

WIRED KINGDOM

RICK CHESLER

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DEDICATION

For my parents, Ron & Lois, and my wife, Tabbatha, for all of their support over the years. For my unborn child, whom we expect in October—I look forward to the day when we can see a whale together!

In memory of Jon Bok, fellow scuba diver and marine biology student. One more dive!

This book is also dedicated to the real-life men and women around the world who work every day in decidedly unglamorous jobs to understand and preserve our planet's living marine resources.

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I would also like to thank the many friends I have met online who became supporters of *Wired Kingdom* long before they could hold the book in their hands (or their Kindles!). Know that I appreciate all of you.



WIRED KINGDOM

To hold as 'twere the mirror up to nature

- Shakespeare

*Pleasant it is, when winds disturb the surface of the
vast sea, to watch from land another's mighty
struggle*

-Lucretius



CHAPTER I

PACIFIC OCEAN

OFF THE SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA COAST

The great whale hung beneath the waves, surveying her domain. At ninety-seven feet and one hundred tons, she was the largest animal in creation, even larger than the dinosaurs that once roamed the land and seas; yet she was still vulnerable to her enemies.

The behemoth generated a sound that disturbed the Pacific. It was a low groan, comparable to a jet engine in terms of sheer decibels. Though she could not reach the seafloor miles below, the blue whale's biological sonar allowed her to scan its depths.

This time, it had identified something unusual.

With an almost imperceptible movement of her powerful fluke, the whale began a patient ascent.

WIRED KINGDOM TECH SUPPORT FACILITY

Hundreds of miles away in California's San Fernando Valley, Trevor Lane's computer speakers rattled to life on his desk, snapping him awake. He had

heard the sound they produced only once before, and it had not been as loud or sustained as this. He removed his glasses, rubbed his eyes and glanced at the clock on his PC: 8:02 A.M. He'd been staring at the monitor for almost three straight hours before he dozed off. He reached for a half-empty can of Red Bull without taking his eyes off the screen.

His monitor displayed a panoramic view of blue ocean, and in the foreground, the back of a blue whale. The live images, transmitted via satellite, originated from a remote camera attached to the whale's dorsal fin. The angle reminded Trevor of the over-the-shoulder point-of-view camera angles used in the video games he had designed to pay his way through a computer science degree.

He had been watching the video for days, and although many times there was nothing to look at but varying shades of blue and green, it fascinated him nonetheless. It was as if one were swimming along with the whale, holding onto its dorsal fin as it traversed thousands of miles of open ocean. What made it engaging to the millions of paying Internet users was that it wasn't simply video being viewed over the web—it was a live streaming audio/video feed. What made it especially enthralling to Trevor was that he had invented it. It was his technology that had been used to put a tiny, waterproof web-cam on a blue whale. Of all Trevor's technical accomplishments, this was by far the most impressive.

Over the past several days Trevor had electronically followed the whale as it trolled its camera across the planet's largest body of water. He knew exactly where it was on the globe, because its GPS coordinates were embedded in the upper left corner of the streaming video. Since it was currently well off the coast, there was not much to see other than the whale's body itself amidst a sea of blue. Although, every twenty minutes or so the blue whale's spout interrupted the monotony with an explosive burst as it came to the surface to breathe, offering Trevor brief glimpses of sky and swells before the animal dove again. He marveled at how loud it was. Sometimes his onscreen view became whitewashed by a glaring sun. Once he'd even seen a bird soaring high overhead. Other than that, he'd mostly seen open blue water.

Trevor rubbed sleep from his eyes, waiting for the whale to surface again. He was anxious for another GPS reading; the last one had contained incomplete data. His eyes wandered to information posted on the web site, his most recent obsession:

"This is the official web site of the *Wired Kingdom* television show. All content herein is the sole property of *Wired Kingdom*."

He clicked the "Contest Information" link:

"*Wired Kingdom* strives to present a thoroughly

absorbing and unique educational experience for all of its viewers. A large component of our programming involves this web site. Viewers are encouraged to participate by entering weekly contests sponsored by *Wired Kingdom* in conjunction with its television nature series. Most of our contests revolve around online inter-action with our free-ranging wild animals featuring live web-cams. These audio/visual feeds are streamed through our web site completely unaltered in real time through our privately owned satellite network.”

