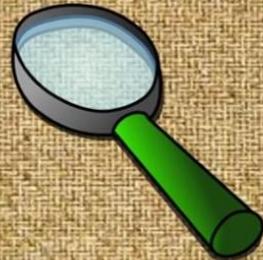




BOOK TWO

**Matt
and
Michael
Snow
Investigate:**

**The
Haunted House
on Hawthorn Hill**



By David Drake

Matt and Michael Snow
Investigate:

The Haunted House on Hawthorn Hill

Book TWO in the series

By
David Drake

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Family of man Press

Book ONE: The Shadow Imp
Book TWO: The Haunted House on Hawthorn Hill
[Look for new titles.]

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DEDICATION

This book was written
with the hope
that its young readers
will come to understand
that it is okay
to be genuinely different
from others
and
that by getting to know and understand
people who are different,
we allow ourselves
to grow beyond ourselves
in remarkable ways.

- DD

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CHAPTER ONE

Old Hank Bradbury

Old Hank Bradbury was indeed old – he had been living on his social security check for as long as the twins had known him. Although his name was Henry, he had preferred to be called Hank ever since he was a boy. Few people even knew his last name – he had always just been Hank. He had also always been pretty much of a hermit.

Hank had been the caretaker of the Hawthorn place, a huge old three story house that sat atop Hawthorn Hill, named after the family that had once owned a large amount of land just to the west of the city. It wasn't far from where Matt and Michael lived. Although the last of the Hawthorn family had died many years before, Old Hank continued to live there in the servant's quarters and did what he could to prevent the old structure from collapsing around him. It had been some sort of arrangement with the family.

The house had been unpainted ever since the twins had first discovered it more than a half dozen years earlier. That had occurred one day when they were five and had ventured that seemingly endless mile away from home to investigate the big house they had only seen from a distance – often through a spy glass from their bedroom window. It was on that occasion they first met Old Hank. He had always treated them well and seemed pleased each time they paid a visit. Although they were eager to explore the entire old house, they had never gotten further than Hank's quarters – a

bedroom, a sitting room, a kitchen and a bathroom near the rear on the first floor.

By the time they entered school, they were aware of the stories about the old house. The other boys in their class were all convinced it was haunted and that the ghosts of the long dead family members roamed the house each time there was a full moon.

Matt and Michael were not given to believe in such things as ghosts, but never argued the point, understanding that arguing was just a sport that never really solved anything. They certainly did not believe the stories about Old Hank being in league with the Devil, himself, and possessing the power to put a curse on anybody with whom he made eye contact. Needless to say, few of the boys in that part of the city ever looked Old Hank in the face when they passed him on the sidewalk or encountered him in a store. Except when forced to prove their courage in order to save face among their friends or impress a girl, none of them would ever approach the haunted house on Hawthorn Hill.

School had been out for the summer for nearly a week and the twins were already looking for new and exciting things to do. The evening before, they had told their parents they thought it was time to visit Old Hank again. Their mother said she would make a batch of sugar cookies for them to take along. Old Hank had quite a sweet tooth.

“There will be two dozen in the box when it leaves my kitchen, and I expect there to be two dozen in the box when it arrives at Hank’s place,” she said with a smile.

After breakfast, they slipped the box into Matt’s backpack along with their usual hiking supplies. Their mother handed Michael a small sack of cookies for them to munch on. They each kissed her on her cheek and raced out the door. It wasn’t that they had any reason to be in a hurry. Matt and Michael didn’t need a reason to be in a hurry – it is how they moved through life – twin whirlwinds well known to everybody in the surrounding area.

It was already hot – extra hot for a June morning – cutoffs and sneakers weather for sure, so they shed their T

shirts by the time they left the yard. They stuffed them into the backpack, removed their own private stash of cookies and set off at a trot.

They stayed west of the creek – the one that more or less set the western border of the city. It wound its way across the wide, flat meadow and along the eastern base of Hawthorn Hill, which they soon saw rising in front of them.

It was the first in a series of hills that spread northwest from the city toward the woods. *That* was another of the twins' favorite places.

There was a long set of stone steps that curved up from the base of the hill to the flat area on top where the house sat. Their father had told them that the house was well over one hundred years old – built in the late 1800s – and that Hank had been the caretaker for at least fifty of those.

Half way up the hill they paused, cupped their hands to their mouths and as one called out.

“Old Hank. It’s the Snow Twins!”

