to do any housework. Mort sometimes cleaned up while Gunther was passed out. As often as not, having lost face, Gunther would loose his temper and trash the place again.

Mort went to his bedroom. His father's badge glimmered on the living room wall alongside the door, a constant reminder of the past. Gunther was still proud of what he had been. Mort closed his bedroom door behind him, backed into a corner and squatted in the dark, wondering if things could have been different.

Gunther Braggs had been a lieutenant on the police force. Gunther's wife, Bernice, Mort's mother, had been a sergeant working undercover. She had been no better a mother than Gunther had been a father. Mort had been a

mistake in an overcrowded world. Babies had been out of vogue when he was born. In a world of fifteen billion, they still were.

Gunther had never told him exactly how his mother had died, or why he had been kicked off the force. Mort had heard on the streets that Gunther had cornered a young hood. The boy had pulled a gun. Gunther had been trying to talk the young gang-banger out of the gun when Bernice made an unexpected appearance. Thinking he was being outflanked, the kid had panicked and shot her.

And in the rage that followed, Gunther had emptied his gun into the boy.

Gunther had never been the same afterwards. He had turned mean, and the department had been forced to retire him early. Gunther hadn't wanted to retire. He had moved into the ghetto with his young son to be close to his old precinct.

But his former friends and partners abandoned him. He didn't make any new ones. And Gunther started drinking. Mort had gotten as tough and mean as his old man trying to survive on the streets. He could hardly get along at Armstrong High anymore. According to his counselor, he lacked the proper social skills. Rather, he had picked up bad ones. His counselor didn't seem to understand that bad ones were needed to get to school in one piece every morning.

Mort had one decent friend left in the whole world. Rick Kaiser. And Rick was afraid of him. If Rick had an ounce of courage in his bones, Mort would have no friends at all.

A cricket chirped somewhere in the dark. The sound reminded him that he was still in the jungle. Danger

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surrounded him.

He heard his father fall in the kitchen. It sounded like he took the table and a chair or two with him. Mort crawled in bed and slept while he could. The silence never lasted long.

Gunther's cry from his own bedroom propelled Mort out of bed in the middle of the night.

"Bernice! No!"

Mort pulled his pillow over his head and tried not to hear his father yelling in his dreams. He needed sleep. He had school in the morning.

But Gunther came crashing into his room. "Get out! Get out of here!"

Mort always slept dressed in defense against Gunther's blind rages. He dived past a wild swing of the fist and was out the front door in a flash. Inside the apartment, a tormented man let out a bellow of anguish that never diminished in volume. Gunther Braggs would die grieving for his lost wife.

Mort ran from the apartment building with tears running from his face. A drunk blocked his way on the sidewalk. Mort shouldered him aside, sending him crashing to the pavement.

A car squealed tires as it came around the corner. Young men Mort had never seen before hurtled insults. Mort picked up a piece of broken pavement and threw it. He bounced the five pound piece of concrete off the hood and left a dent.

Tires squealed. The car nose-dived and stopped. Doors flew open, and four men charged out.

Four were not enough to deal with Mort's hurt and anger. Mort barreled past two to get to the boy who had

yelled the insults at him. As soon as three had managed to drag Mort off their injured friend, they all retreated, battered and bleeding. Mort knelt in the middle of the street when the car roared away, sobbing and trying to catch his breath.

Only in the silent aftermath of the fight did he notice the gun that had been lost in the scuffle. It was an illegal antique, a forty-five caliber semiautomatic, chrome-plated pistol, identical to the one his father kept locked away in the apartment. For as long as he could remember, Mort had wanted to get his hands on that gun. New guns had gadgets in them and couldn't be fired except by their owners, nor could ownership be transferred except at the City Hall Tech Department after a thorough background check. Illegal antiques that could be fired by anyone were as rare as gold nuggets.

Antique or not, the gun would silence his enemies. The gun would earn him respect on the street. It would be worth the risk.

A gun would make him a man.

## *Six*

**M**arla van Kirk stood in darkness, surrounded by jungle. Overhead, stars dusted the night sky. With a groan of pure pleasure, she opened her arms to embrace the warmth. She closed her eyes, threw her head back, and drank in the peace and quiet.