With an amused sort of detachment at what had been done with his technical creation, Trevor clicked the listing for the current week’s contest:

“A cash prize of one million U.S. dollars will be awarded to the contestant who submits a screen-captured image from our web site’s *Wired Animal* streaming broadcast, demonstrating a ‘*spectacular and clearly visible example of human presence in the ocean.*’

“All entries must be submitted no later than midnight, July 23. Winners will be announced live on the following Friday night’s 8:00 P.M. television broadcast. In the event that two identical images are submitted, the winner will be that with the earliest submission date/time stamp.

“Only one entry per contestant per week. Once a contestant has submitted their entry, the entry is final.

Contest only open to *Wired Kingdom* web subscribers.
“Good luck!”

As an employee of *Wired Kingdom*, Trevor was ineligible for the show’s cash prize. But human presence in the ocean? At first he thought there would be a lot to choose from; however, the whale had remained hundreds of miles from land, avoiding the major shipping lanes. At an entry fee of fifty dollars, potential contestants were passing on the occasional plastic six-pack tie, shopping bag or miscellaneous piece of fishing gear in hopes of snapping a one-in-a-million shot of some icon of the sea: a message in a bottle or perhaps a sunken Spanish galleon loaded with gold doubloons that every sea aficionado dreams of discovering.

He wondered if he’d missed anything while asleep, but the web site’s message boards confirmed that other users had so far not seen anything noteworthy. Trevor clicked back to the whale’s live feed. More blue, but the water was lightening in color. Trevor guessed the whale was drifting up to the surface for air. He hunched forward in his chair, watching, waiting in vain anticipation, as though something interesting might happen this time. A plume of mist shot thirty feet skyward, accompanied by a thunderous grating sound that reminded him of gravel being dumped from a truck bed. Nothing unusual here.

And then he heard something else.

A voice.

Trevor turned up his speakers.

A female voice.

The video showed only the whale's back slicing through calm, blue water.

Now he could make out words . . . distant, as if carried by a breeze, yet distinct.

"Please no. Please—"

Gunfire.

Two shots, about a second apart.

A splash.

"What the . . ." Trevor muttered.

Water washed over the camera's lens as the animal submerged.

Did someone shoot the whale?

The curtain of swirling bubbles dissipated, revealing a quick shot of bare legs and feet kicking in a cloud of greenish blood. Before Trevor could freeze the image, the whale rolled to one side, returning the monitor to its familiar blue.

"Damn it!" *Was that real?*

The whale moved and again the view changed.

A flash of bare breasts.

Bits of flesh and blood.

Then the screen went to static.

"No!" Trevor grabbed the monitor and shook it. "Come on!" He checked the connections, knowing full well the interference came from the satellite transmission. Although the broadcast was susceptible to occasional interruptions of service resulting from bad weather—similar to consumer satellite television

feeds—he had never seen this type of sustained interference before. And the weather was perfect.

He was considering possible sources of interference without success when the garbled transmission on screen suddenly cleared.

Sharks!

Trevor froze as blue sharks swarmed through the greenish sea, inflicting savage bites on the woman, removing a ten-pound chunk from the gushing torso. Clouds of blood obscured her upper body and head. And then, once more, the scene plunged into indecipherable snow.

Trevor slammed a fist into his desk in frustration.

“Bastards!” he yelled at the empty room. *They said they wouldn't stage anything. Millions of dollars worth of cutting-edge R&D being used for entertainment?* The contract he had signed with the show guaranteed that his device would be used solely for scientific purposes and to promote awareness of the marine environment. He recalled painfully that it also tied his salary to the performance of the whale-cam and web site.

He continued to watch. The static intensified, rendering the transmission worthless. This concerned Trevor even more than what he had seen—his testing had been exhaustive. On a second computer monitor, he consulted a stream of technical data that acted as the vital signs for the constellation of private satellites transmitting the signals from the telemetry device to the Internet. Nothing appeared out of the ordinary.

