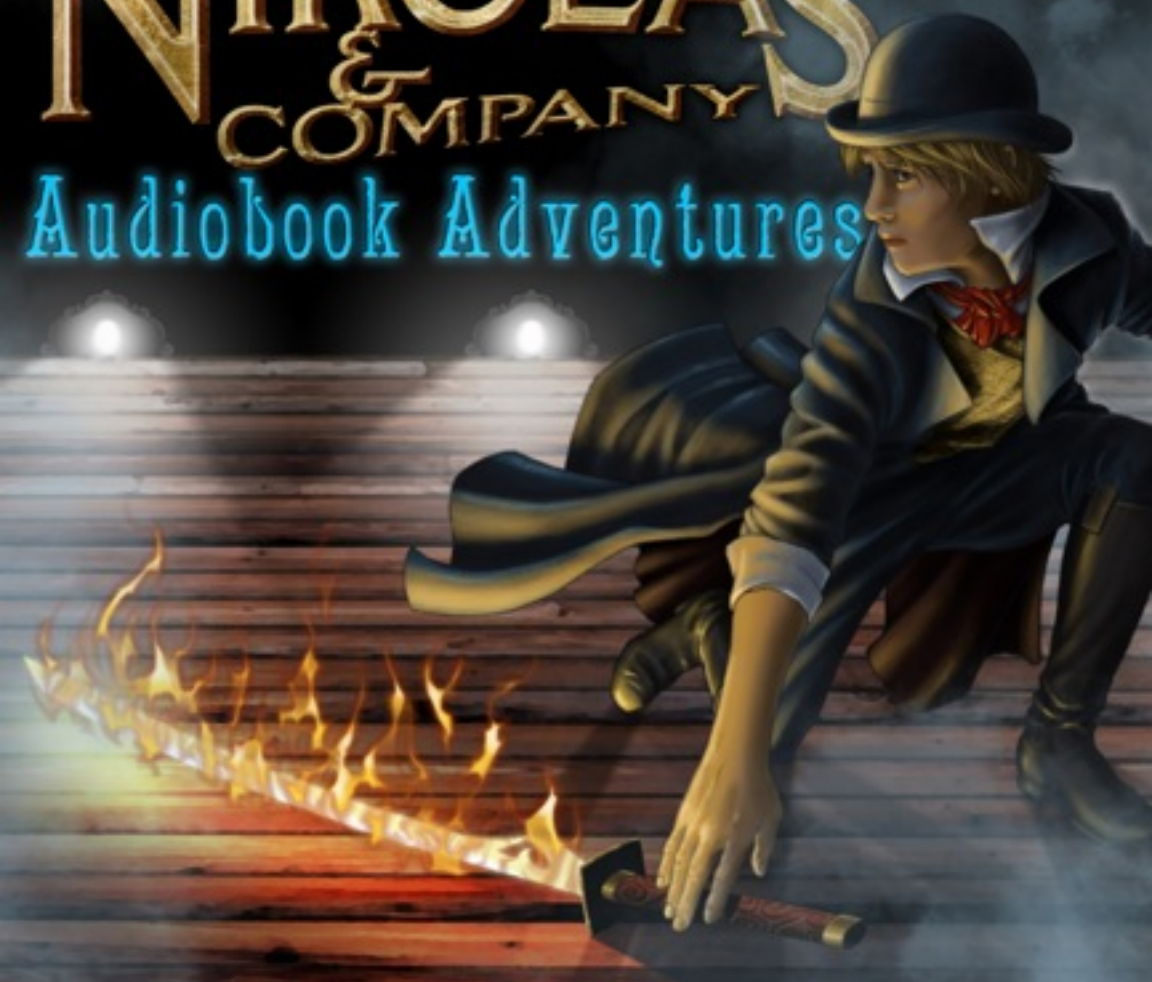


NIKOLAS & COMPANY

Audiobook Adventures



Episode One

THE MERMAN AND THE MOON FORGOTTEN

NIKOLAS & COMPANY

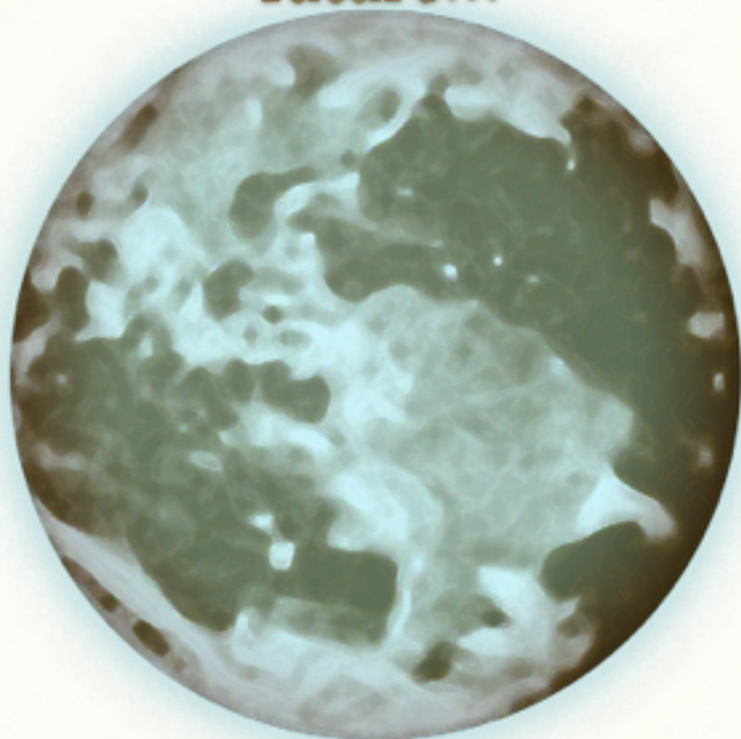


BY KEVIN MCGILL
Illustrations by Carlyle McCullough

Chapter 1

The Voice

Sometime in the near
future...



COLORADO CITY, COLORADO

S

toward Nikolas Lyons. The Ronés enter the city of Huron at the peril of us all.

“What?” Nick ripped his face from under the machine. The workshed was lined with all sorts of twenty-first century antique motherboards, microwaves, cappuccino machines, key-making machines.

And none of them could speak.

The Ronés lie about their true intent. They enter the city of Huron at the peril of us all.

Nick dropped the nanodriver. He really did hear a voice. More specifically, he heard a woman’s voice. Couldn’t have been his mom. She was out on one of her global shopping trips with his dad, which he counted on. She didn’t like it when Nick got into their shed and started messing around with all of the antique electronic devices. Neither did the fire marshall. But he had to finish his machine. It would change everything for him.

The Ronés lie about their true intent. They enter the city of Huron at the peril of us all.

“I’m losing my mind,” Nick said, wiping his blond hair out of his face. “I can’t lose my mind, not yet at least. Finish the machine. Get off this planet. Then I can lose my mind.”

In order to finish his machine, Nick had resorted to the Nick Lyons’s living-dead power formula: three-parts soda, two-parts energy drink, six-parts chocolate syrup, chased down with Pepto-Bismol. But that wouldn’t cause hallucinations . . . right?

The Ronex lie about their true intent. They enter the city of Huron at the peril of us all.

Nick looked down to his feet. The voice had come from under the floorboards. "Ha, ha, Tim. Funny. I can hear you under there."

The Ronex lie about their true intent. They enter the city of Huron at the peril of us all.

He squeezed his eyes shut and opened them again.

"I will not hear voices . . . I can't hear voices."

"You seem disturbed, Nick?" said a motherly digital voice. A white box with two multi-purpose arms and the holographic head of a middle-aged woman floated toward him. It was Nick's nannydrone. There had been enough "incidences" involving the blowing up of old tech that the fire marshall insisted Nick's parents post a nannydrone at his side at all times. Didn't help much, though. The drone was as dumb as a box of bolts.

