

The Incredible Hare by Joe Strike

THE INCREDIBLE HARE

A Children's Novel

by Joe Strike

Part One: A Hare Is Born

KICKSTARTER PREVIEW

Subject to revision

Part One: A Hare is Born

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Chapter 1

A Splash of Coffee

Professor Benjamin P. Burnside opened his mouth, took a deep breath—and hollered: “HOPPER!”

He waited for a response. Hearing none, he yelled again, only louder.

“HAROLD HOPPER, *WHERE ARE YOU?!!!*”

The professor fumed, his bald head flushing with frustration; his teenaged lab assistant’s delays in answering his calls had been growing ever longer as of late.

Burnside drummed his pudgy fingers on his desk and popped a breath mint into his mouth. He thought about giving Harold a cell phone so he could summon his assistant without raising his voice, but quickly dismissed the idea. Why exert oneself pressing all those phone buttons (or spending all that money) when a forceful, authoritative bellow was much more effective?

“HOP—!”

Harold burst into the office, his oversized lab coat (a hand-me-down from Burnside) flapping behind him. He looked worried, winded too, as if he had just run from one end of the building to the other—which he had, not to mention up two flights of stairs from the sub-basement. His every-which-way hair was more unkempt than usual, and his glasses seemed at more than their usual risk of slipping off his nose.

Harold’s sudden arrival took Burnside by surprise. He lurched backwards and half-swallowed the mint. The next moment he was waving his arms like an orchestra conductor trying to finish a long symphony in a hurry and coughing for all he was worth. Harold took a puzzled step towards his boss. Burnside stopped conducting his phantom orchestra and raised a hand to halt his assistant’s approach

Harold practically screeched to a stop. Burnside gestured at the cabinet behind the teenager. Harold pivoted around; nothing there except the usual assortment of books, scientific journals, Burnside’s beloved solar system model—and next to it, his coffee maker. Harold turned

back to ask the professor if he wanted some coffee, but Burnside was already nodding yes so vigorously that his face was a pink blur—actually, a deepening red one.

Harold lunged toward the machine and quickly poured a cup of yesterday's coffee—too quickly to notice a loose seam on his coat snag onto the model. He rushed towards the professor with the cup, the solar system dragging behind him. Burnside could see what was about to happen and tried to warn his assistant: “HopFERKHH—HoRKCHH! Watch OuCHCTT!” Burnside's sudden urgency had the opposite effect: it looked like the professor was choking to death—Harold had barely seconds to save him!

He all but leapt toward Burnside. His coat yanked the solar system halfway off the shelf before the seam gave way. The model teetered back and forth for a moment, then seemed to stabilize. Burnside breathed a cough of relief—maybe it *wouldn't* . . .

The solar system crashed to the floor, the impact sending planets flying in every direction. Harold turned to see what the noise was, just as several of them rolled under his feet.

Harold stumbled over Saturn and, trying to regain his balance, gave Uranus a swift kick. He tottered towards Burnside, cup in outstretched hand, determined not to spill its contents. Unfortunately, the professor had chosen precisely the same moment to reach for the cup.

A basic scientific principle states, “two objects cannot occupy the same space at the same time,” a principle that is even truer for three objects: in this case, Burnside and Harold's outstretched hands—and that cup of coffee.

Luckily for Burnside, being drenched in cold, day-old coffee was enough to snap him out of his coughing streak. Harold stared at his soaked mentor. A small drop of coffee at the tip of Burnside's nose grew larger and heavier. Finally, it broke loose and landed in the puddle atop his desk with an audible *plip*

“Hopper,” Burnside said tonelessly.

Harold gulped. “Y . . . yes sir?” The words came out all quivery. He hated it when he sounded like that, but he couldn't seem to help it—especially around Burnside.

“I was about to ask you to make some coffee . . . but for some reason I'm not thirsty anymore.”

Harold tried to put the best face on things, which was difficult, since his was wide-eyed and Burnside's was still quite damp. “Then I guess . . . it's a good thing I forgot to make a fresh pot this morning.”

Chapter 2

The Burnside Brainstorm

Professor Burnside mopped his face with a cotton towel from his private bathroom. (Paper towels would irritate his sensitive skin, he often explained, which was why Harold had to do the lab's laundry twice a week—"with extra fabric softener, please.") He glanced at the shopping bag full of planets against the wall. He had enjoyed imagining himself Emperor of the Solar System, his backside nice and warm as he sat atop the sun. Later he would instruct Harold to reassemble the model, but at that moment, there was something else on his mind.

"Hopper, what did you do with the prototype? I can't find it anywhere, and I distinctly remember giving it to you for safekeeping."

"I . . . I'm keeping it in the safe."

Burnside was about to continue when he realized his question had just been answered, but decided not to let his assistant off so easily. "Next time kindly inform me about this sort of thing."

"But I told you—" Harold began.

"*In writing*, of course!" Burnside interrupted.

Harold stifled a sigh; the professor was running true to form this week, doling out twenty or so complaints to every compliment. I guess I can't blame him, Harold thought. He's really worried about . . .

"THE PRESS CONFERENCE, HOPPER! The press conference is *tomorrow morning*, and the prototype has to be functioning perfectly. Do you want me to look like a fool in front of all those reporters?"

"No! No, of course not, Professor!" he protested, even as he heard a voice way back in his brain say "*Why not? You do it every day in front of me!*" Harold grimaced at the uninvited thought. If it weren't for Burnside's recommendation, the local university would never let a high school sophomore—even a brilliant one like Harold—take advanced-level science courses one after another. Working as Burnside's unpaid lab assistant before and after school was the least he could do (as the professor reminded him on a regular basis). There was no way he could afford to

alienate his benefactor, and yet here he was, waiting for Burnside to leave the laboratory; then he would be free to . . .

Burnside noticed his assistant's pained expression. "You did remember to charge its battery, didn't you?"

"Yes, sir. I was about to put it back in when you called."

"Then why are you just sitting there? Don't you understand, Hopper? I've timed everything perfectly. Tonight everyone will see me recreate Galileo's famous experiment on live TV—it's amazing how many people don't even care that gravity affects all falling objects equally. Then tomorrow, once I'm a celebrity, I'll unveil the Burnside Brainstorm to the world!"

Harold braced himself for Burnside's "Brainstorm speech."

"Think of it, Hopper: an object that rests gently against your ear, light as a feather, that translates what anyone says into English, no matter what their native tongue! Believe me, Hopper, the Brainstorm will revolutionize everything it touches: business, politics, education . . ."

"I know all about the Brainstorm, Professor, I helped you build it."

In reality, the device was more Harold's doing than Burnside's. Over the last few months, and with the professor looking over his shoulder the entire time, Harold had written an elaborate computer program and designed the tiny circuits necessary to make the Brainstorm a reality.

As usual, Burnside did not hear him. "I wanted to do a simple demonstration of the Brainstorm, but you know how those TV people are . . ."

"I do?" asked Harold; he had never met a TV person in his life.

"They said, 'Go for the visual, Professor! The picture is everything.' I have to admit they *do* have a point. Once you've captured the public's attention it's a lot easier to explain a breakthrough concept like the Brainstorm to their quotidian minds." Harold had never heard the word "kwoh-ti-dee-un" before but suspected Burnside had not meant it as a compliment.

"That's when they offered to do the show live out at Gorgeous Gorge. They said that simultaneously releasing a golf ball and a 10-pound weight into the gorge would be far more dramatic than just dropping them at my feet—now that's going for the visual, Hopper! They also pointed out that way I wouldn't have to worry about them landing *on* my feet."

Harold's ankles went all rubbery at the mention of Gorgeous Gorge. He remembered the time he looked down into the Grand Canyon. (Actually, it had only been a picture of the Grand Canyon, but it was still pretty scary.) Harold and high places didn't get along very well.

Burnside rose to his feet. “At the conclusion of my experiment, I’ll announce my press conference. I trust you’ll have everything ready by then, Hopper.” He gave his assistant a piercing look. “Eight a.m.—sharp.”

Harold gulped and stood up as well. “Y . . . yes, sir. I’ll, I’ll put the battery in right now.” He tried and failed to make eye contact with Burnside, then heard himself say, “In fact, I’d like to test the Brainstorm one more time to make sure it’s working properly.” Harold immediately regretted his offer. *Why did I say that? Now he’ll know I’m up to someth—*

“Excellent, Hopper—that’s the kind of initiative I like to see. A self-starter will always find a place for himself in the world.” Burnside suddenly felt quite benevolent towards Harold. “Perhaps you’d like to accompany me to the Gorge.”

Way up to the Gorge? The Gorge? Leave the lab now, after all his planning? Harold felt a full-fledged anxiety attack coming on. He had never refused one of the professor’s requests, but tonight might be his last chance to use the Brainstorm. What if some big corporation showed up tomorrow and bought the device on the spot? Tomorrow night it might be hundreds of miles away.

Burnside noticed Harold’s anxious expression and immediately regretted his invitation. An image of the solar system flying apart courtesy of his clumsy assistant popped into his mind, and Burnside was one of the planets hurtling off into deep space. “On the other hand, I’m sure you’re in a rush to get home and look after your sister.”

Harold relaxed. Cindy might be five years his junior, but if there was one thing she didn’t need much of, it was looking after. He made a mental note to call and let her know he’d be late tonight. “Yes sir, that’s right—I’ll watch the show at home with Cindy. Good luck, Professor. See you in the morning.”

“Luck?” Burnside scowled. “We’re not talking about luck, Hopper—we’re talking about *science!* Now where are those directions to the Gorge?”

Harold watched Burnside shuffle through the still-damp papers atop his desk. “I think you’re holding them, sir.”

Burnside glanced at the sheaf of documents in his hand; Harold’s step-by-step directions were right on top. “Very good, yes, excellent,” Burnside muttered, folding the paper and putting it inside his suit jacket. He stood up and headed for the door, then turned back to Harold.

“There’s just one thing I can’t figure out, Hopper. Isn’t *America’s Most Dangerous Amateur Stunts* an unusual name for a science show?”

