

# THE **HARDY BOYS**®

#160

## **A GAME CALLED CHAOS**

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# 1 Cousins in Chaos

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“My cousin Chelsea is in trouble,” Phil Cohen said on a bright, sunny summer morning. He stood in the Hardys’ front yard, frowning and rubbing his chin with his thin fingers.

Joe Hardy glanced at his older brother, Frank. They’d been friends with Phil a long time and knew him well. When Phil rubbed his chin, it didn’t just mean trouble, it meant *big* trouble, the kind that even brainy Phil couldn’t think his way out of.

Joe bobbed his head toward the front door of the house. “Come on in, Phil,” he said. “We can talk about it over some breakfast.”

Phil shook his head. “I don’t have much time,” he said. “I’m in the middle of a project, and I have to get back to work.” Phil had parlayed his skill with computers into a number of high-paying part-time jobs. Joe figured he must be working on a tight deadline.

“Don’t keep us guessing, Phil,” Frank said. “We can’t help if we don’t know what the trouble is.”

“Well,” Phil said, “Chelsea’s a project manager at Viking Software up in Jewel Ridge, Connecticut.”

“Viking . . . That’s a new company, isn’t it?” Joe asked. “I think I read something about it in *E-Gaming* magazine. Didn’t they put out that Norseman’s Revenge shareware game?”

“Yeah, they’ve released a couple of pretty good games. Nothing to really put them on the map yet, though,” Phil said. “But the project Chelsea’s working on could change all that. Have you ever heard of the Chaos series?”

“Heard of it?” Joe said, smiling broadly. “Caverns of Chaos is just about my favorite computer game ever.”

“I could hardly get any computer time to write my American history term paper,” Frank said. “Joe wouldn’t give up the computer.”

“Hey, that’s all ancient history now,” Joe said with a laugh. “Besides, you got an A on that paper.” He turned back to Phil. “So, what’s the Chaos series got to do with your cousin?”

“Well, her company is putting out the next game in the series. But she, well . . . she told me she’s lost the guy who’s writing the game.”

“Steven Royal?” Joe asked.

“Yeah, that’s his name,” Phil replied.

“How do you lose a computer game designer?” Frank asked.

“She’d have to fill you in on the details,” said Phil. “I figured something like this is more up your alley than mine. Can you guys help? She told me that if she doesn’t find Royal, her job is toast.”

“No problema,” Joe said, clapping Phil on the shoulder. “We’ve found a few missing people in our lives. Where do we start looking?”

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Two hours later Joe pulled the Hardys’ van off the highway and into the outskirts of Jewel Ridge, Connecticut. The town was a former factory town that had caught the high-tech rocket and was riding it to new wealth. As Joe followed Phil’s directions to his cousin’s office, the Hardys noted that many of the buildings they passed were either brand-new or newly renovated.

“Looks like a nice place to live,” Joe said.

“If you can afford it,” Frank noted. “Too bad Phil couldn’t come along.”

“Well, when you’ve got to work, you’ve got to work,” Joe said. “He said he’d be available by phone if we need him. And maybe he can come up later this weekend.”

It didn’t take long for the Hardys to find the offices of Viking Software. The company was located in a new building in a small industrial park on the edge of town. The site was beautiful, surrounded by a forest, and even had trees separating the sections of the parking lot. The developer of the building had obviously taken care to blend his work with the existing landscape.

Joe and Frank drove their van into the lot, found a space, and got out. The building itself was ultra-modern, the exterior all steel and mirrored glass, in which the beauty of the natural landscape was reflected. The brothers walked down a short path to the building. A sign in the lobby directed them to the offices of Viking Software, which commanded the entire second floor.

“Hi. We’re Frank and Joe Hardy,” Frank announced as they approached the reception desk. “Chelsea Sirkin’s expecting us.”

The receptionist, seated behind a modular gray desk, checked her appointment book. The tag on her lapel said her name was Jeanne. “Yes,” she confirmed, smiling brightly. “Ms. Sirkin said to send you right back. She’s the third office on your left, near the far wall.”

“Thanks, Jeanne,” Joe said, returning her smile.

Chelsea Sirkin met the Hardys halfway between the reception desk and her office. Frank and Joe figured the receptionist must have buzzed her when they came in. Chelsea was a short, thin young woman about twenty years old, with frizzy blond hair and round glasses.

“Hi,” she said, extending her hand. “I’m so glad you could come. We’re almost frantic about this whole thing. Dave Henderson, my boss, is pacing his office like a caged tiger.”

“We’ll do what we can,” Frank said. “But first, you’d better fill us in on everything.”

“Okay,” Chelsea said. “Let’s go into my office. Would either of you like a soda?”

“Sure,” Joe said.

“Whatever you’ve got,” added Frank.

Chelsea stopped at the staff lunchroom and grabbed three colas out of the fridge. “You might want to take some chairs,” she said. “I don’t have any extras in my

office.”

She held the drinks while the brothers each hauled a chair down the hall to Chelsea’s office.