This place was wild and free. For the first time in her life, she was alone. Her parents had told her it would happen some day. They would die and she would be free at last. This wasn't the way they thought it would happen, but it must have happened. How otherwise could she have gotten away from them?

A cat growled nearby.

Marla paused and watched for movement in the underbrush. She had never been taught to fear. The world existed to sustain her. People and animals alike existed to

serve and obey the whims of her parents.

“Kitty-kitty! Here kitty!”

The white Siamese bounced to her from the underbrush. Marla cried with joy. She had always wanted one. Her parents had always denied her. Almost desperately, she reached for the soft, warm fur, and pressed it to her body.

The cat purred for a time.

But the purring grew fainter, and then stopped altogether.

The cat began to change form.

“No! Please!”

The animal’s warmth and softness turned hard and cold. Instead of a living creature, she cradled instead a foot-tall statue of porcelain, the present that had been given to her by her parents on her fifth birthday. The summer previous to that birthday, she had visited neighbors with a litter of newborn kittens. She had been forbidden to touch. Her parents had promised her a kitten of her own, and this was how they had responded to her wishes.

Marla set the statue on the ground. She did not break it in her anger. She had been taught the value of things. She had been taught to behave like a young lady. Her defense against the hurt was to emulate her ever-so-caring parents and not feel anything at all.

It was the way of the world, the only way she knew.

Bright light appeared off to her right. Brilliant, cold, winter light, her parent’s world. Marla turned away from the glare. The jungle darkness was warm, soft and filled with living things. Her very life depended upon exploring the unknown and learning a new way of life.

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Something furry passed near her feet. It mattered little what kind of animal it was. She dropped to her hands and knees and reached for it eagerly.

“Please, let me pet you!”

A mouse hopped onto the back of her hand. Marla paused so as not to frighten it away. The lowly creature perched on two legs and quivered with nervous tension. The heat of its tiny body warmed her skin. In the next moment, it became a thing of stone.

A voice murmuring close by cut short her disappointment. At first, the intruders frightened her. It was one fear she had picked up from her parents, the fear of hooligans and the poverty-stricken world in which they lived. “But you must know your enemy,” her father had told her last year. It had been the reason he had sent her to a public high school for her senior year, to live among her enemies and implement the defenses her parents had instilled in her.

She reached out and parted a bush with one hand to see who they were. They sat on a park bench, a boy trying to kiss a girl. The girl sat without moving, without responding to the boy in any way at all.

Her behavior alarmed Marla. She had to respond. She had to embrace the boy and kiss back, or he would leave her, and she would be alone. But the girl was ignorant. And frightened. Marla understood all too well. Neither did she know how to respond to Rick Kaiser’s gentle displays of affection. Rick was the first boy in her life. The very first.

Marla gasped in surprise. The intruder was Rick Kaiser! And the girl? Who was the girl?

Trees rustled overhead in a spring breeze. Patches of

moonlight fell to the ground. Sooner or later, the face of the girl would be bathed in pale illumination.

It happened, and Marla reeled back in shock. She brought her arms across her face, as if to ward off an attack.

The girl at Rick's side was a manikin. It wasn't even a living girl.

And it had her face!

Marla closed her eyes in pain, remembering the times Rick had tried to kiss her. She had not known how to kiss back. She had frozen up. She turned into a lifeless manikin each and every time, cold inside, and hard.

The warmth and the darkness of the jungle shunned her. The winter glare flared brighter and engulfed the jungle and its precious secrets. Along with the warmth went her feelings. Drained of emotion, at least she did not hurt.

The winter light surrounded her with a world more suited to her station in life. Despite the chill in the air, green hills rolled beneath a blue sky like an unending golf course, her father's golf course, no less. She stood upon a cobblestone path that wound through the hills as far as the eye could see. The cobblestone path led to the gates of a distant castle.

The castle towered into the blue sky, an edifice of silver and gold flashing and sparkling in the sun. From such a distance, it looked like a tiny knick-knack. Marla had seen it before somewhere. On the living room mantel at home, maybe. A priceless treasure, it meant nothing to her. Money was a thing her parents cared about. Money bought things, but things she took for granted.

