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Alexander Greenberg, Chief Attorney
of The Mac-Tonic™ Corporation

PROLOGUE

Rendezvous at 40,000 Feet

Lyle Funderburk sipped a glass of ice-cold Mac-Tonic™, on the way back from a conference in Japan. He swirled the chipped ice around his tumbler, deep in thought. The conference had gone well. Japan was a good territory – one of the best – but it could be better, more profitable, and he knew it. *But how?* He took another sip of the sickly-sweet soda and let the bubbles pop on his tongue. He peered down at the Pacific Ocean 40,000 feet below, stretched out like a giant, glistening waste of space, but inspiration didn't strike.

An air hostess appeared and replaced his glass of Mac-Tonic™ before the ice had chance to melt and dilute the soda. The new beverage was served at exactly 34 degrees Fahrenheit. The ice had been perfectly chipped by hand; it was one of the many qualities required of a hostess, right up there with possessing an understanding of guests' needs that bordered on the telepathic. And being young, of course. When it came to the Mac-Tonic™

fleet, anyone over twenty-five had about as much chance of taking off as a refrigerator bolted to the floor.

The air hostess smiled sweetly, or sweetened her permanently sweet smile, and glided away.

Lyle Funderburk allowed himself to be distracted by her only for a moment. Time is money, after all. He checked his watch. The jet was making excellent time for his lunch appointment with Senator McVeigh.

But unbeknownst to Lyle Funderburk, the jet was speeding towards something that threatened to destroy them all. Because, travelling from California to Shanghai, straight across the Pacific in the opposite direction, was another private jet. Its sole passenger was Lewie Hewitt. He sat in the luxury of a deep leather seat, swirling a glass of Mac-Tonic™ that had been cooled to the exact temperature of 34 degrees Fahrenheit by a young, smiling air hostess. He was thinking about money, and how he could make more of it.

Lyle and Lewie knew each other well. They were colleagues and enemies; either of them might feasibly become CEO of The Mac-Tonic™ Corporation if Dwight Eagleman ever retired or moved to another company or *just dropped dead already*. Lyle was Head of International Marketing and Branding; Lewie was Head of Global

Operations. They didn't expect to be meeting each other so soon. Their next scheduled face-to-face wasn't until the following month, at the annual Mac-Tonic™ shareholders' convention in New York City.

But as things turned out, they had an unscheduled rendezvous at 40,000 feet.

The pilots spotted each other at the last second – were close enough to recognize the terror in the other's eyes – before instinctively snatching at the controls in a futile attempt to avoid a collision. They sheered away, forcing their wings to meet like two swords clashing in battle. The wings were ripped off. The planes spiralled out of the sky, trailing thick clouds of black smoke behind them in a revolving helix.

In a way, it was beautiful, but there was no one there to admire it. The nearest civilization was a thousand miles away.

Lyle and Lewie couldn't believe what was happening. They were used to being in control, to wielding unimaginable power, and so to find themselves plummeting towards the Pacific Ocean, each with only a screaming air hostess for company, was difficult to comprehend.

I can't die now, they both thought, separately. If I die now, I'll never become CEO.

They wondered who would be promoted into their positions, after their deaths. *Martin DeWitt? Donnie Holland? Alexander Greenberg?* None of them deserved such seniority in the company. None of them deserved to know what they knew.

Then they thought about their wives. More specifically, about whom their wives would remarry. They both suspected it would be Randy van de Velde, the wily old Texan.

Then they thought about their kids, and wondered why they had ever included them in their wills. No doubt they would squander the fortunes their fathers had worked so tirelessly and ruthlessly to accumulate.

Their only consolation, as the jets hurtled towards the water below, was that the company would prevail. Its worker bees might perish, but the colony would survive. The sweet stuff would continue to flow. The Mac-Tonic™ Corporation would prosper.

They hit the water smiling.

What they didn't know, of course, was who was in the other jet. No single person could be entrusted with something as valuable as the Mac-Tonic™ formula, and so two executives were entrusted with half each. Lyle Funderburk and Lewie Hewitt were the two keepers of

the secret. As a precaution, they were not allowed to travel together, in case their car rolled down the side of a mountain, or their yacht sank, or their helicopter fell from the sky.

But no one had considered the possibility that two jets might collide in mid-air.

The odds must have been a trillion to one.

Some guys are just unlucky, I guess.

And so, as the last of the wreckage slipped beneath the waves, in the middle of the greatest expanse of water on Earth, the Great Thirst began.



North Nitch, California

Chuckie de la Cruz stole one hundred dollars from the bank and slipped it into his pocket, and Queenie watched him do it.

Her brother always cheated, as brothers always do, but Queenie didn't say a word. The more money he had, the more money she could take from him: he was financing his own downfall. All Queenie needed was for Chuckie to think he was getting away with it, and so she pretended to pay attention to the sounds of the TV drifting through the open window – something dull about environmental protests farther up the coast. When Chuckie glanced up, Queenie made sure her eyes were fixed on the brown, litter-strewn ocean beyond the back porch railings.