As he entered the office, Joe decided he’d seldom seen such a mess in his life. Papers lay scattered about everywhere, overflowing from Chelsea’s desk to the floor. Some looked like memos, others had designs for video game characters on them. Posters from movies and video games decorated the walls. A tower of books almost high enough to tumble over lay on a single shelf attached to one wall. The opposite wall was made entirely of glass and looked out over the parking lot.

“Sorry about the mess,” Chelsea said sheepishly, “but, as I said, things have been pretty crazy around here.”

“Phil said you ‘lost’ your game designer?” Frank said.

Chelsea rubbed her chin in a way that reminded the Hardys of Phil. “I think so,” she said. “But I’m not really sure. Steven Royal has always been eccentric—we knew that even before we hired him. He’s been designing *A Town Called Chaos*, which will be the fourth game in the Chaos series.”

“I thought there was just one game,” Frank said.

“You need to get out more often,” Joe said, grinning at his older brother. “He did *School of Chaos* after the first one. It was an even bigger hit—I just didn’t hog as much computer time with it. There was a third one, too, but I never bought it.”

“Yes,” Chelsea said, “*Forest of Chaos* didn’t do as well. I think that’s part of the reason Royal left his old publishers. But his new game is fabulous. We’re lucky to have him aboard. That is, we would be, if we could find him.”

“Have you contacted the police?” Joe asked.

“We’ve talked to them, yes,” Chelsea said, “but Royal . . . well, he’s got a reputation as an eccentric. His car is gone and the police are pretty sure Steven’s just taking an unannounced vacation.”

“What makes you think he isn’t?” Frank asked.

“Our production deadline on the game is two weeks away,” Chelsea said, “and he hasn’t delivered a final version to us. Without it, the game won’t get into stores in time for its release date.”

“I thought you said it was a great game,” Joe said. “How do you know that if you don’t have a final copy?”

“We’ve got a demo version of the first level that we’ve been giving away on the Internet,” Chelsea said. “Plus, Royal showed me the whole game when I visited him at his condo last week. He said he just needed to put in the final touches. It is an amazing game—it has everything, from the usual rolling boulders to a giant ape. Kids are going to love it, and adults, too.”

“*A Town Called Chaos* will prove that Royal’s work is state-of-the-art in computer gaming. He said so himself when I saw him. He was real hyped about it. But since then”—she turned her hands palm up—“nothing. He doesn’t answer calls or knocks on his door. No one has seen him—and the police don’t believe he’s really missing.” Her eyes misted up a bit, and her lower lip was trembling as she finished.

Joe put a hand on her shoulder. “Don’t worry. We believe you, Chelsea,” he said in a comforting voice.

“It’s not just *my* job,” she said, regaining her composure, “it’s the future of our whole company. We put most of our start-up money into signing Royal. If this game doesn’t come out on time, we won’t have enough cash from our other projects to stay afloat. Dave won’t even have the chance to fire me because he’ll be out of a job, too.”

“I think we can help,” Frank said. “We’re good at tracking things down. Do you think Royal would have gone back to his previous publisher?”

“Wondersoft?” Chelsea asked. “I don’t think so. He has a contract with us, and like I said, he wasn’t happy with the way their head guy, Ron Rosenberg, promoted Forest of Chaos.”

“That’s one angle to check out, anyway,” Frank said.

“Is there anything else we should know?” Joe asked.

“Yes,” Chelsea said. “I meant to mention it earlier.” She rummaged around her desk for a moment and came up with a piece of paper. “Yesterday, this e-mail appeared in the mailboxes of everyone at the company. We’re pretty sure it’s from Royal even though it came from a fake e-mail address.” She handed the paper to Frank.

*My past is the key to the future. You must seek the Town Called Chaos to win the game. The King is waiting. Pawns make the first move.*

Frank handed the note to Joe.

After a moment Joe said, “The reference to ‘King’ is probably a word play on Royal’s own name.”

“Which would make the rest of us the pawns,” Frank said. He frowned. “Looks like he wants your company to solve his riddles to find the prototype video game.”

“That’s what we came up with, too. Royal loves puzzles and riddles—the Chaos series is full of them. Dave is convinced that Royal is using this as a ploy to get more money. But we’re tapped out. It’s going to be a struggle just to survive until money from Town starts coming in—assuming the game comes out at all. If we had the money, Dave would have hired a professional private investigator to track Royal down.”

Joe crossed his arms over his broad chest. “Good thing we Hardys work for soda and burgers.”

“For relatives of friends, anyway,” Frank added, smiling. “You know, the reference to Royal’s past could be to his former publisher, Rosenberg.”

“So is that our first stop?” Joe asked.

“No,” Frank said. “I want to check out Royal’s condo first. There might be clues there, or at least something that’ll give us a lead on how to approach Rosenberg. Chelsea, I need two things: first, a picture of Royal, so we know who we’re looking for.”