Still, it was important. She belonged to that world. It

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was her responsibility to care for it. In turn, it would care for her. Her parents had promised that someday all of this would be hers, a bright and cold world free of risk and danger.

Perhaps this was that day.

## *Seven*

The night time jungle took form about Becky Marple. She recognized the cat that howled at her from the underbrush. It was Pywacket. The cat belonged to her parents. It bit and scratched when petted.

All Becky could see were the eyes of the cat in the underbrush. Yellow orbs glowed in the darkness and made her think of Halloween. The howling of the cat naturally blended with the moaning of the wind in the trees.

A rain of dead leaves fell to the ground. The trees became gnarled fingers standing against the star-lit sky. The chilled wind blew the carpet of dead leaves away until the ground, too, was barren.

Becky stood shivering in the dark autumn chill, trying to remember why this was happening to her.

“Hi, Becky.”

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She turned, overjoyed by the sound of Bobby Randolph's voice. What she saw standing behind her sent her staggering back in horror.

She could see through him, all but his feet. His feet were missing, trailing off into a white mist. Bobby stood by a gravestone, his own gravestone.

When she had been twelve years old, Bobby Randolph had been her best friend. He had died of leukemia the summer of the incident at summer camp.

"Surprised to see me?" Bobby said.

Becky didn't know whether she should be or not. "My mother told me you went to heaven."

Bobby grinned. "Did you believe her?"

"I knew you died. What are you doing here?"

"I came back to help you," Bobby said. "You look like you could use a friend."

"You were my first friend," Becky said. "And my last."

"That's not such a good thing," Bobby said solemnly. "There should have been many others."

Becky stared at the ground. "I didn't want others."

"I know." Bobby looked sad. "But look at what you've gone and done to yourself, Becky Marple. You're practically a ghost yourself."

"I feel like one," Becky said.

"It's hard to feel like a real person when you have nobody to talk to except machines," Bobby said. "Machines don't care. They don't feel."

"I know." Becky shrugged her helplessness.

"Do you want to come with me?" Bobby Randolph said. "I can show you the safe way home."

Becky balked at the invitation. "I don't want to go home. I'd rather be a ghost like you."

Bobby shook his head. "It's not what is best for you."

"What is best for me, may I ask?"

"It would be best to face your fears and resolve them."

"I'm afraid of everything. I wouldn't even know where to start."

Bobby pointed to a part of the landscape that was pitch black. "Start there."

Becky studied the mysterious blackness darker than spilled India ink. "Why is it so dark?"

Bobby shrugged. "The dark represents the unknown."

"Bad things happen in the dark," Becky said.

"The things that take advantage of you spring from the darkness, but the darkness is only your ignorance. Every time you grow, you must venture into the darkness and the unknown to learn something new."

In another direction, a golden light on a distant hill caught and held her attention. "What's that over there?"

Bobby studied the light. "Past memories. Bad memories. The reason for the way things are."

She recognized the amber light. She had a memory of being strapped in a car seat and watching that warm light approach. It was home.

She started through the trees to investigate. Bobby followed in silence.

The light was a log cabin in the woods. She failed to recognize it until she peeked in a window. Inside, her mother and father sat at computers at opposite ends of the room. They stared at their multicolored screens in the darkness, tapping at keyboards and murmuring their commands to the CPU.

A playpen had been shoved against the back wall. Within, a baby lay on a bare plastic mattress. It was

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crying. It had been crying for so long that its voice had gone hoarse. A branch beating against a window had frightened it earlier in the evening. Its fear had long since faded to a dull ache.

Things had never changed. Even now, school let out in the afternoon. Her parents often worked until the late evening hours. Like her parents, she spend long hours alone at a computer screen alone, programming a machine to be her very best friend and say all the things she wanted to hear.

“I don’t have anything to go back to,” she told Bobby hovering gray and pale among the trees. “Why shouldn’t I be a ghost like you? Nobody knows I’m alive anyhow.”

“Ghosts live in the past,” Bobby told her. “To be alive, you must move into the future.”

