

Excerpt One:

I sat on my bed, biting my lip, jiggling my leg, tapping my finger on my eMaster. The handheld computer was ready to go. This was it. Tonight we'd test The Cryptogram Connection. We'd meet in the ice cream parlor at exactly twelve o'clock midnight. Our parents, Brad, and Kerry's zillion little brothers would be asleep.

The four sensors pulsed slightly against my head. I watched the red numbers on the digital clock change.

11:57. I stared at the computer and the home page I'd created. Ice cream sundaes, racecars, scooters, and manazomes repeatedly spun to the center of the screen, becoming larger and larger, until they zoomed to the back and faded away.

11:58. I thought of Nicole and Kerry sitting with their computers. Waiting like me. I thought of all the hours and days and weeks we'd spent working on the game. I thought of how they were counting on me, on my code. I threw back my head and whispered, "Oh, man, I hope the game works."

11:59. I keyed in my password then held my thumb over the enter icon. I adjusted the Ultra on my head. Would there be any glitches? Probably. Any major ones? Man, I hoped not.

The clock blinked.

12:00. Holding my breath like I was at the top of the highest hill on a roller coaster, like I was about to fly down the hill with my arms raised in the air, I pushed the button.

Excerpt Two:

I stood in front of a racetrack. One car roared around the track: Nicole was already at it. Empty cars waited at the start line, and I picked a flame-red car with a glassy shine, long in front and hugging the ground. I sank into the leather bucket seat and closed my eyes. Yes! My brother let me drive his Mustang around the parking lot a few times. But this. This was too awesome.

I stepped on the clutch and turned the key. The engine rumbled to life. I gripped the steering wheel with my left hand and closed my right one over the stick shift knob. The engine's power vibrated against my palms.

I eased up the clutch and pressed down on the gas. The car rolled forward. My shoulders tensed as I peered through the windshield. I pushed the gas pedal to the floor. The car jerked then blasted onto the track, slamming me back against the seat. The car wavered down the straightaway. Come on, man. Get it under control. Tightening my grip on the steering wheel, I shifted into second, then third gear.

Okay. Time to go for it.

I shoved the stick shift into fourth gear. The tires screeched as I banked around the curved track. Back on the straightaway, I gave it more gas and shifted into fifth gear. I floored it, and the car shot down the track. My scalp prickled as I glanced at the speedometer. 80—100—120—One hundred and fifty miles per hour!

Excerpt Three:

A shadow flickered over our heads. A creature soared high above the beach. I squinted to get a better look. Altai! The gryphon manazome circled closer to the ground and hovered a few hundred feet above us. Then, with its talons open, it streaked toward the ground—aiming straight for us.

"Nicole, Kerry, quick," I yelled. "Follow me!"

"What? What's wrong?" Nicole called.

I pointed.

She gazed up. "Let's go!"

I headed toward the beachcomber shack, followed by Nicole and Kerry.

"Nic, wait," Kerry cried out.

I spun around. Kerry had tripped, and Nicole stopped to help her. I ran back to them.

"Nicole, get inside, I'll help Kerry."

Nicole, of course, ignored me and seized Kerry's hand. I grabbed Kerry's other hand, and we pulled her toward the shack.

"I'm okay. Let go," Kerry yelled.

We raced toward the shack, the girls in front of me. Glancing up, I saw Altai's beady eagle eyes, its sharp hooked beak, its razor talons... "Hurry!"

Kerry stumbled again. Altai would be on her any second. I went to grab her—I'd drag her if I had to—but she didn't fall. She and Nicole leaped through the door and crashed to the ground like baseball players sliding into home base. I dove in after them just as a rush of wind from Altai swooped over me.