Chelsea nodded, reached over to a shelf, and pulled off a book. The cover read *Strategy Guide to Caverns of Chaos*. On the back was a photograph of a smiling man and woman. The man appeared to be of medium height and build and had a full beard and long brown hair. The woman was thin and athletic looking and had black hair and green eyes. The man was smiling and the woman looked like a real-life version of Katherine Chaos, the game's heroine. The character Chaos was depicted on the front of the book, dodging flying bats.

"Royal's the man in the picture," Chelsea said.

Frank nodded. "Okay, the second thing we need is directions to Royal's place."

"I can do better than that," Chelsea said. "I'll take you there myself."

"Don't you have work to do?" Joe asked.

Chelsea shrugged sadly. "As Dave said at our staff meeting this morning, if we don't find Royal soon, we're done."

• • •

Fifteen minutes later the trio pulled into the parking lot beside Royal's building, which was built along a river. Joe and Frank could see that the place had once been a factory, but extensive renovations had transformed it into a high-priced condo complex. It was three stories high and Chelsea told them it had four units on each floor. As they drew nearer they could see that the rear of the building had private docks on the riverfront.

Though cleaned up, the building's exterior still sported some features from its factory days, including decorative molding and wrought iron fire escapes that snaked down each side of the building. The grounds around the complex were beautifully maintained, every tree and blade of grass in its proper place. The afternoon sun reflecting off the nearby river painted the building in gold and silver light.

Joe whistled softly. "I bet this place sets Royal back a pretty penny every month." Frank nodded in agreement.

"Royal lives on the second floor," Chelsea said. "We can go up because there's no doorman during the day. But how are we going to get in?"

Joe ran a hand through his blond hair and smiled roguishly. "We're pretty clever about that," he said.

The three of them went through the lobby and climbed a stairway that curved gracefully up to the second floor. The stairs emptied out onto a long narrow hallway. There was a door at each corner of the hall.

"Royal's condo is the one on the far left," Chelsea said, indicating one of the doors on the riverfront side. "He's got an amazing view of the river."

As the trio approached the door, Joe stopped abruptly and put a finger to his lips, hushing the others. "It sounds as if someone's inside," he whispered.

"Maybe he's come back!" Chelsea said. "I didn't see his car in the lot, but . . . ." She approached the door and knocked tentatively. "Mr. Royal? Steven? It's me, Chelsea Sirkin." The sounds stopped; no one came to the door.

Frank's eyes narrowed. Something didn't seem right. "Let Joe and me handle this," he said to Chelsea. He put a hand on the doorknob and turned it; the door

wasn't locked.

Frank gently pushed the door open and poked his head inside. Joe peered over his brother's shoulder to get a look, too.

"Chelsea," Joe said, "is Royal a bad housekeeper?"

"Well," Chelsea started, "he's not the neatest person . . ."

"A *really* bad housekeeper?" continued Joe.

Chelsea stepped forward to see what Joe meant. A small gasp escaped her lips as she peeked inside.

The doorway opened directly into the living room of the condo. It was a huge room with a high ceiling and a row of sliding-glass doors that led onto a balcony that overlooked the river. Royal apparently used the room as a workplace, too; a computer sat atop an old desk near the far wall. The whole place looked as though a hurricane had hit it.

Papers lay scattered all over the floor. The drawers of the desk had been pulled out, emptied, and left open. Pictures hung crooked on the walls, as if someone had searched behind them. The cushions had been removed from the overstuffed sectional couch and left on the rug. Looking toward the adjoining dining-room/kitchen area, Joe could see that someone had searched the pantry, too.

"Chelsea, did the police search the condo when you called them?" Frank asked.

"I don't know," she replied. "They said they'd checked and had seen no sign of foul play."

"Then my guess is that whoever we heard in this room a minute ago ransacked the place," Frank said. He bent down and examined the lock on the outside door. "Looks like it's been picked by someone who doesn't really know what he's doing. Plenty of fresh scratches around the lock hole."

A subtle movement on the far end of the balcony caught Joe's attention. One of the sliding doors had been left slightly ajar. "Look," Joe cried, pointing to a figure on the balcony. "There he is!"

## 2 Royal Friends and Foes

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The Hardys sprang into action, bolting across the room and pushing open the sliding door. When the man on the balcony turned and saw them, he jumped over the railing.

“He must have made it onto the fire escape,” Joe said. “I’ll follow. You try to stop him out front.”

“Right!” Frank replied. He darted back through the apartment, almost knocking Chelsea over as he headed for the front door.

Joe was right—there was a fire escape about six feet below the balcony. By the time he leaped onto it, the culprit had reached the ground and was beginning to run toward the parking lot.

There was no way Frank would reach the guy in time if he had a car nearby. Joe had only one thing to do. Climbing over the railing of the fire escape, he tried to pick a soft-looking spot on the manicured lawn below. Then he jumped.

The ground didn’t turn out to be as soft as he’d hoped, and Joe had the wind knocked out of him. He hadn’t broken anything, though. “Hey!” he called after the man he was chasing. The man looked back and stumbled a bit, but continued running.