To confirm that the show's web site had broadcast the actual data stream from the satellites, he bypassed the commercial web site and used his secure account to view the satellite transmission directly, only to find that they were exactly the same. Unfortunately, it wasn't a simple hack whereby someone had substituted a pre-made video for the satellite feed as a hoax. *The satellites are transmitting this! Maybe the show staged some kind of surprise publicity event. But why the interference?*

His other monitor flickered back to life, displaying an empty blue frame, with the exception of the whale itself. He glanced at the GPS coordinates. Jotted them down. The whale was far out to sea off the Southern California coast. The whale rose again, breaking the surface. Sun-dappled open water. Calm, but no longer mirror flat. A light breeze whistled through the mic. Although he had integrated a windscreen into the device to prevent the annoying *whooshing* noise familiar to camcorder users, if the angle was right it couldn't be completely stopped.

Again, the image returned to a scrambled mess. When the picture returned a few seconds later, he heard a sound he couldn't place. Something vaguely familiar.

Then nothing.

The connection now appeared to be lost entirely as the screen went black, leaving Trevor to stare at his own reflection. His brown eyes betrayed a lack of sleep. His wavy dark hair needed cutting. He thought

he appeared much older than a recent graduate. Finally, he banished his mirror image by clicking out of the video feed.

A quick check of the site's chat room and message boards revealed only the impassioned confusion of people wondering what was going on, whether what they had just witnessed was real. Trevor placed a call to Anthony Silveras, one of *Wired Kingdom's* many producers, but the only one who seemed able to get things done. Anthony picked up on the first ring, his voice strained.

"Trevor—"

"Did you see—"

"I was about to call you. My phone's ring—"

"Tony, listen."

"What's going on, Trevor?"

The open line went quiet. "Looks like we just broadcast a murder live on our web site."



CHAPTER 2

BAJA CALIFORNIA, MEXICO

Héctor González drove his old but reliable pickup truck at a leisurely pace up the wide dirt road of his rural coastal village. Tejano music poured from the blown speakers as he lit a cigarette, shook out the match and rested his arm in the open window. The neighborhood children playing soccer in the street parted to let him pass and waved. But as he waved back, despite the easy smile he wore, he failed to hear the music, taste the tobacco or take comfort in the familiarity of his surroundings.

He crested the hill and began the descent to his street. Even the splendid view of the blue Pacific in the distance, which had never before failed to lift his spirits after a long day of work, left him numb. He rolled past a row of shacks set back from the road until the ground leveled out at an intersection just off the town square. He was about to turn left when a man came running out of an old fishing shop, waving with one hand, a small Styrofoam cooler in the other.

“*Hola, Héctor!*” the man shouted, smiling broadly.

Héctor stopped the truck. “*Hola, Arturo, need a ride?*” The local fisherman was a friend of Héctor's who had steady work as a deckhand on a sport fishing boat. He owned no car, and each day his boss would drop him off at the shop, where he would walk or catch a lift the rest of the way home with someone. More than a few times that someone was Héctor, who was usually glad for the company, if not today.

“Yeah.” Arturo nodded and climbed into the vehicle, placing his cooler on the floorboard at his feet. “Thanks,” he said.

“Good fishing?” Héctor asked, pulling back onto the road.

“Not bad. Ready for *siesta*.”

Héctor forced a smile. Normally he would be too by late morning, but he could not allow himself to rest now.

They rolled on in silence for a time, the balding tires stirring up a cloud of dust in their wake. Arturo glanced at Héctor. “How is Rosa?”

He shook his head. “Not now, my friend, please.”

Arturo nodded, looked out the window. He grinned as a basset hound wobbled after a clutch of roosters on the side of the road, the dog's testicles hanging so low that they hit the ground as it walked. “Faster, Diego!” he called to the hound. “You know that dog is a miracle?” he said to Héctor. “All day, he drags his balls on the ground and yet he's fathered every mutt from here to Las Palmas.”