'Your go,' Queenie said.

Chuckie picked up the dice and rolled them across the board. Queenie quickly calculated where he was going to land and tried to hide her smile. Chuckie counted the

spaces out one by one with his top hat token (which he insisted on calling a cowboy hat) and only slowed down on the penultimate property. He glanced at Queenie, but she was watching all right.

‘Pay up,’ Queenie said.

Chuckie scowled. ‘How much?’

‘Two hundred.’

‘What?!’

‘I own all the railroads, so that’ll be two hundred dollars. Please.’

‘How do you own so much stuff already?’ Chuckie said, reaching for the bank. ‘I swear you must be cheating . . .’

Queenie lost her cool.

‘Use *your* money, dummy, not the bank’s! I know you have difficulty telling them apart sometimes.’

Chuckie froze. ‘What are you trying to say?’

Queenie rolled her eyes. ‘Don’t play stupid.’

‘I’m not!’

‘All right, then stop *being* stupid. I know you’re cheating! It’s obvious; there are bills spilling out of your pockets!’

Chuckie looked down at the banknotes tumbling from his shorts. His face went from shock to confusion

to anger like a traffic light. And then he launched himself at Queenie.

Playing Monopoly was one of only two things Queenie and Chuckie ever did together: the other was fighting, and they probably only played Monopoly because it was almost guaranteed to end in a fight. As a result, Queenie was ready for Chuckie's attack; she rolled out of the way and jumped down the porch steps on to the sand below. But anger made Chuckie surprisingly fast, and he barrelled after Queenie in a flurry of money, knocking her backwards and landing on her chest. His podgy hands were still clutching hundred-dollar bills, and he tried to force them into Queenie's mouth.

'You want my money? Here, eat it!'

Queenie twisted her head this way and that, struggling to dislodge her brother. But Chuckie was a big boy; it was like being sat on by a juvenile elephant. She was going to have to fight dirty.

She reached out to the side, grabbed a handful of sand and threw it in Chuckie's face. He rolled away, spitting and spluttering and rubbing his eyes.

'Ma!' he yelled, staggering towards the house. 'Ma!'

He crawled up the broken steps, across the bleached boards of the porch and blundered through the back door.

For a moment, Queenie just lay there panting, looking at the house through a tangle of dark hair. It looked like a shipwreck that had washed up to be battered by the elements. The boards twisted away from the walls, the back porch sagged and the shutters were a strong fart from coming away completely. The sky was often hazy with the fumes from a nearby industrial waste incinerator, and every surface held a smear of soot. A sewage pipe emerged from the sand beside the house and ran on rusty fixings to the water's edge, where it dribbled its contents into the ocean. The waves were lazy and brown and fizzed creamy foam up the sand, carrying trash that spiteful currents conspired to channel into the bay. The whole thing looked like an arcade coin-pusher, constantly advancing and retreating, carrying prizes that nobody wanted to win.

This is not what I imagined when Ma said we'd be moving to California, Queenie thought, for the hundredth time. No wonder I'd never heard of North Nitch.

North Nitch wasn't in any of the guidebooks or travel brochures. Most maps left it off altogether. There were no blue skies or white beaches, no statuesque muscle men newly cast in bronze, no goddesses in hot pants gliding by on rollerblades. There were no beach parties or barbecues

(although someone did set fire to a shopping cart once). No glistening lifeguards, or fancy seafood restaurants, or street performers. There was no one in aviators or bug-eye sunglasses, endlessly reflecting the beauty of the people and the place. Groups of teenagers didn't lounge around, having the time of their lives, sipping on ice-cold bottles of Mac-Tonic™ that beaded in the sun but never dripped to leave ugly blemishes on the sand.

Life was nothing like a commercial in North Nitch, California, but it was the place Queenie de la Cruz was supposed to call home.

She wandered away from the house, towards the water, and sat on an upturned plastic crate. It was fifty-fifty whether Ma would come for her or not, but there was no way she'd come as far as the water's edge, not even to shut Chuckie up. Queenie put her chin in her hands and watched as the sun went down.

Some evenings, the sun just slid below the horizon without a whimper, like a coin fed into a slot. But other times, like this evening, it spilled itself across the water in a red flood, throwing pink light over everything on the shore: the coffee cups and chunks of polystyrene; the garden chairs tangled in fishing wire; the plastic bottles that looked like dead fish.

Sometimes, Queenie missed the sunsets in Kansas. It was still a clear run to the sun here, but the space in between was a different kind of empty. It used to feel like she could walk all the way to the horizon, through the bristling cornfields and yawning nothingness, if only she had the time. But here, it was like standing at the edge of something impassable. It felt like she'd already come as far as she was ever going to go, even though there was so much out there that she still wanted to explore.