Joe scrambled to his feet and resumed the chase. The man was angling for the far corner of the parking lot now, and Joe knew that would give Frank and him a chance. As Joe hit the asphalt parking lot, he spotted Frank coming out of the front door. The culprit hadn’t seen Frank because he was making a beeline for the lone car parked on the far side of the lot.

The man reached the car, a white Toyota compact, and fumbled with his keys. Frank got there just as the man finally got the door unlocked. “Hold it!” said Frank, leaning on the car door so it couldn’t be opened wide enough for the man to get in.

The man spun and raised his hands in a defensive gesture. Frank balled up his fist, ready to throw a punch if the guy made a false move. As Joe reached the car, the man said plaintively, “I give up! Don’t hurt me!”

Joe almost laughed, but Frank remained stern. “Who are you? What were you doing in Royal’s condo?”

The man relaxed a bit. “I . . . I could ask you the same thing,” he said.

“Look, you,” Joe said, taking a menacing step forward, “don’t give us any trouble.”

The man backed up and raised his hands again, even though it was obvious to both Hardys that he had no idea how to defend himself in a fight. He was only about five-foot-eight and had curly reddish hair and a rectangular-shaped face. He wore a gray hooded sweatshirt and pants.

“I’m Zeb Winters, a friend of Royal’s,” the man said. “I came by to see him.”

Just at that moment Chelsea caught up with the brothers. She had a cell phone in her hand. “Should I call the police?” she asked.

“We’re not sure yet,” Joe said. “Do you know this guy?”

Chelsea looked surprised. “Why, yes I do. He’s Zeb Winters.”

“And he’s a friend of Royal’s?” Frank asked.

“Ha!” Chelsea laughed. “Bitter rival is more like it. He and Royal have been trying to one-up each other for years.”

Winters crossed his arms over his chest and sneered. “And I’ve won that battle more times than I’ve lost.”

“Okay, wise guy,” said Joe. “Now tell us why you’re really here.”

“Why should I?” Winters said.

“Because somebody ransacked that apartment, and right now you’re our number-one suspect,” Frank said.

“Hey,” Winters complained, “Royal’s place was tossed before I got there.”

“We have only your word on that,” Joe said. “If you didn’t wreck the place, tell us why you came.”

“Okay, okay. I came to confront Royal. I’ve seen his Town Called Chaos demo on the Internet, and I *know* that Royal stole my 3-D source code to make it. Town is way above Forest of Chaos, and Royal just doesn’t have that much programming talent. Everybody in the industry knows that Anne Sakai was the brains behind that partnership. Royal’s got a talent for marketing and promotion, yeah, and he’s a pretty fair hacker, but there’s no way he wrote that program himself.”

“Who’s Anne Sakai?” Frank asked.

Winters stared at Frank as though he couldn’t believe the question. “Who is Anne Sakai?” Winters repeated. “She was just the woman who put Steven Royal on the map! She did the lion’s share of programming on the first two Chaos games—everybody knows that.”

“I remember that,” Joe said. “Katherine Chaos was supposedly modeled on Sakai herself.”

“Katherine Chaos was with Royal on the strategy book we saw, right?” Frank asked.

“She’s the game’s main character,” Joe replied. “She’s an adventurer like Indiana Jones, and a real looker, too. That’s one of the reasons the Chaos games have been so popular.”

“Yes, and that was Sakai herself in the picture with Royal.”

“Wow,” Joe said. “So the character *was* based on her.”

“Okay,” Frank said. “Where is this Sakai? If she and Royal broke off their partnership, we may want to talk to her, too.”

Winters laughed. Chelsea said sheepishly, “You can’t talk to her. She died in a plane crash two years ago.”

“Yeah,” Winters added. “Sharks got her body. Pretty nasty. She kicked off right after Caverns of Chaos. Royal had to do Forest of Chaos solo, which is why it stank. And that’s why I know that Royal stole my source code. He *had* to because Sakai isn’t around to help him with the programming.”

“And I suppose you found proof of this in his apartment,” Joe said sarcastically.

“Well, no,” Winters admitted. “Like I said, I went up to confront Royal, but no one was home. His door was unlocked, though, so I went inside. I saw the place had been tossed, so I decided to look around on my own. Then you guys showed up. Who are you anyway?”

“We’re working with Viking Software,” Joe said. “We’re looking for—”

Frank cut him off. “We’re looking for someone who’s been making threats against Royal and the company. And I’d say that you fit the profile.”

“Look,” Winters said, “I’m telling you that I didn’t toss Royal’s place.”

“Then why’d you run?” Joe asked.

“I thought maybe *you* were the ones who wrecked the joint, and maybe you’d come back for another go. I wasn’t about to stick around to find out.”

“Well, I think you should stick around until the police check out your story,” Joe said. He pulled Winters’s car keys out of the door lock and pocketed them.

“Aw, come on!” pleaded Winters.