A glimmer of understanding and then confusion. “But the future is always dark.”

“The future is the unknown,” Bobby said.

Becky gave a shuddering sigh of despair. “Then I’m trapped here.”

“Your fear has trapped you here.”

She turned to him. “What about you? Where do you come from?”

Bobby pointed to a gray fog among the trees. A pale glow illuminated the haze from within. “I come from there,” Bobby said.

Becky hurried among the trees to where the fog rolled across her feet. Tombstones protruded above the glowing mist. “You’re buried here,” Becky said.

“Other things are buried here, too,” Bobby said. “This is the past.”

“What things?”

“The worst of your memories. The source of your fears of the dark and the unknown.”

“Mother took me to a psychiatrist once,” Becky said. “His name was Michael Oppenmeier.”

“I don’t remember that,” Bobby said.

“That was just after you died. Michael said he would help me remember bad memories so that I would be free of them. He failed.”

“He failed. You were stronger,” Bobby said.

Becky thought about it. It was ironic. “A little girl stronger than a grown man.”

“Strength born of fear, but strength needed to penetrate the dark and the unknown and to grow.”

Becky preferred the graveyard. She stepped closer, thinking that death would be a place of unending comfort, knowing nothing, fearing nothing.

“Do not be so foolish as to imagine what death may be,” Bobby warned her. “Better by far to challenge the darkness.”

Becky did not have the courage. She did not have the will. She walked to the gravestone.

“Be careful, Becky. The past, too, can be part of the darkness you fear.”

The ground gave way beneath her. She fell, not into a casket, but into a dimly lit room hardly much bigger than a casket, the utility closet of the Day Dreams Child Care Center. When she recognized the room, she would have been less terrified had the ground opened upon a tomb of skeletons.

A gnarled old man grasped her ankle. Becky clawed raw earth, screaming. She had forgotten. She had not wanted to remember. Not ever again.

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“Come visit, little girl,” his gravely voice murmured.

He reached up under her dress as she slid into the earth, dragging her down with his rough hands on her bare legs.

“Come on down, China doll, to your good friend Mr. Peters!”

## *Eight*

**T**he cat snarled in the darkness. Rick froze, knowing the cat could be anything. Some virtual reality games were like that. You chose what was to happen next by the way you reacted to a stimulus.

The key word was interactive.

Rick had only one memory of a cat. As expected, the animal that bounded from the underbrush was a manifestation of that memory. He scooped up Prank, his old gray neutered tomcat, the most harmless animal on the face of the earth, and tucked it beneath one arm. Prank purred like a vibrator against his side.

Rick studied the jungle, knowing the exact nature of his foe. The jungle represented the subconscious mind, wild and free of restraint, a place of dark secrets and dangerous emotion. Rick wondered how Mort, Marla and

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Becky had reacted to the sinister darkness. He doubted if they had done well. In the long run, he doubted if he was going to do any better. The jungle was thick with tension. He could feel its electric charge in the air. If he held his thoughts at bay, nothing would happen. Very carefully, he tried to back away from trouble.

The underbrush quickly thinned. When he turned away, the ground was mostly clear of trees and dense underbrush. A full moon in the night sky glowed out across a wooded park area outside town. Just over a hill or two, home awaited.

He remembered now where he lived. He thought it wise to go there and wait. Hopefully, there would be somebody about to tell him what to do. Mr. Mangrove had promised the evaluation wouldn't last long.

But he had been warned, too, that time would seem distorted. Hours could pass. Or days. He couldn't hold his deepest fears at bay that long. He wasn't certain he was holding them back even now. Storm clouds passed in front of the moon and darkened his path. That could hardly be coincidental. *What I see is a reflection of myself*, he reminded himself, *a reflection of my own mind*.

Rick zigzagged along the streets of the town. Nobody seemed to be out and about. The doors and windows of every home stood open, beckoning him to explore and indulge his curiosity. He dared not. It was safer to sit tight and not make waves. If he had a philosophy of living, that was it. Don't stick your neck out. Don't take chances.

He reached his own house and found it empty. The lights refused to come on in the living room.