And it was made worse by the nostalgia of Kansas. At least her pa had been around back then, and they'd been a complete family, no matter how dysfunctional. But then he'd gotten drunk (again), and mistook the thud of hailstones on the trailer roof for golf balls from the neighbouring driving range (again), and climbed on to the roof with a putter, yelling 'Return to sender!' (again), and taken a swing at one of the oversized hailstones just as a bolt of lightning forked through the sky.

The house in North Nitch had seemed like a good place to go after that – even if the estranged uncle who'd left it to the de la Cruz family in his will was supposed to hate them.

It wasn't until they arrived that they realized he'd left them the place *because* he hated them. It was barely habitable.

Watching the bloody sunset, Queenie sighed at the memory and nudged an empty Mac-Tonic™ bottle with her foot. She had an urge to go somewhere, to do something, but the thought of trudging across the litter-strewn landscape made the effort seem pointless. She was so bored she almost wished Ma would come out and holler at her for fighting Chuckie, but the house behind her remained dark and silent except for the flicker and murmur of the TV.

The sight of so many Mac-Tonic™ bottles was making Queenie thirsty, and she was just about to get up and head home when she saw a couple of people making their way along the shoreline. This in itself was pretty bizarre – nobody ever visited this stretch of beach – but what they were doing was even stranger. The two people shuffled along at an impossibly slow pace, stopping every second or so to collect a piece of trash and drop it into one of the sacks they were carrying.

Queenie was transfixed. She'd never seen anything quite like it before in her life.

As the two people got closer, Queenie could see that one was a man, and one was a woman. The man had a

long grey ponytail that reached down to the small of his back, and glasses with small circular lenses that flashed red in the light of the setting sun. The woman wore a purple bandana tied around her head, and a tie-dye T-shirt that hung beyond her knees. As the couple approached Queenie, they smiled and waved at the same time. Without realizing it, Queenie had gotten off the crate and taken a step towards them.

‘What are you doing?’ she asked.

The couple stopped, but they kept smiling.

‘We’re picking up trash,’ the woman said. She held out a fresh bag. ‘Wanna join in?’

Queenie shook her head, squinting into the sun. ‘No, I mean, I can see what you’re doing, but why?’

The man picked up a Mac-Tonic™ bottle and turned it over in his hands.

‘We’re tidying up.’

Queenie was still struggling with the concept.

‘But it isn’t your trash.’

He smiled and dropped the bottle into his bag. ‘But it is our problem.’

‘But it’ll just wash up again,’ Queenie said. ‘No matter how much you pick up, there will always be more.’

The man shrugged. ‘All the more reason to make a start, I guess.’

‘Are you sure you don’t wanna join in?’ the woman asked. ‘It’s your world too.’

Queenie wasn’t quite sure what to say to that. She’d never thought of anywhere beyond her bedroom as her world, and she didn’t own anything that someone hadn’t given away or left behind: even her sneakers were from a thrift store. The world didn’t belong to anybody, except for maybe a big company like Mac-Tonic™, but certainly not people like her. *Did it?*

The question was too difficult to answer, so she asked one instead.

‘Are you two with those people from the news? The ones protesting?’

The woman smiled warmly. ‘That’s right. I’m Linda, and this is Max, and we’re—’

‘Hippies!’ Chuckie shouted.

Queenie spun round. Chuckie was standing on the porch, pointing a finger in her direction.

‘Ma! Come quick! We’ve got hippies!’

Ma had warned them about tree-hugging, drug-smoking, daydreaming hippies before they set off for

California. Apparently, California had a real problem with them. An infestation, she'd called it. Although she'd never mentioned anything about litter picking.

Max and Linda looked a bit bemused, but their eyes filled with fear when Ma's massive frame appeared on the back porch brandishing a broom.

'Queenie!' she hollered. 'Get away from those hippies! Don't take nothing from them!'

Queenie shook her head and covered her face with a hand. When she took it away a few moments later, Max and Linda were scrambling over a nearby sand dune, dragging their bags of trash behind them. Ma kept the broom raised until they'd disappeared over the other side. Then she leaned it by the back door and went inside.

'Way to go, Ma!' Chuckie said, hurrying after her. 'You showed them!'

Queenie looked around at the tide of Mac-Tonic™ bottles Max and Linda had been about to collect. One of them had dropped a thin roll of garbage bags during their escape, and Queenie bent down to pick it up. For a crazy moment, she thought about carrying on where they'd left off. But then Chuckie's voice sliced the thought in half.

‘Queenie! Ma says get your scrawny hide in here right now!’

Queenie turned towards the house. The moon was rising directly above it. It looked like a giant red bottle cap, with a circle of teeth around the circumference and the Mac-Tonic™ logo looping across the middle. Apparently, many years before, the moon had just been a blank, stupid face. But Queenie didn’t know about that.

The sight of it made her think about the trash behind her, and the roll of bags clutched in her fist.

But more than anything, it made her thirsty.

Queenie stopped on the porch and glanced back at the shore, at the blanket of plastic trash.

What a dump, she thought.

Then she went into the dilapidated house and fetched a Mac-Tonic™ from the refrigerator.