“Just sit tight. The cops’ll be here in no time,” Frank said. He nodded to Chelsea, and she punched the number into her cell phone. The Hardys turned to go back toward the condo.

“Hey!” Winters called after them. “Where are you guys going?”

“To make sure you didn’t take anything from the apartment,” Joe said, trying not to smile.

• • •

When they got back to Royal’s condo, Joe said, “Thanks for the save back there, Frank. I almost spilled to that guy that Royal is missing.”

“Yeah,” Frank said. “The fewer people who know, the better.”

Chelsea caught up to them. “The police said they’d be here shortly.”

“Then we’d better not waste any time,” Frank said. “I doubt they’ll let us search the place once they get here. Let’s fan out. Joe, you take the back rooms, I’ll take the front. Chelsea, see what you can find on Royal’s computer. Try not to disturb any more evidence than we already have.”

Chelsea and Joe nodded and the three set about their respective tasks. A few minutes later they gathered by the desk where Chelsea was working at the computer. Frank and Joe pulled up chairs and sat on either side of Phil’s cousin.

“Only thing I found,” Joe said, “is this letter.” He held out a framed letter so the others could see it. “It’s from someone named Ian Tochi. He says he’s going to make trouble for Royal because of something in Forest of Chaos, though he doesn’t say what.”

“I know what that is,” Chelsea said. “Tochi was an old friend of Royal’s. He invented the Bombo Bear animatronic doll.”

“You mean that sappy talking bear that spouted clichés about loving everybody?” Joe asked.

“What’s so funny about peace, love, and understanding?” said Frank.

“That’s the one,” Chelsea said. “Anyway, Tochi got it in his head that the bear character in Forest of Chaos was a parody of Bombo. He’s been making a stink

about it ever since, but Royal never took it seriously.”

“Seriously enough to have it framed,” Frank said.

“That was just Steven’s idea of a joke,” Chelsea said. “I think he likes ticking people off.”

“Which, I suppose, is why we’re all here,” Joe said. “You find anything, Frank?”

Frank shook his head. Just then the phone rang. Royal’s answering machine picked it up after one ring. “This is Royal,” the machine said in the game designer’s voice. “I’m either off saving the world or conquering it. Leave a message.”

“Not a big ego,” Joe said sarcastically.

“Wait! Listen!” hissed Frank.

After the beep, the party on the other end of the line said, “This is Rosenberg. I’m waiting for you at my office, as you asked. But ten minutes from now, I won’t be waiting any longer.”

“He must be waiting for Royal,” Joe said.

“Royal’s sold us out!” Chelsea cried.

## 3 In Cahoots

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Frank and Joe got to their feet at the same time. “If we’re lucky,” Frank said, “we can catch Royal and Rosenberg together.”

“How do we get to Rosenberg’s office?” Joe asked Chelsea.

Chelsea stammered out quick directions, and the Hardys headed for the door.

“You stay here and wait for the police,” Frank told Chelsea. “We’ll catch up with you after we talk to Rosenberg—and Royal.”

Joe tossed Winters’s keys to Chelsea on the way out. He and Frank made their way from the building to their van. A glance from Joe as they passed told Winters that he’d better stay put. The rival designer leaned his chin on his fists and fumed.

Driving quickly but carefully, Frank and Joe arrived at the offices of Wondersoft nine minutes later. It was a five-story building that looked as though it had been constructed in the nineteen twenties. Like most of the buildings in Jewel Ridge, it showed signs of recent renovation. A tastefully painted sign on the glass of the front door read, Wondersoft. The Hardys dashed inside and past the guard at the door.

“Mr. Rosenberg’s expecting us,” Frank said.

“We’re here on behalf of Steven Royal,” Joe added.

The guard nodded them past, and the Hardys made their way to the elevator bank at the center of the lobby. A sign there told them Rosenberg’s office was on the top floor. They called the elevator and rode it up.

When they got off, they found themselves in a reception area, but the desk was deserted. Through an open door beyond the desk, they saw a balding, middle-aged man talking on the phone and smoking a cigar. He took the phone from his ear and stared at the brothers as they entered the room.

“Mr. Rosenberg?” Joe said, addressing the man. “I’m Joe Hardy, and this is my brother, Frank. We’re here to talk to you about Steven Royal.”

Rosenberg put down the phone. “The guard said you were on the way up. Where’s Royal? He was supposed to be here an hour ago. Why didn’t he come?”

“We were hoping you could tell us,” Frank said. “We expected to meet him here with you.”

Rosenberg took a pull on his cigar. “That Royal is a pain. If he weren’t a genius, I’d never put up with him.”

“So, you *have* seen him,” Joe said.

“Not recently. I just got an e-mail from him this morning . . . Say, if you guys are with him, you should know that.”

“We never said we were with him,” Frank said. “We just said we were here to talk to you about him.”

Rosenberg stood up behind his oak desk. “Who are you guys?” he demanded.

“We told you our names,” Joe replied. “But if you’re asking us what we’re doing here, we’re waiting for Steven Royal, same as you.”