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Chapter 3

You Go, Girl

The giant robo-droids had Power Babe cornered. Their massive legs blocked the alley's entrance, leaving her no escape. In a few seconds their immobilizing kineto-rays would paralyze her, leaving her easy prey for their master, The Bombast.

Power Babe (or "Pow," as the oppressed city-dwellers called their heroine) checked her wrist blasters. They barely had enough energy left to display "NEGATIVE" on their status screens. The droids closed in for the kill, their kineto-ray eyes beginning to glow and crackle with deadly force. This is it, not a chance in the world, she thought—until she noticed the microwave tower directly behind the droids. Its fearsome array of armed satellite dishes sent a constant flow of surveillance data to the Bombast's nearby citadel. Pow allowed herself a slight smile; a one in a million shot—what more could I ask for?

The kineto-rays flashed out, striking the ground where Pow had stood a nanosecond earlier; now she was somersaulting towards the robo-droids, a whirling target impossible to get a bead on. She landed beneath the lead droid, where the rest of the pack couldn't fire without destroying their compatriot. Pow flung an arm against the robo-droid's giant mechanical ankle. Her blaster slammed into an exposed power coupling with a metallic clang. The weapon's display instantly changed to "MAX CHARGE L/R." Pow pointed her other arm at the tower. "Power ON!" she cried, firing the blaster. A green energy bolt whooshed upwards, faster and faster. Nice of the Bombast to help me destroy his spy system, Pow thought. The bolt neared its target and Pow braced herself for the apocalyptic explosion about to occur—one she suddenly realized could vaporize her as well . . .

KZAKKK-BRAMMM! KZAKKK-BRAMMM! KZAKKK-BRAMMM!

Blastron, The Mighty Robot of Destruction—or at least the ringing telephone version of him—snapped Cindy Hopper out of her ongoing fantasy, *Power Babe vs. The Bombast*. Reluctantly, she put her mental movie on hold and abandoned her heroic bed-top pose. (The ceiling light—now decorated with green silly string—made an excellent microwave dish.) She unstrapped the bicycle helmet from her bobbed hair and jumped to the floor. If any robo-droids

show up around here they're toast, she thought, lifting Blastron's laser cannon off the robot's shoulder and bringing it to her ear. "You're talking to the Babe—power on!"

"Cindy, hi it's me," Harold answered.

"Hi Harold, ready for tonight's big show? I put a casserole in the oven and made room on the DVR. I wonder what kind of surprise they're gonna spring on the prof. How'd he ever wind up thinking *Stunts is a science* show?"

"He saw an episode where they put someone in a centrifuge to see how much acceleration he could take. They called it 'astronaut training.' He missed the part where the audience voted on how long it would take him to throw up . . . or which direction the vomit would go. Listen, Cindy—"

"Oh yeah, I remember that show," Cindy laughed. "What a mess! Last week they had this guy who thought he was going to bell a cat, like in that old cartoon—only it was a baby rhinoceros named 'Kitten.' I bet—"

"Cindy, that's why I called. I can't—I won't be back in time for the show. I've got to finish a—a project here at the lab."

Cindy frowned. "I swear Harold, sometimes I think the prof is your personal evil stepmother. What does he have you working on now—version 2.0 of the Brainstorm?"

"No Cindy, you don't understand." He felt himself growing irritated with his sister. He had expected an "Oh sorry, see you later" so he could get to work setting things up. He glanced at his watch; it was less than an hour until the show began. "It's . . . it's a project of my own. It's . . ."

Now Harold was downright angry with Cindy. He hadn't meant to tell her anything about his experiment, just in case . . . "It's something I have to do, only I can't with Professor Burnside around. It's no big deal, really."

"Harold, does this have anything to do with Fluff showing up at the lab? Sometimes I think that screwy rabbit of yours—"

Harold cut her off; she was getting too close to the truth. "Cindy, I can't talk now, I have to go. I'll see you later."

Blastron's laser cannon went dead in Cindy's hand. Harold was up to something, something he wouldn't tell her about. This wasn't like her brother at all, she thought.

It was almost two years now since their parents and the alpine research expedition they were part of vanished in a sudden avalanche. There were no close relatives to take them in, and

they refused to be split up when they discovered none of the town's would-be foster parents had room for two children. Instead, they managed to convince the authorities they could look after themselves. With an occasional visit from a social worker (not to mention the ever-helpful Burnside), so far they were doing fine.

Except that Harold had changed. He had always been quiet and almost unnaturally studious. Sports, friends, movies—none of that seemed to interest him. Encouraged by his brainy mom and dad, he devoured knowledge as if it were candy. (When it came to Cindy, they shrugged their shoulders, hugged their daughter, and praised her boundless imagination.)

Then the avalanche swept their parents away and Harold grew more distant. She could see him thinking everything through before saying a word, then saying as little possible. When he adopted Fluff he seemed to open up a little, but now . . .

Cindy glanced out the window. Puffy-topped cumulonimbus clouds were approaching, red and ominous in the setting sun. A gust of wind banged the screen door against the house. *Power Babe froze at the sudden noise. Had one of the Bombast's robo-droids survived the blast? Slowly, cautiously, she peeked over the shattered slab of concrete that had protected her from the explosion . . .*

Chapter 4

Collision Course

Professor Burnside felt particularly important right about now. Gorge Road was blocked by two police cars, their roof lights spinning and blinking as if a carnival were taking place. Police officers stood by their vehicles, turning back the crowds trying to visit the Gorge. Splashes of color flew across peoples' faces. Abrupt, staticky police radio calls clashed against loud music pouring out of open car windows. At random moments, far-off flashes of lightning turned the trees into forbidding silhouettes against the sky. The entire scene had an urgent, giddy and slightly unreal air.

Burnside inched his car through the traffic. Night had fallen and he worried he would be late for his rehearsal. Still, all this hubbub, this foofaraw, was for him and his science demonstration! The professor allowed himself a small, self-satisfied smile—which grew into a big goofy grin when the crowd began to recognize him. “There’s the professor . . . look, that’s him!” (The local newspaper and TV stations had been publicizing the event all week long.) The various murmurs grew into a chant. “Burnside! Burnside! BURNSIDE!”

The professor leaned out his open window and magnanimously waved to the onlookers. He beamed as the crowd cheered in response. Their cheers grew louder and louder—until he drove into one of the parked police cars.

CAR-RASH! The cheers were suddenly replaced by the sound of crunching metal. A moment of shocked silence followed, interrupted by a few isolated snickers. Fortunately, Burnside’s car had been barely crawling along; the damage was mainly to his pride and his left front fender. He noticed one of the police officers walking towards him. It was Jean “Smitty” Smith, usually the town’s most easygoing law-enforcement official. She didn’t seem particularly easygoing at the moment. The professor began praying she wasn’t about to throw the cuffs on him; there was a TV show waiting for him, for goodness’ sake.

“Officer Smith, I’m terribly sorry, I’m running late for the—”

Her stern expression gave way to a friendly smile when she recognized Burnside. “Don’t give it a second thought, Professor. We’ll just bill you for the damage later. The show crew

radioed us to let you through as soon as you arrived.” She called to one of her fellow officers. “Eddie, move your car—it’s the professor!”

Smitty climbed into her vehicle. “Professor, where’s that assistant of yours? You know you work him too hard.” She and Harold’s mom had been friends in college; now that he and Cindy were on their own, she tried to keep a watchful eye on them from a distance.

“Hopper? Nonsense, woman—I’m giving his disorganized life structure. I’m teaching him the value of discipline and hard work—I’m a *role model*.” Burnside thought he saw Smitty roll her eyes as she backed out of his way. The crowd began cheering again as he drove up the hill. The professor waved without looking back, his eyes fixed firmly on the road ahead.

Chapter 5

Down in the Basement

For the third time since Burnside's departure, Harold checked the building entrance to make sure it was still locked. (It was.) He headed to the laboratory and without turning on the lights, entered the room.

The dim light streaming in from the hallway barely illuminated the computers and test equipment filling the lab. The darkness posed no obstacle for Harold, who was familiar enough with the room to find his way through it with eyes closed. Light pouring out the lab's windows after hours might attract unwanted attention.

Harold crouched down and opened the safe under the counter. The combination was the same as the lab's zip code, which made it easy to remember.

The safe was empty except for a plastic case with the word "PROTOTYPE" written on top. Harold removed the container and closed the safe, then popped a pair of tiny hearing aid batteries out of a charger on the countertop.

Harold pocketed the batteries and headed towards his workspace, a converted storage closet (or as Burnside called it, Harold's "alcove") near the back of the building. He opened the bottom drawer of his file cabinet and removed a similar but smaller case from behind the last folder.

He looked at the locked door just across from his alcove. Well, he tried to rationalize, I did promise the professor I'd test the Brainstorm one last time . . .

Harold opened the door with one of the keys Burnside had given him. His shadow fell onto the first few basement steps before it was swallowed by darkness. He had been down these stairs a lot lately, but tonight they seemed spookier than usual. Harold pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose, took a deep breath and turned on the light.

Harold locked the door behind him and went downstairs. The staircase descended into a small room with cinderblock walls, a surprisingly tiny space barely larger than a closet. Apart from the stacked cartons at the bottom of the steps, the room was completely empty.

He picked up one of the cartons and tossed it aside. It was empty and all but weightless, in spite of the "HEAVY MACHINERY—DO NOT LIFT UNAIDED" sign taped to it. The other

cartons all bore the same message and were likewise empty. Harold had labeled and stacked them against that particular wall in case Burnside ever decided to visit the basement, which he never did.

In a few seconds, the cartons were out of the way and the door they had been hiding stood in plain sight. For a second Harold thought about calling the experiment off . . . No! He wouldn't let his nerves get the better of him. He had thought it all the way through. Nothing could possibly go wrong . . . Could it?

Harold put his hand on the doorknob. Slowly, as if expecting the bogeyman to jump out and yell "BOO!" he opened the door to the sub-basement. The lights were already on and there wasn't a bogeyman in sight.

This was the lab's real basement. The tiny one Harold was standing in descended from the center of the sub-basement's ceiling, held in place by a pair of girders running from wall to wall just underneath.