Nick found the nanodriver wedged between a crate and the wall. He grabbed it, wiped off the dust and cobwebs and went back to work.

"Again, why are you disturbed, Nick," the nannydrone said.

"I'm not disturbed. I'm busy." Nick got down to a knee and undid one of the machine's screws with his finger. "Got to finish the machine."

"I believe you are disturbed," the nannydrone said. It extended a multipurpose arm with a small probe. The probe activated its bioscanner, a fan shaped laser, and shoved it between Nick's face and the machine. The laser swept back and forth, blinding Nick several times.

"Nick," the nannydrone said. "I just ran a full neuroscan and it says you are not being honest with me. Something has disturbed you. It seems you are experiencing delusions, Nick? Is there anything I can do? How might I make you happy today?"

"Hug a power line." Nick swatted the probe away.

“Please wait while I process your request . . .” A clock symbol appeared over her face. “I am sorry, Nick Lyons. I cannot perform such a task.”

“Of course you can’t. Wanna know why? That would actually make me happy.”

“Oh dear, Nick. My biorhythm sensors *now* tell me you have been upset by an unidentified object within this very room.”

“Really?” Nick smacked his forehead. “Wonder *who* that could be?”

“I am formulating a solution to your happiness, Nick,” the nannydrone explained. “This solution today is brought to you by Pappy’s Pudding Fingers. Lick your way to happiness. Due to a decreased level of serotonin in your brain, dilated pupils, and small but noticeable constipation—”

“Gross,” Nick said.

“You would be best served by having a Pappy’s Pudding Finger. Chocolate.”

The nannydrone buzzed to a locked fridge by the bathroom. Its multipurpose hand flipped and inserted a key. As part of an attempt to open up another profit stream, the manufactures, *Lifedrone*, distributed complimentary Pappy’s products with their nannydrones.

“Here is a complementary Pappy’s Pudding Finger on a stick.” The nannydrone rose to meet him eye-level. It held the Pudding Finger between its fingers. “Enjoy, Nick.”

“I don’t want it,” he said.

Ignoring him, the nannydrone unwrapped the pudding finger and smooshed it to his mouth. “I can order a month’s supply whenever you’d like, Nick.”

He ducked away. “Stop.”

“Lifedrone and Pappy’s has joined together to offer a special deal just for you, Nick.” The nannydrone shadowed him and smooshed the pudding finger to his lips again and again. “Yummy, yummy to the tummy, Nick.”

“Dude, seriously.” Nick wiped the pudding finger from his cheek.

“See, yummy, Nick,” *SMOOSH*, came the sound of the nannydrone smashing the Pudding Finger into his cheek. “So yummy,” *SMOOSH*. “Yummy, yummy.” *SMOOSH. SMOOSH. SMOOSH.*

“I don’t have time for this,” Nick smacked the nannydrone’s arm. “I have a demonstration this afternoon, the machine isn’t ready, Tim’s disappeared as usual, and I’m hearing voices. So get. Out Of. My. Face!”

“But . . .” The nannydrone lowered the pudding finger slowly, “*everyone* wants a Pappy’s Pudding Finger, Nick.”

Nick sighed and said under his voice, “I really need to get off this planet.”

He turned back to his machine, hoping the nannydrone would give up and go back to the corner where it could just keep monitoring him in its creepy way. Instead, the anti-grav motors whirled as it rose above his right shoulder and leaned over.

“Nick?”

“Yeah?”

“Are you still attempting to runaway, Nick?”

“Yes, if that’s OK with you.”

“Why?” said the nannydrone.

“Why?” Nick waved his hands. “I’ve explained this, like, a million times to you. Oh right. You’re a replacement. Well, I’m trying to get off this planet because people here are stupid. Entire world is covered with the geneva virus. The earth hasn’t seen the sun in years. All my friends are trapped in a refugee camp. And no one seems to care. They just worry about getting their next chin tuck. I’m tired of these people. I want out. Is that OK with you?”