“We’re investigators, working on a problem Royal’s having with his present employer,” Frank said.

“Police?” Rosenberg said, cocking the cigar to the side of his mouth.

“Private investigators,” Joe said.

Rosenberg sat back down in his padded leather chair and blew smoke. “Then I don’t have to talk to you, do I?”

“That depends on who you’d rather talk to—the police or us,” Frank said. “I’m sure the boys in blue will be happy to stop by here once they finish up at Royal’s condo.”

Rosenberg leaned forward and frowned. “What are the police doing at Royal’s place?”

“Oh, sorry. We must have forgotten to tell you,” Joe said, “Somebody broke into Royal’s place and tossed his stuff. And since Royal’s out of town, and since you were the last person to hear from him, I’m sure the police will want to talk to you.”

“Okay, look,” Rosenberg said, “I don’t know anything about any break-in. All I know is I got an e-mail from Royal this morning, saying maybe he’d consider coming back to Wondersoft—if I made him the right offer. But, like I said, he never showed up. How was I to know he was out of town? Maybe the e-mail wasn’t really from him. People are using the Internet to play pranks all the time.”

“Could be,” Frank said. “Maybe we could figure it out if you showed the note to us.”

“Why should I do that?” Rosenberg asked, sounding suspicious.

“Because we want to help Royal out, just like you,” Joe said. “And if we do, you might benefit.”

Rosenberg pulled a piece of paper out of his desk drawer. “You boys make a good team,” he said, handing the paper to Frank.

Frank scanned the paper. “Mind if we keep this?” he asked.

“Go ahead,” Rosenberg said. “I can always print another.”

Frank nodded, then said to Joe, “We’d better check in with the police.”

“Right,” Joe said. “Here’s our number in case you need to reach us.” He scribbled the phone number of the van on a piece of paper and handed it to Rosenberg.

Rosenberg stood as the Hardys left his office. “Tell the cops I was helpful,” he called after the brothers. “I don’t want any trouble.”

When they reached the van, Frank took the wheel and handed the paper to Joe. “See what you make of the note at the bottom,” he said.

“Another riddle!” Joe said.

*The King is in the counting house; the Queen is in the dungeon. Their fortunes may be reversed when all the roosting bats come home. Side you with Ignorance or Knowledge? Seek not the apprentice, but the master.*

“This certainly seems to imply that Royal is in the money,” Joe said. “But who is the Queen in the dungeon? Chelsea? She certainly is in hot water.”

“Maybe,” Frank agreed. “If she found Royal—and/or the game prototype—her fortunes would certainly be reversed. There’s so much we don’t know about this case yet. I hope Chelsea can shed more light on it.”

Joe nodded, then said, “The return address on both the messages Royal sent are different, but I’m betting they came from the same machine. Do you think Phil could trace them?”

Frank smiled. “You bet he could. Call him and put him on it. I’m sure he’ll take the time to help his cousin, even though he’s working.”

Joe called Phil Cohen on their car phone and gave him the info he needed. As they talked, Frank picked up some burgers and drinks from a drive-through. When they arrived back at the condo, the sun was setting and Winters’s car was gone. They didn’t see any signs of the police, either. They found Chelsea sitting on a picnic bench by the parking lot; she looked tired.

“The cops wouldn’t let me stay in the condo,” she said. “But I wasn’t sure where you guys would end up, so I just hung out here.”

“Too bad they kicked you out,” Joe said. “I was hoping to poke around Royal’s place a bit more.”

“I did some more snooping while you were gone,” Chelsea said. “But I didn’t turn up anything useful.”

“We brought you some food,” Frank said, handing Chelsea a bag with a burger and drink. “We also put in a call to Phil, to see if he could trace your e-mail and another one that was sent to Rosenberg.”

“Great. Thanks,” she said, managing a weak smile. “I’m beat. Why don’t we head back to my place and eat there. You can fill me in on what you found.”

“Good idea,” said Joe.

They all piled into the van and headed to Chelsea’s apartment, which wasn’t far away. Her home was both newer and smaller than Royal’s, and it didn’t have a view of the river.

The three of them finished eating, and then the Hardys filled Chelsea in on what they’d found out. Afterward she told them what had happened at the condo after they’d rushed off to see Rosenberg.

“Basically, the cops questioned Winters and me,” she said. “He stuck to the story he’d told us—except when he told it to the police, he left out his being inside the condo. I just told the police the truth. Since they knew I’d been worried about Royal, they pretty much took me at my word. They looked over the condo, but didn’t find anything.”

“You mean, aside from the mess,” Joe said.

“Yeah. They said the place had probably been robbed by someone who knew Royal was on vacation.”

Joe nodded. “We gave Rosenberg a similar story,” he said. “It makes a certain amount of sense.”

“Only if you can believe the robber just happened to miss an expensive computer sitting in plain sight,” Frank said.