The staircase in front of Harold was twice as long as the one behind him and descended to the all but empty space below. Once upon a time, a great deal of electronic equipment had filled the room. All that remained of them was a floor full of dark scuff marks and unused electrical outlets. An array of large machines still stood against the far wall, just beyond an oversized console lined with buttons, switches and gauges.

Next to the console was a small folding table and chair Harold had brought from home. In the center of the table stood a large metal cage, and in the center of the cage was a large white-and cinnamon-colored rabbit.

The rabbit's name was Fluffernutter.

Chapter 6

A Gorgeous Night

Professor Burnside drove his big car up Gorge Road. A thunderclap sounded somewhere in the distance. There was no sign of a TV crew anywhere. Burnside was wondering if he'd made a wrong turn when he noticed a bright glow through the trees ahead.

The road emerged into a clearing and ended in a parking lot. Beyond it were picnic tables, restrooms and a playground, then an open field leading up to the bridge spanning Gorgeous Gorge. Its official name was Harris Gorge, in honor of the first person to discover (and unfortunately fall into) the chasm. Its spectacular 50-mile view drew tourists from all over the country and quickly earned it its better-known nickname.

Cars no longer crossed the bridge when they came to it; years ago, traffic had been re-routed onto a new ground-level highway, and tonight the bridge was the site of a live television broadcast.

Burnside pulled into the last empty parking space. He marveled at the beehive of activity in front of him. Huge floodlights were hanging from cranes, giving off enough light for a major league night game. Vans were parked everywhere, with thick black cables snaking between them. Men and women hurried back and forth, briefly talking with one another, then separating to repeat the process with others. Workers carried and connected equipment with a combination of focus and nonchalance that said they'd done this hundreds of times before.

A lanky man with thinning hair and tired eyes approached Burnside. "Professor Burnside? I'm Charles Christopher, the show's producer. So glad to have you with us." He gave Burnside a weary smile and shook his hand.

Burnside felt a rare twinge of sympathy for someone else; Christopher seemed to have the weight of the world (or at least all of the equipment spread out in front of them) on his shoulders. "Pleased to meet you, Mr. Christopher."

"Please, call me Chris, everyone does," he said. "But I'm afraid we don't have a lot of time. If you come with me, Nicky wants to say hello before we prep you for the broadcast."

"Nicky?" Burnside asked.

“Nicky Nesbitt, the show’s host,” responded Chris. “I used to host and produce back in the old days. Nicky took over on camera after I sold the show to the network. More seasoned talent, you know.” He took a wistful look at the activity surrounding them. “Things were a lot different back then . . .” Chris fell silent for a moment. “You’re not familiar with Nicky?” he finally asked Burnside. “He’s one of the best-known people on TV.”

“I’m afraid I don’t watch a lot of television, Mr. Christoph . . . Chris,” Burnside said. “But when I saw your show’s demonstration of centrifugal force a few months back, I said to myself, ‘Now here’s a science program that knows how important it is to educate the public.’”

“*Science program?* Professor, I think you may have misunderstand—”

“Is that the professor?” a hearty voice boomed out. “Professor Burnside, how are you doing? Glad to see you.” An athletic-looking man with chiseled features and a politician’s smile was walking towards him, arm extended. He grabbed Burnside’s hand and squeezed hard, harder than the professor expected. Burnside grimaced and hoped the man would think he was smiling; he knew show business was no place for weaklings.

“Pleased to meet you Professor, I’m Nicky Nesbitt, host of *America’s Most Dangerous Amateur Stunts*.” Burnside chose not to admit he had never seen Nesbitt before and waited for the man to let go of his hand. “I can’t tell you how glad we are to have you here tonight,” Nesbitt continued. “The lawyers won’t let me.” Releasing his grip, Nesbitt delivered a friendly cuff to Burnside’s shoulder that stung nonetheless. “No, I’m just kidding, glad to have you aboard.”

Burnside smiled weakly, massaging his sore shoulder with his sore hand. “Not at all, the pleasure is mine. I just hope America is looking forward to my demonstration of the principle that—”

“That’s great, Professor,” Nesbitt enthused, “but we have to put you in your harness before we go live.”

“Harness?” Burnside asked. No one had mentioned anything about a harness before. He saw Chris take a half step back, his eyes downcast.

“For your own protection of course,” Nesbitt said, “for safety’s sake.”

Burnside swallowed. “Of course, for safety’s sake—you don’t want me falling off the bridge by mistake.”

“Oh no, not by mistake, absolutely not,” Nesbitt assured him. “You’re going to jump off, once we give you the word.”

Burnside tried to say ‘what?’, but only managed a tiny little squeak. “Nicky, I have to check the camera set-ups,” Chris said in a quiet voice. His eyes were focused on the electronic tablet in his hands. “Good luck, Professor,” he added and walked away.

Nesbitt took no notice of Chris’s departure. “Professor, no one’s going to watch you throw a couple of rocks off the Gorge Bridge—that’s a big-time so what.”

Burnside tried to say they were spheres, not rocks, but Nesbitt was on a roll. “The public wants to see thrills, danger. You know—people staring fate in the eye and saying, ‘go ahead, take your best shot.’” (But most of all, Nesbitt thought, they want to see people risking their lives just to win a few bucks and be on TV.) “You want to prove that two bodies of different weight fall at the same speed. Take it from me, three bodies will be *three times* as interesting, especially when one of them is yours! This is your chance to put your lab—and yourself—on the map. Don’t throw it away. Isn’t it worth taking a risk or two to get the public’s attention? And if you don’t mind me reminding you, the money isn’t half bad either.”

Burnside stared at Nesbitt, speechless. Even so, Nesbitt could see the wheels turning in the professor’s head; if he listened closely, he could even hear them squeaking. Whew, he thought, Burnside’s taking the bait. The network wouldn’t like it if I let my closing stunt walk off the show. I’ve already used that back-up tape of college kids stuffing jellyfish into their underwear three times. Of course, I could blame it on Chris again. I just wish I could get him out of my hair once and for all . . .

Nesbitt turned his attention back to Burnside. “Don’t worry, Professor. We’ve covered all the bases: five cameras on the bridge, three at the bottom of the gorge, even a ‘copter-cam—the whole schmeer and then some.” This information didn’t seem to reassure Burnside, so Nesbitt continued. “All our safety equipment is checked, double-checked and then checked again by seasoned professionals. I promise you, nothing is going to happen tonight. Nothing—except great television.”

Chapter 7

Once Upon a Rabbit

It all began the night Fluffernutter showed up on the Hopper doorstep. Harold was sitting in the kitchen, engrossed in a science journal, when heard a strange noise. This was strange in itself; when Harold was reading it normally took a freight train passing by at close range to get his attention.

It was a quiet yet persistent scratching sound, a curious kind of noise that only something interesting could be making. Harold put his journal down and went into the living room. Cindy was sprawled on the couch, watching several planets exploding at top volume in one of her animé videos. Hyper-quantum bombs were detonating by the dozens, but the strange sound wasn't coming from the TV. "Did you hear a noise?" Harold asked his sister.

"Of course I heard a noise. How could *anyone* not hear that? Don't worry, the Brutarians won't get away with it. Queen Valorica still has a few tricks up her sleeve."

Harold shook his head. "No, not that. It's a—" Just then he heard the sound again. It was coming from the front door. He put his hand on the doorknob, wondering for a moment how he could hear something so quiet over the din of Cindy's movie.

Harold opened the door. No one was in sight. He felt something press lightly on his foot and looked down. A rabbit was staring up at him, its right front paw resting on the tip of his left shoe.

"Cindy, it's—" Harold started to say. Before he could finish the rabbit skittered past him and jumped onto the couch next to his sister.

"Friend of yours, Harold?" The rabbit twitched its nose at Cindy. It was completely white except for a thatch of cinnamon-colored fur between its ears. Harold closed the door and walked over to the couch. "Never saw him before—honest." He patted the cinnamon patch on the rabbit's head and smiled; there was something comforting about the way its fur felt on his fingertips.

The rabbit slid out from under Harold's hand, leapt over the back of the couch and headed into the kitchen. Harold and Cindy stared at each other, then followed suit.

The refrigerator door was wide open. The rabbit was standing on its hind legs at the open fridge as if he belonged there. His paws rested on the bottom shelf while he nibbled on a head of lettuce directly in front of him.

“Did you leave the door open?” Harold asked his sister.

“No, I closed it after I took my goop out—remember?” She pointed to a jar of marshmallow Fluff on the kitchen table. “I was going to make a sandwich when the show ended.” Another explosion sounded from the living room, followed by heroic yet ominous music. Cindy shrugged. “Sandwich time.” She went to the cupboard and took out a half-empty jar of peanut butter.

Harold put some lettuce in a plate for their guest while Cindy gathered up the rest of her sandwich fixings. She glanced at the head of lettuce her brother was returning to the refrigerator. “Y’know, I could’ve sworn that lettuce was way in the back of the fridge before that rabbit got here . . . all wrapped up, too.”

Cindy went to work on her favorite post-animé snack. She spread the snowy white cream atop a slice of white bread. Next, she stuck a long-handled spoon into the peanut butter, scooped out a healthy dollop and snapped her wrist as if she were casting a fishing rod. The clump of peanut butter flew off the spoon and landed dead center atop the cream-covered bread.

Cindy was about to crown her creation with a second bread slice (she liked the bulge the peanut butter made in the middle of the sandwich) when she noticed something. “Check it out Harold—they’re both brown and white!” The peanut butter was more a deep gold and the rabbit’s patch a rusty brown. Even so, there was indeed a resemblance between the sandwich and the rabbit. “You’re a Fluffernutter, fur ball,” Cindy teased the animal. “Better stay away from sandwiches if you don’t want a bite taken out of you.” If rabbits were capable of giving dirty looks, Harold could’ve sworn his sister just got one.

The rabbit stuck around, and the name “Fluffernutter”—or “Fluff” for short—stuck as well. As it turned out, Fluff’s arrival and his help-yourself dinner were just the tip of the iceberg lettuce . . .