“It is not my feelings on the subject you should be worried about, Nick,” the nannydrone said. “It is your mother’s. I have been collecting up Sonya Lyons’s social status messages

regarding your attempts to runaway. Would you like me to read them out to you, Nick?”

“Please don—”

“April twenty-seventh,” the nannydrone ignored him. “At three fourteen PM, your mother wrote on her *Friendme* account—“ In a perfect mimic of her voice, the nannydrone said, “—What-ever. Caught Nick trying to break into my bank account last night. I was like, crazy insomniac and found him creeping through my account, running one of those account-crack apps. Ugh!!! Where does he even get these programs? He was two clicks away from buying a shuttle ticket to outer space, AGAIN! Next time I’m gonna just let him go. Anyone want a fourteen-year-old mentally disturbed demon-boy? Lol!!!!

“May eighth. Nine ten am.

“OK. You seriously cannot pay me enough to put up with demon-boy. Airport security arrested the boy for trying to hook up a leech pod to a moonshuttle. Thought he could hitch a ride ON THE HULL OF A SPACE SHUTTLE!! Who does that? Seriously. Am I the only mom who puts up with this crap? #WishIcouldrunaway

“June second. Ten fifteen pm.

“Yep. Demon-boy almost lit Hiker’s Canyon on fire. Of course. Oh. And he torched the neighbor’s greenhouse. It is gone. GONE. Thank goodness for pyrodrones. Seriously.”

“June third. One twenty-three am.

Lighting Hiker’s canyon on fire, remix. Again, pyrodrones put it out before we were sued by every person on the block. Found out he was messing around in the old tech shed. Blew something up. Probably trying to build a space shuttle. Seriously, that boy is the fuel of nightmares. #mysonisafuturemanhunt”

Nick had heard enough. He went over to the nannydrone’s minifridge and picked it up.

“What are you doing with that minifridge, Nick?” The nannydrone said. “It is property of Lifedrone.”

Nick marched to the large window overlooking Hiker's Canyon and said, "Open window." The glass swooshed open. He peered out the window and to a fifty-foot drop.

"There are nearly three thousand dollars of Lifedrone's products in the minifridge, Nick." nannydrone put up two concerned plastic arms.

"Yeah, I know," Nick said. "And what's your primary protocol?"

"To observe and protect you, Nick." The nannydrone slowly moved toward the minifridge precariously hanging out of the window.

"Wow," Nick said. "That's a total lie. I didn't know drones could lie." He began to tip the minifridge over.

"Disengaging deflect program," the nannydrone said. "You are correct, Nick. My primary protocol is to try and sell you low cost snacks at high end prices."

"So if I chuck this over the canyon you'd have to save it?"

"Yes. I would have to save the Lifedrone produ—"

Nick raised his hand and let the minifridge tip over. It tumbled three times in the air.

BANGG!!

The first boulder snapped the door open, flinging Pappy's products into the air.

BANGG!! BANGG!

The second boulder sent the door flying away.

It continued to bang and bounce against granite boulders until a pine tree stopped it.

Nannydrone lit its propulsions and flew out the window with arms outstretched. For a moment the drone actually crested into the air, but Nick knew that while *Lifedrone* had installed their machines with many of the latest flight technology, one technology it did not bother to develop was the anti-gravitation system. The nannydrone could only hover at five feet. Hiker's canyon was fifty feet.

The nannydrone fell like a piano.

WHEEEBOOM!!

It blew up on impact.

Nick smiled as he watched the drone's battery pack explode into a greenish ball of flame. A pyrodrone launched from some nearby stoop, its hoses aiming toward the flames.

He felt a little tinge of guilt as the nannydrone's plastic skin began to melt into the pine nettles. This one had lasted the longest, three weeks at least. But he consoled himself knowing *Lifedrone* would send over a replacement by this time tomorrow. Pappy's Pudding Fingers won't sell themselves, after all.