Chelsea smiled. “Yeah. Jewel Ridge must have dumb crooks. Anyway, the cops kicked us out and sealed up the place—until Royal gets back, of course. They let Winters go because they really didn’t have anything to hold him on. None of us even saw him in the condo. They promised to keep an eye on him, though, and also said they might want to talk to you guys. Check in with them before you leave.”

“We’re used to checking in with the police,” Joe said.

“Okay,” Frank said, “it looks as if Royal may have put one over on Rosenberg, too. Rosenberg wouldn’t have called Royal here if he knew where Royal is. In fact, he seemed surprised when Joe and I hinted that Royal was out of town. Winters doesn’t know Royal’s gone, either. That sure doesn’t leave us much to go on.”

“Except for the riddles,” Joe said. “I’ve been thinking about them. If ‘My past is the key to the future,’ maybe we need to know more about Royal’s past. What can you tell us, Chelsea?”

“Well,” she began, “I did some research when we were trying to lure him to Viking Software. His is one of those typical came-out-of-nowhere computer genius stories. Apparently, he and Anne Sakai became friends in college—they had a mutual interest in computers and adventure gaming. Together they came up with Katherine Chaos and the Chaos saga idea. In their spare time, they programmed Caverns of Chaos. It sold well and they landed a contract with Wondersoft, but their second game, School of Chaos, really took off.”

Chelsea took a sip of her drink and continued. “The two of them became famous in the computer gaming community. They traveled all over the world doing gaming conventions and promotional appearances. It probably helped that Anne looked a lot like the game’s heroine.

“But in the end I guess that was a double-edged sword. Anne got a lot more attention than she wanted. Maybe she was really a loner at heart. So she cut out on the tour and went on vacation in the Caribbean. Unfortunately, she never came back. Her private plane crashed at sea and she died.”

“Wow. What rotten luck,” Joe said.

“Yeah,” Chelsea said. “She was at the top of her profession before her death. I guess Royal took it pretty hard. But he did do another game, Forest of Chaos, without her. Unfortunately, it didn’t do as well as the first two.”

“For which Royal blamed Rosenberg,” Frank added.

“Right, but the game really wasn’t as good. With the new game, Royal seems to be back on track,” Chelsea said. “A Town Called Chaos is a great game.”

“What about what Winters said,” Frank asked, “that Anne was the brains behind the games?”

“Well, if that were true, you couldn’t tell it from the new game. It’s way better than the first three. Personally, I think Sakai’s death shook Royal, that’s why the third game didn’t turn out as well. Winters is just a jealous crank. A *talented* crank, but a crank nonetheless.”

“Did Sakai have any relatives who could still be involved with the game?” Joe asked.

Chelsea wrinkled her forehead and thought a moment. “I’m not sure. I think she had heirs, but Royal never mentioned them. If you like, I can check at the office tomorrow. Do you think they might know where Royal is?”

“They could,” Frank said. “And what about this Tochi character? Do you think he might have something to do with Royal’s disappearance?”

“You mean, he might not have gone off on his own?” asked Chelsea, surprised.

“Yes,” Frank said. “It’s entirely possible that Steven Royal has been kidnapped.”

## 4 Kidnapped?

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“But you can’t be serious,” said Chelsea. “Who would want to kidnap Royal?”

“Could be someone out to get back at him, or at a rival company, or just someone who wants money,” Frank said.

Chelsea looked puzzled. “But if they wanted money, why the riddles?”

Frank shrugged. “Possibly to throw us off. I’m not saying that Royal *has* been kidnapped. I’m just saying that we don’t really have enough facts at this point to rule anything out. Steven Royal is missing; that’s all we really know.”

“So you think maybe Tochi kidnapped him?” Chelsea asked.

“At this moment anything is possible,” Joe said. “And Tochi did send that threatening letter that Royal had framed.”

“It’s just too much to think about tonight,” Chelsea said. “I need some rest. We can start fresh in the morning.”

“Good idea,” Frank said. “Joe and I should be getting back to Bayport. It’s a two-hour drive.” He and Joe stood up to leave.

“I’ve got a spare sofa if you’d like to stay the night,” Chelsea suggested.

“Well, it would save time . . .” Joe said.

“And we’ve got some extra clothes in the van,” added Frank. “So, Ms. Sirkin, I guess you’ve got yourself a couple of houseguests.”

“I’ll call home and let them know what’s up,” Joe said.

“Check in with Phil, too,” Frank suggested. “Maybe he’s turned up something. I’ll get some stuff out of the van.”

Joe nodded. “Good idea.”

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Frank and Joe got up early and puzzled over the case as they made breakfast. Phil hadn’t had anything to report.

When Chelsea finally joined them, she looked worn out. The Hardys could tell she hadn’t slept well.

“What’s the good word?” Chelsea asked sleepily.

“Waffles,” Joe said. “Want some?”

She nodded and then took a seat at the small table in her combination kitchen/dining room. Joe plopped a plate of waffles in front of her and Frank poured the syrup and a glass of milk.