At first, Harold and Cindy tried keeping Fluff in a cage at night. Harold made sure its door clasp was securely shut, wished the rabbit goodnight and went to bed. The next morning his alarm clock buzzed at its usual time. Eyes closed and still half asleep, he fumbled for the clock’s snooze button—and his hand landed on Fluff’s fur.

Harold woke with a start. He looked at the night table next to his bed: Fluff was nowhere in sight. Harold put on his glasses and slid his feet into his bunny slippers. (Cindy had bought them as a joke the day after Fluff's arrival, but Harold found them surprisingly comfortable and adopted them as his regular after-hours footwear.) Still groggy, he went into the living room. There was Fluff, curled up and apparently fast asleep in his locked cage. Harold shook his head and went to lie down again for a few minutes. An hour later he woke up late for school. Harold spent the rest of the day wondering whether he had dreamed the entire episode.

As it turned out, he wasn't dreaming. Somehow, Fluff had the uncanny ability to show up wherever and whenever he wanted, whether or not he was expected. He could vanish from sight for hours at a time, then turn up as if he'd been there all along. Cindy would see Fluff curled up on the sofa (always in the same spot on Harold's squished cushion), then open the linen closet a few seconds later to discover him napping on the towels—or vice versa.

After a few such incidents, Harold and Cindy accepted Fluff's comings and goings as a way of life. They didn't think twice a few weeks later when an entire day went by without any sign of him. After a second Fluffless day, however, they began to worry. The next afternoon "HAVE YOU SEEN THIS RABBIT?" flyers dotted the neighborhood.

There were no callers. No one had seen Fluff. Harold was surprised at how much he missed the rabbit or the soft feel of fur under his fingers. Cindy tried to reassure him that while she missed their pet too, she had no doubt Fluff was fine wherever he was. "Face it Harold," she said, "that rabbit hops to the beat of a different drummer."

Monday afternoon Harold arrived at Burnside's lab for his regular after-school stint. He discovered Burnside in his office, pacing back and forth in front of his desk.

Harold stood in the doorway and watched. Burnside was always like this while in the throes of what he considered a brilliant idea. He finally noticed his assistant. "Hopper—I just had a *brilliant* idea—a veritable brainstorm!"

It was the translator, of course, or as the professor quickly dubbed it, the Burnside Brainstorm. Harold listened patiently as he described, redescribed (and re-redescribed) his concept for the Brainstorm.

Eventually, Burnside realized he was repeating himself. "Hopper—why are you standing there? I need you to find out everything you can about voice recognition and electronic translation—NOW, please!"

Harold left Burnside's office and headed toward his alcove. He was about to sit down when he heard a familiar scratching noise coming from the lab's rear exit a few feet away.

Harold froze in his tracks. It couldn't be, he said to himself, even as he knew, without a doubt, it *was*.

He opened the door and Fluffernutter leapt into the lab. The rabbit made a clumsy turn on the slippery floor and hopped towards Burnside's office.

"Hopper—there's something else I need you to research . . ." Harold heard the professor's footsteps. In another second, Burnside would be in the hall, demanding an explanation for the rabbit's presence. He knew the professor would never believe it was Fluff's idea; it would be a lot simpler to hide the animal for the time being. Harold scooped Fluff up, dropped him into one of his lab coat's oversized pockets and tried unsuccessfully to look nonchalant for Burnside, who had just emerged from his office.

Fortunately, Burnside was oblivious to his assistant's nervous demeanor or to the bottom of the lab coat bunched up behind his back. "Miniaturization, Hopper. I almost forgot. Miniaturization is the key to the Brainstorm. We may even need to employ nanotechnology in order to realize my dream . . ." Harold listened as attentively as anyone could with a four-pound ball of fur wiggling and bumping against their backside.

Burnside finished and waited for a response from Harold. "Well?" he finally asked.

"Uh, yes! Yes, Professor, of course! Voice recognition and electronic translation." He backed away from Burnside, trying to keep his bulging pocket out of sight. "And nanotechnology. I'll start researching them right now."

A dumbfounded Burnside stared down the hall. What could Hopper possibly be up to? The professor's face suddenly lit up with an "aha!" expression; another brilliant idea had just occurred to him. Best to return to the office and write it down before it slipped away.

Harold sat down at his computer and connected to the internet. He reached into his lab coat pocket—no Fluff! *Where was Fluff?* Harold looked up; there was Fluff, peeking out from behind Harold's computer monitor, his paws atop its screen. The rabbit was staring into Harold's eyes as if he were trying to communicate via telepathy. "I wish I had a translator that could tell me what *you're* thinking," thought Harold. He began typing search words into the computer. "Nanotechnology . . . voice recognition . . . electronic translation . . ."

Harold stopped typing and looked at Fluff again. He had just had a brainstorm of his own. “Maybe I can *make* one . . .” Harold pushed his glasses toward the top of his nose and began typing again; it was time to launch an extra search or two. “Brain waves . . . cerebral scanning . . . bio-communication . . .”

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Chapter 8

The Mainframe-Up

The sub-basement became Fluff's home at the lab. When Harold told Cindy Fluff had returned she wasn't the least bit surprised. "I knew he'd show up sooner or later. That animal has a game plan all his own. Any rabbit in his right mind wouldn't go near a research lab."

Harold smiled. "Fluff seems to like it there—he hasn't pulled any disappearing acts yet. Besides, you know the professor specializes in electronics. The last thing he wants is a lab full of animals. Me too, as a matter of fact. One rabbit is more than enough to take care of."

"Why don't you bring him home?" she asked. "It's not like you to take a chance with Burnside."

Somehow, Harold had never gotten around to letting Cindy in on his plans. He told himself it was to keep her from worrying about him or Fluff, but deep down he was afraid that if she found out she might insist on taking part; it was exactly the kind of situation that would appeal to her inner Power Babe. "Don't worry," Harold said. "I keep him way out of sight. He's good company too—he talks a lot less than the professor." Cindy grinned. She didn't know which she hated more: the way Burnside seemed to bully her brother, or that he never complained about it. Hearing him tweak Burnside was something new.

"As long as you don't miss Fluff too much" Harold continued, "I'd like to keep him at the lab."

"It's fine with me," she answered. "That way I don't have to clean up after him. Just promise you'll bring him home for the holidays, okay?"

Harold quickly found all the information he needed to design the Brainstorm to the professor's specifications. It only took a little longer to write up a few extra algorithms and add a tiny input jack to the unit. He told Burnside the jack would let the Brainstorm translate phone calls and digital recordings as well as face-to-face conversations. Although he had never given a thought to electronic input, Burnside said, "Well of course, Hopper" as if it had been his idea all along. "What good is it if it only works in person?"

Harold didn't tell Burnside the input jack's real purpose: he intended to use the Brainstorm to read Fluff's mind. With Harold's additions, the device was now capable of scanning the rabbit's brainwaves and translating them into English. Harold presumed he would hear simple thoughts—"Hungry," "Play trick!"—or perhaps the rabbit equivalent of a mischievous giggle—that might nonetheless shed some light on Fluff's uncanny abilities. The only thing the Brainstorm lacked was the extra computing power to boost Fluff's brainwaves to human level—but that power was already in the lab, waiting to be tapped into.

* * *

Fluffernutter's ears pivoted at the sound of Harold's footsteps. The rabbit waddled over the cage's metal slats to meet his human. Harold let Fluff sniff at his fingers, then stroked its soft white fur. He turned to the machines lining the wall; each one was the size of a large refrigerator, topped by an oversized pair of tape reels that made them look like stern, disapproving robots.

The machines were mainframe computers, storage devices dating back to the dawn of the digital age. They had been sitting in the sub-basement, unused and forgotten until Harold discovered them not long after he started working at the lab. When he tried to ask Burnside about the equipment and received only a blank stare in return, he realized the professor had either never entered the sub-basement or was unaware the building even possessed one.

His curiosity piqued, Harold visited the town library and learned that once upon a time the building housed a top-secret government research project. The project moved on, and the building stood abandoned until Burnside bought it for \$25 at a town auction and opened his laboratory. Harold hadn't given the building's history or the computers in its sub-basement a second thought thereafter—until the day he decided to read Fluff's mind. The computers and their control console were old, but they still worked and (in theory at least) they would provide more than enough power to make his experiment a success.

Harold sat down and put the two plastic cases on the table next to Fluff, who hopped out of his cage and gave them a sniff. Harold opened the one labeled "PROTOTYPE" and brought out the Burnside Brainstorm.

Except for its white color, someone unfamiliar with the Brainstorm might have mistaken it for a larger version of a mobile phone's wireless earpiece. About three inches long and half an inch thick, the unit tapered from an inch wide at its back (where Harold had added the input jack) to a pen-sized front opening containing its microphone.

Harold reached into the padded envelope, took out a pair of thin, coiled cables—and a second Brainstorm, a scaled-down version of the original. If Harold had his sister’s sense of humor, he might’ve called it the Bunny Brainstorm; in a few moments it would be nestled against Fluffernutter’s ear.

Harold inserted a newly charged battery into each of the Brainstorm units. Next, he uncoiled the cables and plugged them into the console. Technically this should have been impossible. Over the past few weeks, however, Harold had managed to rewire the console and install a pair of inputs—one for the original Brainstorm and one for Fluff’s.

Harold plugged the other end of each cable into its appropriate Brainstorm. He put the larger unit on his ear and the smaller one on Fluff’s. He reached across the console and clicked a series of metal toggle switches into their “ON” position, leaving only the last one turned off. One by one, the mainframe computers powered up. Their oversized reels spun first in one direction, then the other, then back again, as if they couldn’t make up their minds. The dozens of lights on the console flickered on and off in random patterns. An electronic hum grew louder by the second—but not loud enough to drown out a distant rumble outside the lab. Harold remembered that thunderstorms—possibly severe ones—had been forecast for that evening. A fluttery sensation filled his chest and he realized he was barely breathing.

A second, closer rumble sounded outside. The electronic hum filling the room seemed to grow more intense. Harold took one more look at Fluff. He pushed his glasses to the top of his nose—and flicked the final switch.