Héctor forced another smile. “Yes, I know. He must have brass *cojones*.” Héctor pulled the truck to a stop in the middle of the road. There was of course no other traffic to block.

Arturo opened the door and got out. He lifted the lid from his cooler and took out a Ziploc bag bulging with fish filets. “Have yourself a good lunch,” he said, handing Héctor the bag. Héctor nodded his thanks.

Driving again, he continued on in a daze, reaching his house by instinct. Rolling past a stand of towering fan palms that marked the northern edge of his property, he pictured the trees as they had been decades ago, shortly after his father had planted them. Back then they had been close enough to the ground to be run over by careless drivers, and some had succumbed to that fate. But the rest had survived, outliving even Hector’s father, who had lived to a ripe old age before leaving the house to his son.

Héctor pulled into the narrow driveway of his one-story home, the nicest on the block. He took the three steps to his front porch and flung open the screen door. “How is she?” he said without preamble. Their living room was well worn, lived in. A battered old upright piano occupied part of one wall, its top decorated with figurines of Jesus and Mary and framed photographs of their extended family. His wife of twenty-three years did not look up from her position on the floor as she knelt in the corner in front of a homemade altar, a semi-circle of lit candles arrayed before her. She was praying feverishly, hands

clasped in front, lips moving rapidly with quiet intonations. Héctor looked down at the tired figure she had become. She had aged in the past months, lines of gray streaking her rich black hair, creases marring her smooth complexion and once-bright eyes. She was still beautiful, but so sad, even in her faith. He himself had been unable to do anything, after all, so she would appeal to God. He waited for her to finish; who was he to disrupt her pleas?

After another few moments his wife rose and turned to face him with wet eyes. She spoke rapidly. "Héctor, the news from the hospital today is very bad. Rosa has been transferred back to the critical care unit. Her doctors report that the complications from surgery have gotten worse. Her body has rejected the donor tissue. They say she is starting to die, Héctor, and that all they can do where she is now is to make her passing more comfortable." At this she broke into a sob, dropping to the floor one knee at a time. "Eleven years old, Héctor. She is only a child! Why?"

Héctor went to her, knelt with her, held her.

"But what about the advanced treatment? They told us that if the surgery failed, something could be done in Mexico City."

His wife wiped her nose, shaking her head. "They do want to move her."

"But if they can save her—"

"We cannot afford the treatment. Even if we sold our house, Héctor, and your business, borrowed from everyone we know . . . it wouldn't be enough." She

broke down again, weeping.

“Listen to me, Carla. Listen.” She stopped sniffing and looked him in the eye. “When you go back to the hospital to visit Rosa—”

“Me? Aren’t you coming? Rosa will want to see you.”

“Listen. I want you to tell the doctors to notify the surgeons in Mexico City.” Héctor stood, his wife rising with him.

“I am flying to the United States this afternoon, near Los Angeles. I will be gone for at least a day, maybe a few days.”

“Héctor . . . she may not have much time.”

“It will be okay,” Héctor reassured her.

“But *Los Angeles*? Why?” She grabbed the bag of fish from his hand and went to the kitchen. He followed her but said nothing as she laid the filets in a pan and began to season them. He deliberated carefully while she worked on the fish. After she had lit the burner under the pan, he spoke.

“I have accepted a job.”

“A job? What is wrong with your usual trips?”

An air charter operator, Héctor had built a successful business around his piloting skills and Cessna seaplane to run eco-tours for a wealthy American clientele. He thought about how many trips he would have to make, ferrying adventurous San Diego surfers to Todos Santos Island or weekend kayakers to the Coronados to earn what he had already been wired in advance for this mission.

“This job will pay for Rosa’s procedure.”

“Héctor, most of the money must be paid before they will treat her. You know this.”

“It pays well, *cariño* . . . enough to pay for the entire treatment.”

Carla whirled around, shaking a spatula at him. “Héctor Jesús González! What is this crazy talk? You tell me that you are not planning anything illegal. You tell me this instant!”