That had been something Old Hank had requested they do so he wouldn’t be surprised by their arrival. Apparently, there were occasionally unwanted visitors. Just what constituted an unwanted visitor the boys didn’t know and hadn’t asked. They knew for sure that the two of them were always welcome.

They continued the climb – 100 steps in all. That made the hill about as high as a six-story building in the city.

“He didn’t ring his bell,” Michael said.

“Sometimes he’s busy and doesn’t.”

“But usually he does, his signal he heard us. Think we should call out again?”

“Okay, I guess.”

Again, they stopped and called out together. Again, there was no bell rung in response.

Michael became concerned.

Matt seldom became concerned.

They reached the top of the steps and followed the stone walk around to the rear of the house – on the west side to their left.

“The outside door to his quarters is open,” Michael said pointing.

“I see. Probably means he’s out here somewhere close by,” Matt said. He cupped his hands and called out again.

They stopped and waited, listening for a response. None came.

Michael started for the door. Matt followed. They stopped just outside and looked in.

“Hank! You in here?” Matt called.

Still, there was no response.

“It’s not his day to go down to the store for groceries,” Michael said.

“That’s the only time he leaves the place,” Matt said.

“You think we should go in and take a look?” Michael asked. “Maybe something’s wrong.”

“The door’s open. I suppose that’s like an invitation.”

Michael rolled his eyes. His brother had a way of making almost anything seem like the truth.

Matt shrugged his shoulders.

“Well, you asked if we should go in.”

Without the further discussion that would have usually followed, Matt moved ahead of his brother and stepped inside. Michael followed close behind. They walked slowly through the kitchen into the sitting room.

“Hank!” Michael called out several times – softer than before, just to alert him to their presence.

There was no response.

They came to his bed room door and stopped.

“It’s closed,” Michael said.

“I got eyes, I can see it’s closed,” Matt came back.

“So? Shall we open it?” Michael asked.

Matt approached the door and knocked.

“That was a good move. I should have thought of that.”

“We can’t all be brilliant,” Matt said offering a smile back over his shoulder.

“And you prove that every day of your life.”

Back in their room or out on their lawn such a trade of comments would have signaled an immediate attack with a roll-across-the-area wrestling match. Not that time. There was nothing true about Michael’s comment – they both made good grades and managed to do so in a way that all the other guys still liked them.

There was no response to the knock. Michael reached around Matt and repeated the knock while calling out. It produced nothing.

Matt, impatient since the moment he had been born, reached for the knob, turned it and eased the door open. It was dark inside. Michael felt for the switch beside the door and the ceiling light came on.

“His bed’s not made,” Michael said. “His bed is always made.”

“His robe isn’t hanging on the back of the door,” Matt said. “It’s always hanging on the back of the door.”

“Except when he’s wearing it, of course,” Michael pointed out fully unnecessarily, but then Michael was the careful and precise member of the twosome.

They returned to the sitting room.

“The blinds are down,” Michael said.

“They are always up during the day,” Matt said.

“Looks like something’s very wrong, Michael said. “I can’t imagine him leaving his quarters in just his robe.”

“He wouldn’t – not on his own anyway,” Matt said. “I smell trouble.”

“I’m with you on that. So, now what? Call the police?”

“How about we look around a little bit first,” Matt said. “No use upsetting things if it really isn’t necessary.”

“Even though I think you’re just using this as an excuse to look through the house I don’t have any better plan,” Michael said.

“Hey. You want to look around as much as I do!”

“I won’t deny that, but I’d prefer to do it with Old Hank’s permission.”

“So, you’re saying we should just hang around and wait while Old Hank could be in some kind of trouble?”

“That’s a good point, I guess. Anyway, since you *are* going snooping regardless, I’d feel better going with you – to keep you out of trouble, just like old times.”

“How do you suppose we get into the main part of the house?” Matt asked looking around.

“How about that door on the north wall of the room? I’ve never seen it open and it has a slide lock on it. I’d guess that means the guy on this side of the door doesn’t want anybody entering from the other side – the main house side, I’m thinking.”

“One of your best pieces of detective work, Brother Michael.”

“Thank you, Brother Matt.”

Matt slipped the lock open and turned the knob. The door would not open.

“Has an old fashioned key lock – a big hole for a big old fashioned key,” Matt said.

They began looking around for an ideal hiding place for a key.

“If he doesn’t carry it with him, my bet is on the top of the door frame,” Michael said. “Bend over so I can ride on your shoulders. I should be able to reach it from there.”

They made the arrangement and Matt stood up.

“You’re getting heavy in your old age, kid.”