The rabbit blinked as electromagnetic waves gently probed his mind. Harold raised a hand to the device in his ear and waited to hear Fluff’s translated thoughts. At precisely that moment, a bolt of lightning found its way to the lab’s lightning rod.

CRAAAACKKK!

If the rod had been grounded correctly, the electricity would have traveled harmlessly down a metal pipe and into the earth. Years ago, however, a workman leaving early for the weekend absent-mindedly connected it to the wrong pipe—the one carrying power to the mainframe computers.

An enormous electrical surge shot through the old machines, burning out every one of their circuits and filling the sub-basement with a dazzling rain of sparks. The next moment a

wave of energy, like a giant, invisible hand, slammed into Harold and sent him flying backwards across the room.

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Chapter 9

All Wet

Professor Burnside was suffering from a frostbite-level case of cold feet and enough butterflies in his stomach to keep him aloft after he stepped off the bridge. He had made the mistake of wandering to the edge of the Gorge and glancing down. It was not the modest drop he remembered; right now it seemed almost bottomless, even as the show's bright floodlights made every rock in the dry riverbed below appear more jagged and dangerous than they already were.

The professor felt a wet impact behind his ear. He jerked upright, afraid he was the victim of a practical joke that would send him tumbling over the railing, but no one was nearby. He began scanning the sky for an inconsiderate pigeon when a drop of rain hit him square on the nose. He frowned, remembering his cold coffee shower back at the lab. Once today was enough, thank you. A moment later, a barrage of raindrops pelted his bald head and shoulders. A heavy downpour had begun, drenching everyone and everything.

As if from out of nowhere, sheets of plastic materialized above and around the cameras and monitors, put in place by technicians now wearing yellow ponchos with "AMDAS" stenciled on the back. Large black umbrellas sporting the same initials sprouted like mushrooms over the heads of the show staffers. Without saying a word, a young woman sprinting past Burnside handed him an umbrella of his own. The light towers shone on, impervious to the downpour and transforming the rain into dancing gray needles.

A stab of lightning struck one of the towers, shattering its glass fixtures. An unnerving shriek cut through the air as rain pelted the exposed red-hot filaments.

Burnside turned and headed for his car. He passed a huddle of umbrellas bobbing near one of the trailers. Underneath were Nesbitt, "Chris" Christopher, and his staffers planning their next move. Drifting closer, he could make out Chris's voice: "Rain-out . . . Why risk it? . . . Cancel the segment . . . next week . . ."

I'm a free man! Burnside thought. He sighed in relief, loudly enough for the group to turn to see what the noise was. Noticing their stares, he quickly mumbled, "Gee, too bad, a rain-out, huh?" He realized he was grinning, and quickly switched to a disappointed frown for their benefit.

The professor continued on his way; he would return to the lab, check on Hopper and the Brainstorm, then head home. He was about to unlock his car door when he heard Nesbitt's voice. "Professor? The show's still on."

"What are you talking about?" Burnside answered. "It's *pour--*" He looked up; the rain had slowed to a light mist.

"Chris can be a little too cautious on occasion," Nesbitt said, "but I reminded him how much our audience is looking forward to your experiment."

There was no mistaking Nesbitt's you're-not-going-anywhere expression. Burnside gulped and nodded meekly. Nesbitt responded with a toothy smile that reminded the professor of a crocodile. Not far away, Chris's voice reverberated out of a bullhorn. "Get ready people—five minutes to air!"

Chapter 10

A Very Special Episode

A bag of microwave popcorn in her hands, Cindy plopped onto the couch in front of the TV. She brought her foot up over the remote control on the coffee table and daintily pressed the ON button with her big toe. “I’m Nicky Nesbitt, welcoming you to a thrill-packed, special live episode of *America’s Most Dangerous Amateur Stunts!*”

Just beginning—perfect timing! Cindy’s toe pressed a second button to start recording the show. She was really sorry Harold wouldn’t get to see the prof’s big moment live.

As always, *Amateur Stunts* began with clips of its most outrageous moments: would-be hippopotamus wranglers being dragged off by their oblivious prey . . . barefoot sprinters trying to make it through a field of mousetraps . . . and Cindy’s favorite: contestants pressing oversized buttons that rewarded them with either cash prizes or smoke explosions. (She loved the way the losers resembled cartoon characters who had held onto a stick of dynamite just a little too long.)

The clips gave way to animated gold coins and dancing dollar signs spilling out of a canvas sack, replaced in turn by Nicky Nesbitt holding a slender, silver microphone. “There’s a big bag o’ cash in store for the survivor—” He paused and gave his famous wink and grin into the camera. “I mean the *winner* of tonight’s show! Who will bring home the bucks—and who will bring home the boo-boos? We’ll find out in a minute . . .”

Four minutes of commercials later, Nesbitt introduced the show’s opening stunt: “Let’s go to Akron Ohio for an attempt to break the world’s record—oh wait, there isn’t any world’s record because no one’s tried it yet—for peanut butter scuba diving!” A few minutes later a steam shovel pulled a dazed, glop-covered contestant to the surface of a PB-filled vat. “Ohh, better luck next time,” Nesbitt commiserated, “but I know you’ll enjoy your consolation prize: a year’s supply of grape jelly!”

Next, volunteers tried to slide down the world’s longest ski jump with bars of wet soap strapped to their boots in place of skis; none of them made it. (“He must be feeling the agony of de-feet just now,” was Nesbitt’s comment after one particularly disastrous attempt.) Then a

squad of sumo wrestlers, each inside his own giant plastic sphere, attempted to squash a plucky fellow who managed to elude them—for a while, anyway.

Nesbitt came back on camera. “And later on”—Cindy sighed; “later on” meant they were saving that stunt for the end of the show—“one *nutty* professor is going to prove the existence of . . .” He looked down at an index card he was holding, as if trying to decipher it. “Gravity?” he finished, in a pretend, this-doesn’t-make-any-sense voice. A goffy sound effect of a plane dive-bombing out of the sky and hitting the ground with a fearsome thud punctuated his sentence. “Ooh,” he grinned. “That’s gotta smart!”

Chapter 11

Strange Changes

As he flew across the basement, Harold saw Fluffernutter leap into his cage. I hope he's okay, Harold thought; I hope *I'm* o—

BAMM! Harold hit the wall across from the computers. *CRUNNCHH!* Its surface was little more than thin paneling that gave way instantly. *WHHUMMP!* Harold slammed back-first into a pile of plastic sacks filling a forgotten storeroom. *FWUPFF!* His impact burst the sacks open, unleashing thousands of narrow strips of paper into the air.

A mountain of shredded top-secret government documents had just saved Harold from serious injury. Too dizzy to move, he lay on his back waiting for the paper blizzard to subside and for his head to stop spinning. His inner ear hadn't been this discombobulated since Cindy talked him into riding the tilt-a-whirl at last year's carnival. (At least this time he hadn't made the mistake of eating two chili dogs beforehand.)

Harold squinted through the shredded paper draped over his glasses. There was Fluff, safe and sound in his cage. The sight helped Harold's head to settle. Aside from an odd tingling in his legs, he felt perfectly fine—energized, as a matter of fact.

Harold frowned. The tingling sensation was growing stronger, and for some reason his shoes felt like they were squeezing his feet. He reached forward to undo the laces, then stopped and stared at his shoes. Something was happening, something weird.

His shoes were starting to expand. He could see the pressure building at their seams, he could hear the leather stretching and creaking. And worst of all, he could feel them getting tighter and tighter.

There was only one possible explanation: his shoes were squeezing his feet . . . because his feet were growing larger! The pressure turned painful and Harold reached towards his shoes again. He had to get them off right now, before they—

“HICCUP!!”

Harold hiccupped, louder than he ever had in his life. At the same moment, his shoes ripped open.

The terrible pressure vanished. Harold looked at his sock-covered toes. They were sticking a good inch or more beyond the shoe's torn-apart seams.

"HICCC—"

His feet grew another inch out of his shoes. He realized these weren't random events. The hiccups were either triggering—or were being triggered by—his strangely swelling feet.

"HICCUP!"

Harold's toenails ripped through his socks. Only they weren't broad and flat any more, like normal toenails. They were round and narrow, like tiny claws.

Harold reached out to touch his toes. This isn't happening, he told himself. It's a hallucination, I'm not—his train of thought stopped dead in its tracks; some sort of fuzz was growing on the back of his hand, sparse at first but spreading as he watched.

"HICCHK!"

Harold's socks gave way. His toes, and then the top of his feet popped into view. Their claws lengthened and poked against his fingertips. There was fuzz on his feet too. He leaned forward and took a closer look. It wasn't fuzz. It was fur.

Chapter 12

One of a Kind

“Chris” Christopher, the producer of *America’s Most Dangerous Amateur Stunts* didn’t hear the first grunt, but the second, louder one made him look up.

The show’s prop master was squeezing Burnside into a safety harness at least a size too small for him. Chris realized the sound had come from both men: the prop master from the sheer effort of trying to buckle the harness shut, and Burnside from having the wind squeezed out of him.

“Sorry Chris, I don’t have an extra extra large,” the man shouted. “I let this one out as far as it would go.” Chris nodded and returned to his tablet; status updates were coming in from the technical staff and there wasn’t time to worry about a contestant’s discomfort.

He glanced up again in spite of himself. Burnside was trying to look brave and failing miserably. Chris flinched at Burnside’s distress; all the professor wanted (or so Chris believed) was to share his love of science with everyone.

Burnside’s apparent idealism—of doing something for the love of it—reminded Chris of what he had given up. Not that long ago, *America’s Most Dangerous Amateur Stunts* was known as *One of a Kind*, and Chris was its host and creator. “Everyone is unique,” he would say at the beginning of the show. “Everyone has a story to tell or a gift to share.” On *One of a Kind* people demonstrated their unusual skills or interests, whether it was a woman who could play the Star-Spangled Banner on an eggplant, or a man with the world’s largest collection of potato chip bags. It would have been easy to smirk at their eccentricities, but Chris was the kind of person who found everyone interesting and treated them all with respect.