“Thanks, guys. I needed this,” she said, taking a big forkful. A few bites later, she added, “You know, I’ve been thinking about Tochi. I think I read that he went to college with Royal and Sakai.”

“So, all three of them shared a past,” said Joe. “And now one is dead and another is missing.”

At that moment the phone rang. Chelsea picked it up. After listening for a few seconds she handed the phone to Frank. “It’s Phil.”

Frank took the phone. “Hi, Phil. Found anything for us yet?” He nodded his head as Phil spoke. Joe edged closer to try to hear the conversation but couldn’t pick up anything.

“Okay, that’s great,” Frank said. “Thanks. We’ll get in touch if we need you again. No. Everything’s fine here. Yeah. Goodbye.” He hung up the phone.

“Well?” Joe asked, curious.

“Phil says that whoever sent the e-mails bounced them through a number of servers before they got to Viking and Wondersoft. That’s why it took him so long to track them down.”

“You mean like hiring a guy, who hires another guy, who hires a third guy to deliver a package so someone won’t know it came from you,” Joe said.

“Yeah. That’s the general idea. The trick is finding that first guy.” Frank smiled. “We’re lucky that Phil knows what he’s doing. Anyway, when he finished the trace, both e-mails originated at the same place: the mainframe computer at Northern Connecticut University.”

“Northern Connecticut University?” Chelsea said. “That’s where Sakai, Royal, and Tochi went to school!”

“Hey,” Frank said, “that makes sense with the last riddle. Remember that bit about ‘ignorance or knowledge,’ and ‘seek . . . the master?’ Well, colleges turn ignorance into knowledge, and ‘master’ could be another word for teacher.”

“And ‘apprentice’ for student,” Joe added.

“Which all ties in to the clue about the past—Royal’s past—being the future,” Chelsea said, smiling just a bit.

“It looks like we’re going to have to take a tour of Royal’s personal history to find your game prototype, Chelsea,” Frank said.

“Then I’d say that Northern Connecticut University is our next stop,” concluded Joe.

“Coming with?” Frank asked Chelsea.

“I think I should stay here and coordinate things from the office. Plus, Dave will want to know what you guys have dug up. Don’t forget to check in with the police.”

“We’ll talk to them on the way out of town,” Joe said.

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Chatting with the police took longer than Frank and Joe expected. Unfortunately, the conversation didn’t give the Hardys any new leads. It was late morning when Frank and Joe finally began the trip from Jewel Ridge to Chisholm, Connecticut, where the university was located. Because of highway construction, it took almost three hours to get there.

At the library, Frank and Joe posed as students doing a summer advanced-placement research paper and obtained permission to use the library. The librarian checked their Bayport High IDs and gave them a temporary password in order to use the computer for the day.

Summer had emptied the college of most students, and Frank and Joe had little trouble finding a free terminal. They called Phil, who told them how to get past the computer's security systems so they could get into the files they needed.

"Here are Royal's academic records," Joe said. "But I don't really see anything that'd lead us to him. Looks like he was a pretty average student. Didn't cause any trouble. Paid his bills on time. Not much else."

"Cross-reference him with the school newspaper database," Frank suggested.

"Okay. There's more here. Some stuff about him and Sakai creating their own game. An article about the Chaos series. An award he, Sakai, and Tochi won for being entrepreneurs. Things about Tochi, too. An article about Bombo Bear. Hey!"

"What?"

"Looks like Tochi's still here," Joe said. "He's working as an assistant professor of engineering."

Frank nodded. "That's interesting. Since he works here, he has easy access to the computer system every day. See if there's anything else, and then we'll look him up before we leave town."

"I could probably get his address from the database and . . . What?"

Frank leaned over his brother's shoulder so he could see the computer screen better. "What is it? What's wrong?"

"Something funny just happened to the computer," Joe said. "It froze up—crashed or something." He typed a few commands, but nothing happened. Then, suddenly, the screen came back to life. A message appeared.

*Riddles in the ether, riddles in the tunnels. Past and future, you decide. Caught between History and Art. Oh, what a tangled web we weave!*

The message flashed a few times and then disappeared. Fortunately, Joe had scribbled it down.

"Looks like the games aren't over," Frank said.

"What I want to know," Joe said, "is how this guy knows where we are."

"He probably doesn't," said Frank. "He's good with computers, so he could have created a program to keep watch on his files. Anyone checking them would cause the message to pop up."

"And we just happened to be the lucky victims," Joe said. "Makes sense. Now let's see if we can make sense of this riddle."

"Okay, if this riddle—the one that just appeared and vanished—is the riddle in the ether, then the next clue must be the riddles in the tunnel," Frank said. "Then more stuff about the past and future. . . . Hmm."

"In School of Chaos, there were some steam tunnels with treasure in them," Joe said. "Hey! Don't some college campuses use steam tunnels for heating? Let me check something. . . ." Joe typed a few commands into the computer and found the article he wanted.

"Frank, check this out," he said. "In the article about the Chaos series, it says that the School of Chaos is loosely based on the NCU campus."