"Mom?"

Silence.

“Dad? Mom? I’m home!”

But meeting his parents in this waking nightmare would have been terrifying. How could he talk to another human being knowing they were but a figment of his own imagination? It would be worse than talking to himself in a mirror-- and having the mirror answer back. Nothing in this entire world was real. Anything could happen.

“Problems, Mr. Kaiser?”

Rick whirled about. His heart pounded so hard, he feared it would burst. The janitor stood in the center of the dimly lit living room. He still wore his blue uniform, his pale gray eyes all but glowing in the dark.

“Am I real?” the janitor asked of him. “A hallucination perhaps?”

Rick decided that he was real in the sense that he came from outside the program. He was either a real human being, or a computer simulation at the very least.

Prank jumped from his arms and ran from the room. Rick stuffed his shaking hands in his pocket. “I don’t know for sure,” he confessed.

“But you remember why you’re here?”

“I was with some friends.” Rick fought to remember. “We were going to take a test of some kind. Was all of that just a dream, too?”

“If you couldn’t tell, it’s not important,” the janitor said. “What is important is to break this little stalemate of ours. You’re a smart boy, Rick. You are too self-aware to be fooled by our little game, but not decisive enough to take control of the situation. We’re like gunfighters who can draw on each other in the same split second. Like archers who can split one another’s arrows in the bull’s-eye.”

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“Then let me out,” Rick said. His teeth chattered. “I’ve had enough.”

The janitor shook his head. “That is not within my power. You still have the most important reality to contend with, the reality of your own conscious and emotional being.” The janitor grew close and put his arm on Rick’s shoulder. “That is a reality that exists only in our hearts and can never be simulated.”

Rick backed away from the man, not wanting to be touched by something that might not be human. “I don’t know what you are talking about.”

“You have three friends who are like the cat that began our little experiment. They look to you to tell them who they are and how they should behave. We are all like the cat, Rick. We are what we think ourselves to be, and what we think others think ourselves to be, no more, no less.”

The janitor advanced on him step by step. “It’s an interesting idea, don’t you think? We are like storybook characters that we build inside ourselves. We think we are this way. We think we are that way. We think we are loved. We think we are hated. The strange thing is, although the creation is ours alone, we look to family and friends for directions on how to put ourselves together. Marla van Kirk believes she is enslaved by the opinion of her parents. Becky is convinced of her worthlessness because her parents give her too little needed attention. Mort is allowing himself to be destroyed by the neglect and belligerence of his parents.”

“Let me out of here,” Rick said. “You have no right to do this to us. We haven’t done anything wrong. Mr. Mangrove said so himself.”

William G. Tedford

The janitor backed away into the shadows, or perhaps the shadows moved to engulf him.

“It’s not our fault the way we are! He said so himself!”

But the living room was empty now. Rick walked in circles, confused by his sudden isolation. He ran his hand along a coffee table. It felt so real.

It wasn’t.

Armstrong High School was playing God.

Rick raised his fists to the darkness.

“Let me out of here!”

## *Nine*

A garbage can crashed to the pavement. Mort Braggs whirled about, aiming the gun at the can rolling from an alley. A cat flew along the ground in pursuit of scattering rats. Grinning, Mort resisted the temptation to open fire on the little scavengers.

Nervous tension gathered inside him like storm clouds. He walked in a large circle in the middle of the street, wondering how to get back to the safety of the jungle. The closest city park was a mile away. Baker Street Park. It had two dying trees, knee high weeds, and a rusting swing set without any seats. It was a place for drug dealers, not kids. Jungle animals, but not house cats.

Mort chalked the jungle down to a dream. He had dreamed the cat just before his father had awakened him

and kicked him out. Why shouldn't he be confused? His head still spun with fatigue. He'd go to school in the morning and get cut down for dirty clothes and blood-shot eyes. Hungry, he'd not be able to study.

At least there would be Marla van Kirk. The Ice Queen. Marla was always the bright spot of his day, even if she would have nothing to do with him. They were both messed over in the head. They shared that in common. Otherwise, they were from different worlds entirely.