Ellie was one of the show’s first guests. She could imitate almost any bird so well a panel of experts couldn’t tell her whistles, chirps and caws apart from real ones. Chris soon found himself visiting her time and again to hear her latest bird calls. It wasn’t long before they realized they were in love, and not much longer until they married.

One day the show visited an elementary school that had hit on a novel way to help fund a homeless shelter: a paper cup pyramid. The students asked people to sponsor cups for 25 cents

each to grow the pyramid wider and higher. Thanks to *One of a Kind*, the monument reached gigantic proportions, raising far more money than anyone expected.

Suddenly, *One of a Kind* was airing contest after contest: soda can sculptures, shopping cart races, costumed tug of wars, the sillier the better and all for worthy causes. Every week the contests grew more outrageous and the show more popular. It wasn't long before a big TV network wanted to buy *One of a Kind*—for a lot of money. Chris turned them down with a simple “no thanks.” He knew their plans to make the show “edgy” and add a “touch of danger” in order to raise its excitement level would turn it into something it wasn't.

Then Ellie got sick. The medical bills were unbelievable, and Chris had to accept the network's offer—but only after making sure he would stay on the show in order to keep the stunts from getting out of hand.

Almost overnight *One of a Kind* became *America's Kookiest Kontests*. When Chris took time off to be with Ellie, the network chose Nicky Nesbitt, an always-grinning talk show host as his temporary replacement.

Not long afterwards, Ellie passed away. Chris returned and discovered *Kookiest Kontests* was now *America's Most Dangerous Amateur Stunts*. The show's ratings had skyrocketed during his absence, thanks to Nesbitt's leering grin and its new high-risk stunts. The network had no interest in seeing them dwindle again and relegated Chris to the task of producing what was now Nicky Nesbitt's show.

When Chris decided it was time to leave and re-create *One of a Kind* elsewhere, he discovered he was trapped: the same contract that guaranteed his job also forbade him from quitting as long as *Amateur Stunts* was still on the air. Now his life was a constant battle with Nesbitt, who seemed to enjoy belittling him as much as the contestants.

Chris glanced at his watch; soon it would be time for Burnside's stunt. “Professor?”

Burnside looked up; he had been trying to tie a loose shoelace, but his harness was so tight he could barely bend over. “You've still got ten minutes until we need you on the bridge,” Chris told him. “Why don't you have a seat?”

Burnside could only manage a terrified nod. He collapsed into a folding chair that almost buckled under his weight and stared straight ahead. Right now Chris didn't feel very good about himself.

Chapter 13

You Are Hare

“*HICCC—!!* N . . . no—this isn’t happening!”

Unfortunately for Harold, whatever was happening . . . was happening. “*HICCC!*” More of his shoes’ stitching gave way, revealing his oversized, fur-covered feet in all their glory. “*HICCUPP!!*”

Now something was tickling his face and making his nose itch. Harold touched his cheek; the fuzz was there too, and something that felt like—whiskers. His heart was pounding. He had an idea what was going on, but it couldn’t be true, it was impossible—or was it?

There was a clean-up sink across the room and a mirror above it. He would get up, walk over and take a—

“*HICC!*” Harold was standing at the sink as if he’d been there all along. He looked back at the closet. One of his ripped-open shoes was spiraling through the air (it hit the concrete floor with a thud), while the other spun on its side nearby. “*HICCK!*” Harold turned to the mirror. His ears were twice as long as they should have been. “*HICC!*” They were covered in the white fuzz—“*HICCIK!*”—and they were moving towards the top of his head!

There was no doubt about it. As unbelievable as it seemed, Harold realized he was slowly but surely turning into . . . into a rabbit like Fluffernutter! The fact that he wasn’t shrinking down to rabbit size, or that his human brain seemed to be working fine was little comfort.

Harold saw Fluff standing up in his cage, forepaws pressed against the thin metal bars. The rabbit seemed to be watching him with intense curiosity. “Fluff—*HICC!*” he shouted. “You—*HICCK!*—did this—you made it happen! Make it stop!”

He turned back to the mirror. It wasn’t stopping. “*HIC!*” His nose was flattening out, his nostrils reshaping themselves into narrow slits. “*HICCK!*” A smooth, short coating of white fur rippled outward from his nose and over his cheeks and forehead. “*HIC-IC!*” His flattened nose and upper lip merged into a small, freckled muzzle. “*HICCK!*” His unkempt head of black hair grew long and straight and lighter, turning a shade of cinnamon-brown.

Harold stared at his reflection. Fear had given way to disbelief, disbelief to amazement, and amazement to fascination. There was something familiar about this new person taking shape in front of him . . .

“*HICC!*” A current shot down Harold’s spine and hit his tailbone full blast. A loud *pop!* sounded behind his back and his bottom tingled with a strange energy; it was as if someone had just given him a reverse wedgie.

Harold looked over his shoulder to see what was going on. His lab coat and dress slacks were gone, replaced by a pair of blue jeans and a peach colored pullover. His sudden wardrobe change was nothing however, compared to the plume of white fur now gracing his backside. Harold smiled. A tail—why not? He saw—and felt—the plume respond with a friendly twitch. I can do that, he thought. In seconds, Harold mastered the art of tail-twitching, from pendulum-slow to hummingbird-fast. “This’ll come in handy when it’s time to dust,” he laughed.

He stopped, puzzled. “Is that my voice?” He didn’t sound like himself. The hesitation that marked his every sentence was missing, replaced by a confident, almost sassy cadence. He already knew he didn’t look like himself, but he didn’t *feel* like himself either, come to think of it. He just felt—*different*: calmer, yet crazier . . . ready for anything to happen—no, *hoping* something weird would happen, something that would give him an excuse to bounce off the ceiling and do somersaults through the air . . .

Ceiling? Somersaults? Why not? Harold lowered his heels (he’d been standing on the front of his feet without realizing it) and leapt straight up. When his ears slapped against the ceiling he angled his feet forwards, hooked them onto the nearest girder and swung around it three times before letting go. He shot towards the floor head first, but at the last second extended his arm. The tiny claw on his pinky caught Fluff’s table at its very corner. Harold’s plunge stopped in mid-air as if someone had pressed a pause button.

Harold flipped himself off the table and landed upright on the floor. “Not too shabby,” he allowed. His ears smacked together, applauding their owner’s prowess. “Thank you, thank you.” He looked up at them and added, “Sorry, no autographs.” They wilted in disappointment and then popped back up as if to say “Just kidding.”

Harold turned to the mirror and studied his bucktoothed reflection. His glasses had vanished too, yet his vision was perfect—so perfect he could see a sparkle in his eye that had never been there before. Turning into a rabbit wasn’t so bad, he thought. In fact, it really was

pretty cool! He could make his tail twitch, his whiskers wiggle and his ears do all sorts of tricks. His clothes' quick-change act was the only part of the deal he couldn't figure out—but it was cool, too.

Harold decided he had spent enough time in the sub-basement; the great outdoors was calling. He noticed Fluff staring at him from his cage. "I'll see you later, Fluff," he said, leaping up towards the basement door. "And thanks for the makeover!"

* * *

A few seconds later Harold stood outside the lab. The building was set far back from the road; no one in the few passing cars noticed a casually-dressed, human-sized rabbit (with his new ears, the 5 feet 3½ inch Harold now stood exactly 6 feet tall) standing in its doorway.

The lawn glistened from the brief rain. The storm had passed, leaving the moonless sky clear, black and sparkling with stars. Harold lifted his head and sniffed the cool moist air. His rabbit nose twitched, taking in the all the scents, pleasant and unpleasant, known and unknown, of the world around him: trees and bushes both nearby and far away . . . flowers, growing wild or tended in peoples' gardens. Each one had its own unique aroma, and he could tell them all apart. Mixed in were the smells of cars burning gasoline and burgers cooling inside paper wrappers . . . popcorn wafting out of movie theaters and soda spilled on concrete parking lots—and the animal scents of his brothers, sisters and cousins in the wild.

His long ears pivoted slowly, like radio dishes seeking out deep-space signals, until he was aware of every sound for miles: the wind wafting through leaves heavy with rain . . . crickets harmonizing in their nighttime chorus . . . a far-off cacophony of radio, TV and traffic sounds that blended into a cricket-like buzz all its own . . . and voices of people in their homes and out of doors, laughing, talking, joking and teasing, whispering words of love or shouting boasts of pride. Harold the rabbit smiled. He knew, in a way Harold the human never could, that he was part of the entire world and that the entire world was part of him.

Just then, Harold felt the slightest vibration in his whiskers, like a seismograph picking up the faint tremors preceding an earthquake. As if they had a mind of their own, his ears turned north, then northwest, then stopped. The next moment they leaned forwards—toward Gorgeous Gorge. At that moment Harold knew, without knowing how, that Professor Burnside's demonstration was about to go terribly wrong.

Chapter 14

It's Showtime!

“Are you ready, Professor?”

Burnside realized Chris was standing in front of him. “You’re on in five.”

“F . . . five what?” he stuttered. He was sorry he had ever let Hopper talk him into this foolhardy stunt. *It was Hopper’s idea, wasn’t it? Of course it was. I’d never agree to anything as dangerous as this . . .* Chris watched Burnside struggle in vain to stand up. “Here, let me help you,” he said, reaching out a hand.

Burnside almost pulled the producer down on top of him. After one more try, Chris called over a particularly hulking crewmember. Together they were able to help the professor to his feet. “Thanks” he whispered. The harness was squeezing him, in all the wrong places, but it didn’t hurt too much—as long as he didn’t breathe.

He saw Chris give him a sympathetic smile and felt a little better. “This way, Professor.” Chris pointed to a brightly lit platform built out over the side of the Gorge Bridge. Burnside suddenly felt worse—a *lot, lot* worse.

Chris guided Burnside to the bottom of the steps where he stood dumbstruck; he suddenly remembered a movie he had seen on TV where a condemned man was being led to the gallows. “Your left foot, Professor,” Chris said helpfully.

Burnside looked down. “Yes, there it is,” he answered in a quiet voice, “next to my right foot.”

“Could you put it on the step please?” Chris asked.