“It is nothing illegal.” *Liar!* his inner voice screamed. In fact, his new job was illegal, but not in the way his wife meant. There were drug traffickers, human smugglers who would contract his aerial services for uncommonly high pay. But he would not allow his wife to suffer the indignity of returning home one day to find his head on their doorstep. Abhorrently violent crime was on the rise in Mexico as drug gangs battled over turf. And, he thought, it was too far beneath him. Using his airplane—the centerpiece of his professional accomplishments, his most prized possession—to enable a pathway of devastation and misery for drugs and sexual slavery was not something that was inside him, not something he could redeem in the eyes of his God, even to save the life of his little girl.

But this new job . . . against the law, yes, but it only involved violating U.S. airspace in order to retrieve a piece of technical equipment from a whale. That was all he knew. He would receive further instructions later, but what could be so wrong? No one would be

hurt, not even the animal.

“Do not take too much risk, Héctor. God will take care of Rosa; He does not need to watch over you, too.”

“I will be performing a simple aerial survey of the Channel Islands. It is no more risky than normal, but since their usual seaplane service is unavailable they are paying me extra for rapid response.”

His wife clucked her disapproval before returning to the preparation of their meal. While she busied herself in the kitchen, Héctor frowned as his mind wrestled the tangled calculus of the logistics required to complete his new assignment. While not as dangerous as working with violent criminals, the job was rife with its own special hazards.

There were the extra fuel tanks he had outfitted his plane with that would convert it into a volatile flying gas tank. There was the low-altitude flying over water for hours on end, over rough seas, in unpredictable weather. He could have mechanical problems far out to sea, unable to radio for help for fear of drawing the attention of the authorities, unable to do anything but drift helplessly hundreds of miles from land. Landing on open ocean posed enough of a challenge, not to mention putting down near a large wild animal. Then there was the real possibility of being sighted by the U.S. Coast Guard ships or aircraft, chased down and detained—maybe jailed—before being deported without his plane, his livelihood, and never again allowed to enter the U.S. That would leave his family

considerably worse off than they were now.

Furthermore, he was proud of the relationship he had built and maintained over the years the with American aviation authorities. These ties had enabled him to build a lucrative business, making trips to the Coronados, an island group straddling Mexican and U.S. waters near San Diego. The thought of deliberately defying their trust left a bitter taste.

As Héctor smelled something starting to burn in the kitchen, yet another possible outcome rattled his brain: he might simply fail to locate the piece of gear or be unable to retrieve it. Fly all that way and undergo all that risk for nothing. His instructions had been clear and simple: deliver the whale's tag and collect a tremendous cash reward.

Then Carla was telling him to sit at the table, sliding a plate of *dorado* in front of him. Badly burnt. She was typically an excellent cook, but her mind had not been on the task. He broke off a piece with his fork and forced himself to eat. It would be his last home-cooked meal for some time.

She asked him how the fish was with a glance.

"Good fish," he said, crunching a mouthful into submission. Another lie. Was it getting easier? But he could no longer savor food; the finest, freshest bluefin tuna would be tasteless mush to him now.

"Good fish," he said again.

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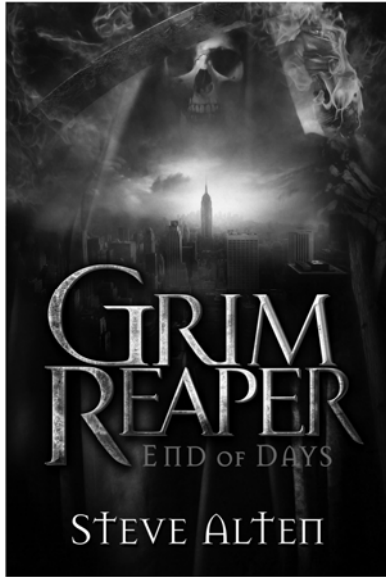
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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Rick Chesler holds a Bachelor of Science in marine biology and has had a life-long interest in the ocean and its creatures. When not at work as an environmental project manager, he can be found scuba diving or traveling to research his next thriller idea. He currently lives in Honolulu, Hawaii, with his wife, cat and some fish.