Rick Kaiser was from a good background. Marla van Kirk would never lower herself beneath her station in life, but he knew what she thought of Rick aside from all that. Rick was a wimp. Marla van Kirk had yet to learn that he had more in common with her than Rick. Her parents had taught her that she was special, just as his parents had taught him that he was special, too, a thorn in the side of the world.

“Hey, punk.”

Mort froze in place. The voice had sounded from directly behind him. Mort turned slowly. The mugger searched his eyes for fear. He found none. Mort brought the shiny forty-five pistol up to bear.

With a cry of surprise, the mugger turned and fled.

Mort followed him with the barrel of the gun. Slowly, his anger grew. His finger squeezed the trigger relentlessly.

The gun boomed. The kick sent him staggering back. The bullet sparked off the side of a building an inch above the running man's head. The man spun around with a look of mortal terror in his eyes.

A car stopped at the intersection a quarter block away. The overhead street light highlighted the dent in the hood. His buddies were back looking for the gun they had

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lost. One man got out of the car. Fire spat like firecrackers sparkling in the night. Bullets zipped and sank like angry bees around Mort's head.

In a raging anger that would not be denied, Mort raised his gun and fired. The boom was like thunder. Again, the recoil pushed him back a step.

The front tire of the car blew. The car sank to one side like an injured animal. Fire flashed from beneath the engine, glowing on the pavement below. Four doors flew open, and its passengers scattered.

An explosion blew the hood off a moment later. As the sheet metal spun end for end and landed with a loud bang on the street, electrical sparks flickered blue against the sides of buildings.

Fire lit with a whumping sound in the engine compartment and ran beneath the car. The fuel tank of the car exploded, rolling a fireball into the night sky. The rear of the car rose into the air with it. The car balanced itself on its nose, then went over onto its back, rocking to and fro, and burning fiercely.

"Wow."

Dazed, Mort backed into the shadows. He turned and walked away on wobbling knees. Within seconds, sirens echoed in the distance, responding to dozens of emergency calls phoned in by the people in the surrounding tenement buildings.

"Hey, kid! Hold it right there!"

The echo between the buildings made it hard to pinpoint the source of the voice. Mort finally spotted a figure in the window of a second floor apartment. He man stood against a table lamp inside, pointing a rifle down at him.

The man fired first. The bullet struck between Mort's legs and buzzed away. Mort fired back, and somehow the boom was even louder this time. The entire face of the building twice the size of the window blew inward. Dust billowed out above the street. Within the depths of the wound, a ruddy fire began to glow.

Mort backed away in disbelieving surprise as the building began to burn. Flames rose inside, appearing in windows adjacent to his target, then overhead. Inside, people were screaming. They came pouring from the building at ground level like cockroaches swarming into the night, and out onto the roof overhead. By the time Mort had run the length of the block, flames speared the night sky. Fire trucks and ambulances converged from all sides, filling the dark streets with flashing red, blue and white lights.

A police car pulled alongside him. "Hey kid, what's with the gun?"

The officer climbed from the car, pulling his own revolver and bracing it against the top of the car. "Drop it kid! Turn and spread 'em!"

Mort ducked off to one side. A bullet fired at him smacked a brownstone wall at his side, stinging his face with cement dust. Mort dodged into an alley and ran the length of it. He stopped at the dead-end wall blocking his way. Behind him, the cruiser with flashing blue lights barricaded his only way out.

"Hold it right there, kid!" The cop's angry voice echoed. "You might as well give it up!"

Mort tried a door set in a wall of brick off to one side. He blew the lock away with one shot. The inside of the building was an empty factory of some kind. A few bare

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bulbs dimly illuminated the interior.

Flashing red and blue lights filled every window. Cops moved in from every direction.

“Hey, kid. What do you say? Let’s you and me talk.”

Mort ducked into the shadows.

“Kid, it’s a lost cause. Give it up before somebody gets hurt. Let’s at least talk about it.”

Mort dodged from cover to cover within the machinery-filled building. Behind him, the officer followed with his hands in the air.

But others stirred in the shadows, waiting for a clear shot. Mort knew how they operated. His father had described the procedure a thousand times.