Burnside finally got the idea and (holding firmly onto Chris’s arm every inch of the way) climbed the stairs. Chris pointed to a small piece of tape on the floor close to Nesbitt. “That’s your mark, Professor. Good luck!”

Burnside watched Chris disappear into the crowd of technicians and camera people, then went to his “mark” next to Nesbitt, who was standing dead center on the platform, his silver microphone in hand. “Howya doing, Professor?” he boomed, putting his arm around Burnside’s shoulders. “Welcome to the big time! You good to go?” Burnside managed a wide-eyed, rapid up-and-down shake of his head. “Great, great,” Nesbitt said approvingly.

The next moment, the prop master handed Burnside a golf ball painted a bright green and a vivid yellow sphere the size of a grapefruit. Burnside realized he was leaning sideways toward the larger, heavier weight and tried to straighten up. “Good, good, great,” said Nesbitt, growing more hyper by the second. “Okay Professor, you remember your speech?”

Burnside nodded; he had been practicing all week long, both to the bathroom mirror and to an increasingly bored Harold. He shifted the golf ball to his other hand and reached for Nesbitt’s microphone.

“Watch it!” snapped Nesbitt, jerking the microphone out of Burnside’s reach. Nesbitt quickly regained his composure and smiled at the shocked Burnside. “Sorry, but no one touches ‘Lucky Mike’ except me,” he explained. “Mike’s been with me since my career began.” He pointed the microphone at Burnside. “Now let’s hear your speech.”

Burnside took a deep breath.

“Good evening America, and the rest of the world,” he began. “My name is Benjamin P. Burnside, professor of Advanced Science. I’ve come here tonight to demonstrate the principle that—”

“Great, great!” Nesbitt interrupted. “If you lose your place, don’t forget the cue cards.”

“Cue cards? What are—” Burnside tried to ask, but Nesbitt’s attention was already elsewhere. The prop master returned, this time carrying a coiled orange bungee cord. He clamped its spring-hook onto a sturdy looking bracket attached to the bridge’s railing. “Not to worry, Professor,” he said. “I welded *and* bolted that bracket on myself. It’s part of the bridge now.” Burnside relaxed a bit. This fellow seemed to know what he was do—

The prop master leapt onto the platform, giving it a terrifying bounce. He dropped the cord at the professor’s feet and hooked its other end onto his harness. “Easy, Professor, I don’t want you going over before I bungee you up—it would cost me my job.”

“Your *job*?” Burnside protested, “what about my *life*?”

The prop master bounded back down the steps and vanished. Burnside heard Chris’s voice shouting: “On in five! Four.—Three.—Two—”

The “One” Burnside was expecting never came. Instead, the floodlights behind the cameras burst into their full brilliance. Burnside squinted, trying to see into the glare. “Welcome back,” he heard Nesbitt intone. “Let’s watch as a 240-pound professor meets a 280-foot drop, protected only by a 100-foot-long bungee cord. Who will have the last laugh: gravity, or the

professor?” The cartoony impact noise punctuated Nesbitt’s sentence. “It’s a science lesson you—and he—will never forget!”

Burnside stood there silently. Blinded by the glare, he couldn’t see Chris standing just below the stage, pointing at him in a “you’re on” gesture. Finally, Nesbitt stepped into the breach.

“I hate to admit it, Professor, but I didn’t pay much attention in high school. What the heck are you doing here?”

Burnside finally realized he needed to start talking.

“Oh, oh, hello . . . I’m . . . I’m here to . . .”

He took a surreptitious glance into the gorge.

“*To jump off this bridge!*” he practically shrieked. Burnside didn’t notice Nesbitt’s grimace, but finally remembered the speech he was supposed to give.

“Um, uh, because . . . that is, um, to demonstrate the principle that all objects, no whether they’re light and tiny—” He showed the large yellow weight in his left hand to the camera—“or big and heavy—” and repeated his mistake, in reverse, “all fall at the same weight of speed.” Burnside winced; he had meant to say “*rate* of speed.” He was about to correct himself when he saw Chris making a circular “Hurry up!” gesture. The producer pointed to someone crouching under the TV camera and holding a large white card with Burnside’s speech printed on it.

The professor nodded gratefully (unaware that 32 million viewers would have no idea why) and scanned the card. He gulped loudly; the few words on it were not part of his original speech. “And to prove my point,” Burnside began reading, “I will join my two friends here in their dizzying descent”—He held up the weights one more time and stole another glance over his shoulder—“into the depths of Gorgeous Gorge.”

Burnside turned, and as slowly as possible, shuffled to the edge of the platform. He looked back at the camera and gave out with a sound that was either a hopeful titter or a terrified whine. With nothing else left to do, Professor Benjamin P. Burnside closed his eyes, stepped off Gorge Bridge and vanished from sight.

Chapter 15

Hare I Am

A white, blue- and peach-colored blur sped through Townline Park. Harold Hopper's oversized rabbit feet pushed effortlessly against the ground. He zoomed forward, faster and faster with every stride.

Harold never felt like this before. Yet the wind streaming past his face, caressing his ears and whiskers, seemed like the most natural sensation in the world—one he might as well be born to.

The park was nearly empty. The handful of people there could barely make out the mysterious figure that zipped past them at race car speed. Harold decided to slow down a touch before he ran head-on into someone, or something. He stopped running as if his legs were rapid-fire pistons and switched to a bounding jog that let him cover yards between each footfall.

Gorge Road was at the far end of the park. Harold could already see the police cars' spinning lights and hear the still-gathered crowd. In another moment he would land in their midst. He knew he couldn't afford the delay—he had to meet somebody at Gorge Bridge.

Harold took one more leaping step, then brought both feet down together. He landed in a crouch, shot into the air, and somersaulted high above the intersection.

Officer Smitty looked up a split second too late. She could have sworn she heard a joyful laugh overhead, but of course nothing was there. Must have been a bird, she thought, returning her attention to the people milling about.

Spiraling through the night air, Harold could see the bridge just ahead to his left. It was time for an ever-so-slight change of direction. He quickly extended his left ear like a rudder, redirecting himself toward a skinny aspen tree. He grabbed its topmost branch and let the tree whip him forwards, then back. He tugged on the tree as it bent backwards, trying to bring it as close to the ground as possible. The tree leaned back further and further, until—

PWEEEEENNG! The tree shot Harold back into the air towards Gorge Bridge. He touched down, then leapt up again, kangaroo-style.

A few yards away, a skinny young man was operating a TV camera. “Yeah, Chris,” he was saying into his headset, “I’ve got the shot.” He squinted into the camera’s eyepiece. “Not to worry—I’ll follow him all the way down, and back up again—”

Something landed atop his camera, throwing his view completely off. “What the —” he muttered.

“Pete, get back on your shot,” Chris said. “He’s going over any second now.” Pete realized there was a pair of feet resting on his shoulders, attached to a rabbit sitting astride his camera.

“Hi!” Harold greeted the man. “Just dropped in for a minute, hope you don’t mind.”

“Uh, Chris . . .” Pete started to say.

“Hey, your camera’s kinda dusty,” said Harold. He leaned back and swished his tail across the camera lens a few times.

“Pete!” Chris was yelling. “Clear your shot! He’s going over! Clear your shot!”

“Better?” Harold asked, lifting his tail. Pete grabbed the camera and lined up his shot again. He had to admit it; his picture *was* a lot sharper now.

Harold looked up at the bridge—just in time to see Burnside step off the platform and plummet towards them.

“Just the man I’ve been waiting for,” Harold grinned. “Great talking to ya, Pete. Have fun!”

Pete didn’t answer. His eyes were glued to his camera’s viewfinder, following Burnside’s trajectory down, when he saw a white sunburst of tail fur, and the rabbit it was attached to zooming up to meet Burnside in mid-air.

Chapter 16

Just Hanging Around

Accelerating at the rate of 33 feet per second per second, Professor Burnside plummeted into the depths of Gorgeous Gorge. He tried to remember what he was supposed to say on the way down. “I, uh, uhh,” he began, extending his arms to release the two spheres . . . “AAAAHHHHHHHHHHH!”

The bungee uncoiled to its full length and its hook slammed against the bracket fastened to the bridge railing. Burnside’s weight stretched the cord to its limit. The professor’s descent slowed, then stopped. The sudden pressure on his harness cut off his scream and forced a loud “oof!” out of him.

No one was ready for what happened next. While the bracket the show’s technician had bolted and welded to the railing was indeed firmly attached, no one knew the connectors holding that particular piece of railing in place had rusted away on the inside.

The sudden jolt pushed the connectors beyond the breaking point. With a loud screech, the railing tore itself loose and went flying into the gorge after Burnside.

An aghast Chris stared into the abyss. He knew something like this was bound to happen sooner or later. Now someone was going to die, and there was nothing he could—

Chris blinked. A white blur was hurtling towards Burnside—a white blur with long ears and a cottontail.

* * *

Harold rocketed past the still-screaming Burnside. He looked down at the professor’s bald head, shrinking away and shining from the TV lights reflecting off it. Harold’s ears angled up; a hissing, clanking rattle was rushing towards him like a snake about to strike. He twisted sideways without thinking. The broken-loose railing, still attached to Burnside’s bungee, whistled past him a whisker-length away.

The railing! Harold bent his legs backwards and caught it against his ankles. The extra weight slowed him down—more than he expected. He’d never make it to the top of the bridge. It was time for Plan B. Do something, quick!

Plan B suddenly presented itself. The top of the bridge was out of reach—but the latticework of girders supporting it was just a few feet to his side. Harold's ears performed a last-second course correction that sent him arcing between the girders.

His momentum spent, Harold began his own plunge earthward with a shouted "going down!" A second later, his plunge ended. He bounced to an upside-down stop, his legs wrapped around the railing. The bungee cord connecting him to Burnside stretched across one of the bridge girders, leaving them dangling face-to-face underneath Gorge Bridge.

"Hello," Harold said. Burnside, who hadn't opened his eyes since he stepped off the bridge, kept screaming. Harold tried again. "Hello!" he yelled, giving the professor's forehead a gentle tap. "Anybody home?"