The Ronces lie about their true intent. They enter the city of Huron at the peril of us all.

"Seriously?" Nick yelled at the wall. "Who *is* that? I don't have time for this. I'm trying to get some work done here."

Nick wasn't usually this grumpy, really. But he hadn't slept for forty-eight hours, had drunk his weight in chocolate syrup and pepto-bismol, and was on his last chance to get off this planet. Now wasn't the time for hallucinations. He had to give every ounce of his focus to the machine.

Nick looked down to the scuba diving goggles, which served as a sort of viewer into the machine. He started to wonder if, in fact, it was his machine, the Prometheus 10,000 that was speaking to him. Maybe it was picking up one of those old time radio signals? Which was weird since they were banned in the late 21st century.

He crouched down to Prometheus 10,000 to see if there were any exposed wires. The machine's skin had been stitched together from a theater spotlight, an unwary antique television and three different game consoles. One could see lights blinking deep within its belly while cables escaped from various holes, only to be dragged back in. His brother, Tim, often referred to it as the greatest abuse of technology. To Nick, it was the machine that would finally get him off this planet.

Earth.

He wanted to go home, to Moon. He had never been there, himself. But still, he knew that it was home. He had watched every holo-explorer video and collected every single movie about it. The shed's walls were lined with screen posters that showed real time views of Moon's craters and outposts. It seemed like the most amazing place in the solar system. He could imagine roaming around the craters for miles on the moonbuggy without being tracked by every drone in the area. He heard that Moon teachers actually taught you useful stuff, like how to fix a leaking space suit, or how to filter your own water using moondust and old oxygen masks. And people shared everything, he heard. Food. Clothes. Land. You had to. It was the frontier of space after all.

Nick gave a deep sigh. He wanted to go to Moon so much. Everything there was black and white. Everything there was . . .

"Simple." Nick blinked, then shook his head. "Talking to myself now, just like Grand."

He also missed the sun.

He hadn't seen it in a long time. Like some global cataract, a thin cloud had covered the Earth for a hundred years, blocking the sunlight. One political party blamed the Great Cloud on their opponent's unchecked consumerism and continued burning of fossil fuels. The other political party blamed it on their enemy's geoengineering. They had placed CO₂ pumps all across the globe to suck out the overabundance of CO₂ and balance the ecosystem. But it was now believed the pumps sucked out too much carbon dioxide, sending the ecosystem into a tailspin.

Nick didn't care who was to blame. It all just seemed like an excuse to hate each other, anyway. He had to get away from it all.

So, when the wealthy philanthropist, Rick Killings, announced that he would award one billion dollars to whoever could return solar radiation to Earth's surface, Nick had found his ticket home, literally. All he had to do was

build his solar transference machine, the Prometheus 10,000, and win the cash prize. Then he could afford to buy a one-way transworld shuttle ticket back to the Trafalgar Lunar outpost and maybe even a plot of colonial land at sector nine. Quadrant 4b. Southside of Moon. Easy.

Just like the movies.

Some might call Nick naïve, simple, even a delusional fourteen-year-old—they usually did. But he didn't care. He believed with all his heart this machine would get him home. Speaking of, he needed to get his butt in gear if he was going to be ready for the demonstration at two o'clock that afternoon.

The Ronces lie about their true intent. They enter the city of Huron at the peril of us all.

"Tim? Is that you? Seriously. I'm gonna punch you in the mouth if you don't knock it off . . . Tim??"

Come to think of it, Nick hadn't seen his brother all afternoon. He walked to the window overlooking Hiker's Canyon, scanning for any signs of his brother.

A hoverbus swept past their house and toward the refugee camps. The sound of the anti-gravitational engines made Nick drop his gaze down to the bottom of Hiker's Canyon. There lay a blond, curly-headed boy, clutching his stomach while trying to cough up a spleen or two. A large teenager hovered over the curly-head boy, taunting and laughing.