There was something familiar about this particular cop. Mort knew the face from somewhere. One of Gunther’s friends? Gunther’s friends were ancient. Most of them had already retired. Some had died. This man was younger.

“Put down the gun. You’re not in any serious trouble yet. Let’s keep it that way.”

“It was self-defense!” Mort called out. He sounded shrill and unsure of himself. He had set half the city afire and he was yelling self-defense. The cops would never buy his story. Gunther would never make bail for him. He’d rot away beneath city hall for six months before they shoved him through some overcrowded court and sent him away for good.

“I’ll give you the gun,” Mort said, hoping to sound reasonable. “You let me go.”

“Set the gun down, and we’ll talk about it.”

“Back off, mister!” Mort raised his gun. “Don’t come any closer!”

They were pushing, forcing him to either give in or get shot. One stupid mistake would nail him. Even now, one of them could be sneaking up from...”

From less than twenty feet behind him, a careless footstep kicked an empty can. Mort swung around. He saw only a dark shape. And a raised handgun.

“Kid, don’t!”

Mort fired. He had to shoot or be shot.

The gunshot was like thunder. The dark shape staggered back into the light. Light fell across the officer’s face. Mort saw an expression of horror.

On *her* face.

On a face he did recognize from a hundred pictures around the apartment. Gunther had accused him a thousand times in his drunken rages.

“You killed her! The last thing she needed was the distraction of a kid! I told her and I told her you’d be a mistake. You as good as killed her yourself, you worthless piece of crap!”

And he had. The face of the dying officer was the face of his mother. Mort turned back to his father, recognizing him, too, from old photographs. He hadn’t as yet been born when his father was this young.

Gunther Braggs leveled his handgun, his face contorted with panic and rage. Mort had time to raise his hand. “No, wait...”

In a split second, the young cop became the defeated old man that Mort knew. Anguish took form on Gunther Braggs’ face. Grief without measure. Rage beyond boundaries.

Mort never heard the first shot. He never felt it, or the others that followed in close succession.

## *Ten*

**B**eneath the clear blue sky, across the rolling hills of green, horsemen raced up the cobblestone path. Marla stepped into the shadow of a tree, fearful of hooligans.

Her parents had warned her. Strange men were predatory. None were ever to be trusted. She had only to look into Mort Braggs' dark eyes to guess the terrible crimes of which he was capable.

But Marla sighed in despair when she saw that the men on horseback were not men at all. This was not that kind of reality. This was the old fantasy of her childhood brought to life. It had different rules entirely.

The riders who were not men wore silver armor that gleamed in the sun. They had pewter faces like pawns of a chessboard. They passed to either side of her, turned, and

awaited her command. The horses were white porcelain, like the cat she had left behind in the jungle.

Marla started walking back down the cobblestone path knowing that nothing bad could happen to her now. Her honor guard followed as they always did when her parents were gone, her slaves and her jailers.

In time, a gold and silver carriage approached from the castle and stopped at her side. She climbed inside with resignation and sat on red velvet. The carriage then turned around and hurried back with clattering wheels.

Polished green hills passed beneath a glass sky of blue. Toy soldiers escorted her to a palace of silver and gold. It all had its own droll reality. She had spent her entire life in such surroundings, waiting for people to take her places, waiting for people to tell her what to do, and how to behave. It was a painless existence, less challenging than Armstrong High, and less threatening.

Peasants dressed in medieval attire crowded the cobblestone path. These were her subjects. Like the knights, they had pewter faces, mercifully obedient knick-knacks to dress up her kingdom. Just ahead, the drawbridge to the castle was coming down. Among the faces crowded to either side, three were of the wrong color.

“Stop! Stop the carriage!”

The carriage rattled to a stop. Marla opened her door and looked down at three pink faces in the crowds. She frowned suspiciously. “Rick Kaiser, is that really you?”

Mort Braggs stood next to him, grinning at her with his sick, repulsive need. Becky Marple stood in the background, staring at her with her strange eyes.

“Don’t go in there,” Rick Kaiser said, his voice an unconvincing monotone. “You don’t know what you’re

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getting yourself into.”