Burnside slowly grasped that he wasn't waiting to be scraped off the bottom of the gorge. He stopped screaming and cautiously opened his eyes, one at a time. A whiskered, furry (and upside-down) face was staring back at him. "AHHHHH!" he screamed, closing his eyes tightly again.

"Calm down Burnsie, you'll wake the neighbors," Harold advised.

"Burnsie?! How dare you? Who do you think you're—" An indignant Burnside opened his eyes again. The rabbit was still there, sporting a curious smile. "You can't be a real rab—" The rabbit's nose gave an unexpected twitch and Burnside began screaming again.

Harold waited a few seconds. "You done yet?" he asked nonchalantly.

The professor realized he'd been asked a question. "AAAAAAAaaaaaa . . ." His scream trailed off and he managed to nod his head feebly. Harold looked at the terrified Burnside, then down at the bottom of the gorge far below. "Y'know, maybe this wasn't such a good idea after all." Burnside nodded yes with much more vigor.

Harold's legs let go of the railing. Burnside stared in shock; the rabbit was going to let them both plunge into the gorge! "AAHHHHH . . ."

Harold spun around like a trapeze artist and grabbed onto the bungee cord. He unhooked the railing from the cord and let it tumble end over end into the gorge.

"Burnsie, I thought you said you were done," Harold reminded the still screaming Burnside. "Sorry," squeaked the professor, before falling quiet again.

Now hold on,” Harold warned. “This might hurt a little bit.” He placed his big feet against Burnside’s big stomach. The professor started to protest “what th—*oof!*” when Harold pushed away, then came swinging back—fast . . .

“*OOOFF!*” Harold’s feet collided with Burnside’s gut. The impact carried them both out in front of the bridge—with Harold’s feet now tucked under Burnside’s harness. They swung back and forth underneath the bridge, firmly locked together.

“Work with me Burnsie,” Harold said, “I’m going for escape velocity here.”

Burnside started giggling. “Heeheehee, you’re tickling me.”

“That’s me, ol’ Tickletoes,” Harold agreed.

Burnside writhed in his harness. “Hee hee! No! Stop it!” he cried, trying to pull himself away from the tormenting feet.

“Sorry, Burnsie. Sometimes a rabbit’s gotta do what a rabbit’s gotta do—*tickle-tickle-tickle!*”

The more Burnside tried to pull away from Harold’s feet, the more Harold tickled him. The professor’s extra exertions were bringing them further out into the open . . . higher into the air . . . and closer to the top of the bridge with every swing.

“Ha ha ha, ha ha—no, no, stop it, please!” Burnside pleaded, gasping for air.

“Just one more time, I promise” Harold said. “*Tickle-tickle-TICKLE!!!*”

The professor pulled backwards with all his might, Harold pushed forward with all of his, and flapped his ears like bird wings. The pair was nearly upside-down when Harold freed his legs from the harness and gave the professor’s stomach one last shove.

They shot into the air like a stone out of a whirling slingshot, their trajectory taking them up and over the bridge. Burnside realized he was tumbling over himself and dropping feet-first towards the platform on the bridge . . .

He touched down perfectly, landing on his mark as if he had never left. Nesbitt, Chris and a speechless show crew stared at the professor. A moment later, someone landed on his shoulders. Everyone stared at Harold, who had ridden in on the end of Burnside’s bungee cord.

“Ta-daa!” Harold announced, jumping onto the platform. “Am I late?”

The crowd burst into cheers. Harold winced at the sudden outburst and his ears folded over themselves to block out the noise.

A gaggle of reporters who had been watching from the sidelines rushed to the stage and began shouting questions. Nesbitt, who was already there, thrust Lucky Mike at Harold and Burnside and tried to make himself heard above the din.

A dazed Burnside looked around, not quite sure where he was and seemingly unaware he was standing next to a human-sized rabbit. The noise was beginning to get to Harold, and the greasy, metallic smell of Nesbitt's microphone irritated his nose. This was nowhere as much fun as rescuing Burnside. He put his arm around the still-wobbly professor. "Take care of my buddy Burnsie, okay?"

"Wait, wait!" "Who are you?" "How did you—" the reporters shouted.

Harold ignored their questions. "And now for my next trick, watch me make this rabbit disappear."

Before anyone could say another word, Harold was gone. Heads bobbed up and down in unison, following a furry, blurry shape that vanished into the night with a series of awesome leaps.

The crowd's cheers gave way to an excited babble. Reporters scrambled to get or make up the rest of the story, whichever was easier. A cameraman stared at the departing Harold, ignoring the newswoman his camera was pointed at. "Did you see that?!" he stammered. "Did you see that hare, he—"

"*Harry*?" she interrupted. "His name is *Harry*?—What, I'm on? —Jenna Chen, reporting live from the Gorge Bridge, where as unbelievable as it might seem, an amazing rabbit, an incredible six-foot-tall hare known only as Harry performed a breathtaking rescue on national television . . ."

The reporters continued to pummel the dazed professor with questions. Burnside glanced down and realized he was still holding the weights he had forgotten to release during his descent into the gorge. He raised his arms and dropped the two spheres.

The golf ball touched down just next to his right foot. At the very same moment, the ten-pound sphere landed dead center atop his left shoe, proving Galileo right once again.

Burnside stared at his feet, apparently deep in thought, then looked up. The reporters surrounding him fell silent and leaned forward. The professor opened his mouth, quietly said "Ow!" and fainted with a thud onto the platform.

Chapter 17

Home Sweet Home

“What, I’m on?” A pause. “Jenna Chen, reporting live from the Gorge Bridge, where as unbelievable as it might seem, an amazing rabbit, an incredible six-foot-tall hare known only as Harry performed a breathtaking rescue on national television . . .”

Cindy stared at the TV in disbelief, a spilled bag of popcorn at her feet. Had she really just seen what she thought she had? She knew that whatever its faults, *America’s Most Dangerous Amateur Stunts* took pride in the fact that nothing on the show was ever faked. She also knew the professor was no actor. (She had seen him perform in a few local amateur stage productions.) He definitely looked like someone who had just survived the scare of a lifetime. But a human-sized, clothes-wearing, talking *rabbit*?

The kitchen screen door creaked open then banged shut. Cindy heard footsteps and the sound of the fridge door opening. She jumped off the couch as quietly as possible. Leaving a trail of squashed popcorn behind, she tiptoed to the kitchen doorway.

Someone was bent over halfway into the refrigerator—someone with a cottontail and long ears. Cindy had a feeling of *déjà vu*—this wasn’t the first time she walked into her kitchen and discovered a rabbit at the refrigerator.

The tail twitched from side to side and a voice in the refrigerator gave out with an appreciative “aha!” She held her breath as the visitor stood up.

The rabbit that had just saved Burnside turned to her with a grin on his face. She couldn’t help but smile back. For a moment, she felt like Alice in Wonderland, but this wasn’t Wonderland, merely hers and Harold’s kitchen.

“Hi,” she said shyly. Cindy was usually outgoing and self-confident with people, but talking rabbits was a different matter altogether.

“Howdy,” the rabbit responded, taking a bite out of a carrot he had found in the refrigerator. He made a face. “What’s up with this carrot? It needs a doctor.”

“Those were for Fluff,” Cindy answered, “but he’s been staying at the lab lately.”

“That’s okay,” the rabbit smiled. “I’m not really much for carrots.” He reached back into fridge and came out with an apple. “More my speed, actually.”

The rabbit tossed the apple from paw to paw. He rolled it up his arm, around the back of his neck and down into his other paw. He threw it above his head for his ears to play with. Cindy watched it volley back and forth between his ears until she started getting dizzy. “Could you—” she began to ask.

“Oops, sorry,” he apologized. “Sometimes they get carried away.” His ears slapped together and captured the fruit, then let it fall on his head. It landed with a *bonk* and bounced into the paw already traveling towards his mouth. He took a crunchy bite, chewed, swallowed, and smiled again. “So kid, how’s tricks?”

Cindy smiled back at the rabbit. “I wouldn’t know. Tricks aren’t for me.” She realized he knew something he wasn’t letting on, something he wanted her to figure out on her own. “You seem pretty good at them though. You were at Gorge Bridge a minute ago—I saw you on TV.”

“That’s me,” the rabbit answered, “as seen on TV. I got here quick as a bunny, didn’t I?”

She studied the rabbit carefully. “There’s something familiar about you. I—I know you . . .” The rabbit grinned again. “Keep going,” he encouraged her. “Harold’s rabbit has that same cinnamon patch between his ears,” she said. “And?” responded the rabbit. “You’re almost there.”

Cindy remembered Fluffernutter’s mysterious disappearance and his arrival at Burnside’s lab; it couldn’t be . . . “You’re not . . . Fluff, are you?”

“You’re right, I’m not,” the rabbit said, “which means you’re wrong—right?”

A hunch leapt between the synapses in Cindy’s brain, making connections and growing stronger as the two of them left the kitchen. She had never seen anyone—*anything* like this rabbit before. Yet here he was, standing in her living room like someone who belonged there . . . talking to her like an old friend . . . or like family. The hunch jumped one last synapse and became a certainty.

“Harold!”

The rabbit looked into Cindy’s green eyes, the same color as his own. His smile grew even wider. “‘Harold’ sounds kinda stuffy, don’t cha think? I’d rather my friends—and my sister—Call me Harry.”

Cindy broke into a huge grin of her own and laughed out loud. “Cool—way cool!” she cried, throwing herself against him to hug him tight. He hugged back and she knew for sure; Harold or Harry, fleshy or furry, this was her brother.

A hiccup echoed in Harry's chest, then another one. The paws pressing against Cindy's back suddenly felt different. Several hiccups sounded in quick succession, Harry's embrace growing weaker with each one. With one final, loud hiccup, his arms slipped off Cindy's shoulders and he fell backwards onto the couch.

Cindy looked down, more shocked now than when she discovered Harry in the kitchen. There, fast asleep on the sofa was her brother Harold, wearing his lab coat and dress slacks. Other than a muddy pair of bare feet, he was as neat and human as he'd been all his life.

"What the heck . . ." she wondered. Harold responded with a noisy snore and rolled onto his side.

(End of Part One)