"Oh boy," Nick said. He found his brother, Tim.

And so had Rocky The She-Bully.

"You should know better, Tim." Nick bolted towards the door. "Never go down to the canyon by yourself . . . Back off, Rocky!"

Can you hear me, Steward? The woman pleaded. *The Ronces lie about their true intent. They enter the city of—*



Nikolas! This is your grandfather, Grand! The project leader's face filled the entire view of Nick's videomail message. The Machu Picchu archeological site could be seen just to the left of his dirt-filled face.

The ID and timestamp on Nick's videomail message read:

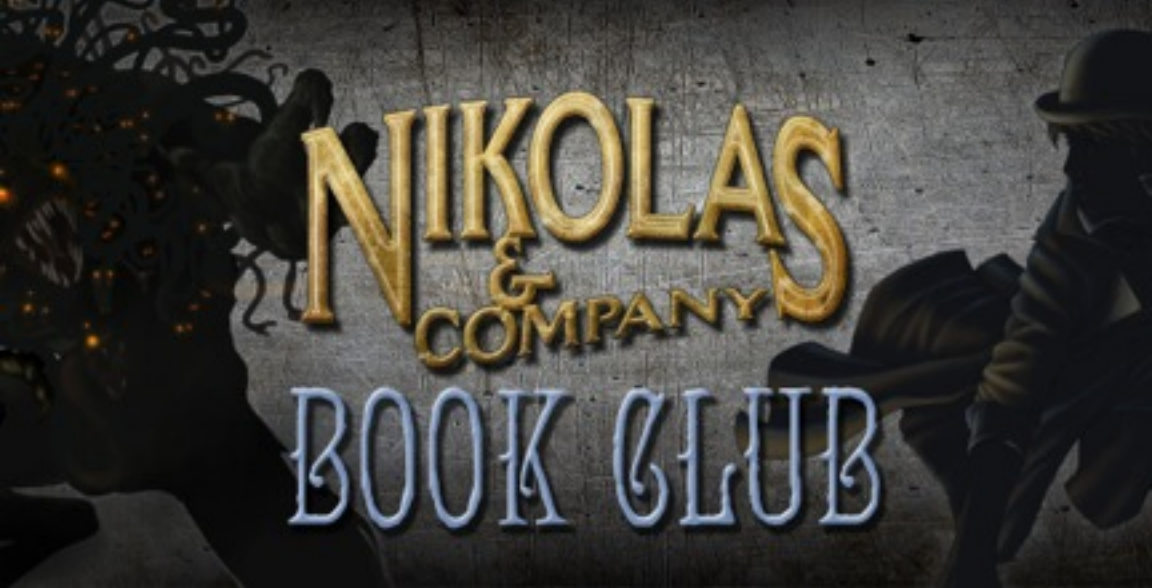
CALLER: GRAND LYONS (GRANDPA)

TIME: 9:32 AM

LOCATION: MACHU PICCHU, PERU

I think I broke their scent, Nikolas! I doubt the trackers know where I am. You must think I sound ins—ne. Hope yo—get my message. I'm not getting a good receipt—. Pass—through a solar-harvest field. Just got back fr—an archeological dig at Machu Picchu. I disguised myse—as a project leader and have spent years searching from a message from home . . . your home . . . our home. I got the message.

The Merrows are in danger! Oh. You probably don't know what a Merrow is. Merfolk! You know. Half human, half fish. They will be attacked soon if I don't return you to your time and place in history. They need you. Your city needs you! The city of—



NIKOLAS & COMPANY BOOK CLUB

Book Club Questions

- Get out a map and find Colorado City, Colorado
- Who was the protagonist (main character)?
- Who was the antagonist (the character's enemy)?
- If you had a nannydronę following you around all day, what would you do to it?
- Do you think Nick is crazy or is the voice real?
- What should Nick do now that he has heard this voice? What would you do?