Rick was always warning and correcting her at every turn. It wasn't Rick's place to play nursemaid. She had had enough nannies and nursemaids.

Marla threw her door open wider. “Get in.”

Rick remained his ever infuriating, do-nothing self.

“I said get in! This is my kingdom and you will do as I say!”

Rick pretended not to hear. Or, more likely, he was just a pretend Rick Kaiser, far too stupid to think for himself. Either way, she could take no more of his defiance. Only Mort had the courage to look her in the eye.

“Guards!”

Several of the horse-mounted knights approached. The hooves of the horses clattered loudly on the cobblestone. A cold breeze blew in from the hills, stirring Marla's hair.

Her heart beat wildly as she gathered the courage to issue orders to her staff. Despite her every sense telling her that this was as real as real could be, a part of her understood otherwise. This was the reality of dreams. Objects represented genuine fears and feelings and desires, but they were not real in themselves.

She pointed to Rick Kaiser. “Take him to the dungeon. Whip him.”

She pointed to Mortimer Braggs. “Cast that man out of my kingdom. Imprison him in the jungle. I may choose to visit, so see that no harm befalls him.”

Mort gave her an evil smile.

Marla refused to look at Becky Marple. “Take the girl to the dungeon,” she ordered her guards. “Torture her without mercy, and then tear her to pieces.”

Marla slammed her carriage door closed. The carriage rattled the rest of the way up the cobblestone path, rumbled over the wooden drawbridge, and entered the courtyard of the castle.

The carriage circled the inner court and stopped. Through an arched entrance, Marla saw a throne room the size of an airport terminal. It had a black marble floor like the living room at home. Towering white marble pillars to either side of her throne on its terraced dais reminded her of the front steps to her parent's mansion.

Doors boomed closed behind her. Marla sighed in growing despair. If she pretended to do what was expected of her, maybe she could sneak away at night. She could return to the jungle where Mort was being held captive. There, she would explore for herself the evil her parents deplored so greatly. She would get to know Mort Braggs a little better. And herself.

Rick Kaiser had nothing more to offer.

She walked alone to the throne. She turned and sat facing thousands of silent worshippers. She had nothing more to do to fulfill her destiny. If her parents had expected more of her, they had failed to communicate it to her.

She sat and stared out over paradise.

And felt it grow distant and cold.

As if...

She looked down at her hand. Crystal materializing from the air covered her fingers. She snatched her hand back with a gasp and watched it fall and shatter to the floor like thin sheets of ice.

For the longest time, she sat rigid, clenching the metal arms of her throne and afraid to look down again. But she

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could feel the paralysis creeping up her body. When she looked down again, crystal plating covered her legs and clothing. Slowly, it spread upward toward her face. She tried to stand and shake it loose, but she had waited too long.

Tears came to her eyes. “No, please. Let me go back to school. Let me go back to the jungle!”

She peeled plates of the cold glass away with her bare hands, from her legs, her blouse, and her hair. It spread faster than she could free herself until even her trembling lips grew cold with its touch.

Like the cat and her pewter subjects, she too became a gleaming statue, a piece of decorative knick-knack sitting on the black marble mantel of a fireplace. Her castle was mere pewter as well, she remembered, about two feet high and plated in gold and silver. The rolling hills were nothing more than the estate grounds visible through the front windows, including her father’s private golf course.

Her mother passed in front of the fireplace, the mantel, and the castle. “Princess! We’re leaving now! Be polite to the servants while we’re gone! We’ll be back early fall!” She blew a careless kiss into the silence of the room and left without looking back.

Marla watched a little girl fly down the stairs, screaming, “Mommy! Daddy! Don’t leave me!”

But the couple were already gone, and the blue-eyed, blond-haired child stood sobbing at the base of the circular stairs beneath a sparkling chandelier. A servant who may as well have had a face of pewter took her silently by the hand and led her back up the stairs.

He locked her in her room. Marla remembered that

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terrible day. Her nanny and tutors would not arrive for another three days. Upstairs, young Marla van Kirk would be putting her face to the glass barrier of a towering window and looking out over a cold and lifeless paradise.