“Maybe you’re just getting weaker.”

“Watch your mouth. I could just drop you, you know.”

“But you wouldn’t,” Michael came back.

Matt tried to shrug his shoulders, signaling the truth in his brother's comment, but Michael's weight wouldn't allow it.

Michael searched the top of the door frame with his fingers.

"Got it."

Michael slid down Matt's back to the floor and inserted the key. It worked.

"Easier to turn than I expected," he said. "Old Hank must still lock and unlock it regularly."

He pushed the door open. The room was large and relatively dark, lit only by the small amount of light that could seep through the heavily draped windows to their right. It was large and still contained lots of large pieces of furniture all covered with sheets.

They thought of it at the same moment.

"The ghost's sheets!" they said together then chuckled about their little funny for several moments.

The sheets were, of course, to keep the dust off the furniture while it was not being used. It occurred to the boys they may have been there for decades (the sheets not the ghosts!).

They walked into the room and crossed toward the double doors that lay straight ahead of them on the opposite wall. Those doors were not locked; they were pocket doors and slid back into the walls. They opened into a wide, unlit hall without windows. There was a wall switch, but when flipped no lights came on. Apparently, the main part of the house was no longer electrified. Michael removed a flashlight from Matt's backpack and ran its beam up and down the hallway. There were several doors leading off into the house ahead of them to the north. At the East end – to their right – was the main entrance into the house. At the other end was a large stairway winding its way up through an opening all the way to the second and third floors. To the rear of the stairway was a single door. Michael lit it with his light.

"Maybe the door to the cellar," he said.

“Could be,” Matt agreed. “Want to start down there?”

“Not sure I want to start at all, but I figure it makes sense to begin at the bottom and work our way up.”

Matt walked on ahead toward the end of the hall. He often took the lead in such situations, partly because he was pretty brave, but mostly because he was very reckless. He tried the door. It opened without any problem. As he prepared to enter they heard a door slam somewhere behind them. They ran back down the hall and looked in through the opening to the large, first room they had entered. The door to Old Hank’s quarters was closed.

“We left it open, right?” Michael asked.

“We sure did.”

They trotted across the large room hurdling a coffee table as they went. Matt tried the knob.

“Locked tighter than a drum.”

“I guess we left the key in the lock, didn’t we?”

Matt nodded.

“I thought maybe a draft had closed it,” Michael said, “but I’ve never known a draft that could turn a key and lock a door.

“Fortunately, we’ve never known a *ghost* that could turn a key and lock a door either. Would it have been Old Hank?”

“I doubt it,” Michael said. “If he came back in and saw an open door in his sitting room, he’d have investigated it, wouldn’t he?”

“I imagine that’s right. So, if it wasn’t a draft, and it wasn’t a ghost, and it wasn’t Old Hank, who was it?”

“I’m thinking somebody who shouldn’t be here. Put that together with Hank’s disappearance and it smells like the doings of a bad guy to me.”

They looked into each other’s faces and nodded.

Another new investigation was officially underway.

CHAPTER TWO

Enter the Ghosts

They put their ears against the door and listened, thinking that might give them some clue about what was taking place on the other side. Nothing. Nada. Zilch.

Matt crouched and looked into the keyhole.

“The key is still in the lock so I really can’t see into the room,” he whispered.

“Let me look!”

They traded places.

“Got an idea,” Michael said. “I read about it in a mystery story once. There’s a wide crack under the door – a least an inch. Take a T-shirt out of the backpack.”

For all their quibbling, the boys trusted and respected each other completely. Matt removed the back pack and handed the shirt to Michael even though he had no idea what he was thinking.

“Okay. Now we flatten it out on the floor on this side of the crack – right under the lock. Then we slip it under the door, push the key out of the lock from this side, it falls onto the shirt on the other side, we pull it back to us on the shirt and use it to open the door.”

“I remember that,” Matt sad. “One problem. In the story, it was a piece of newspaper that slipped under the door straight and flat. A shirt is going to squish and rumple together and clump up. It’ll never slide in flat like that.”

“So, find something that we can use to push the shirt under the door and then straighten it out – like a yardstick or something.”

“How about the metal tape measure we carry in the backpack?”

“Excellent. Go for it!”

As Michael flattened out the shirt on the floor, Matt extended a two-foot-long section of the tape measure and clicked it, locked in place. He handed it to Michael.”

“I predict this operation will take patience and that’s your department,” he said.

He received no argument from Michael. No more than one minute later the shirt was in place, perfectly arranged on the other side of the door.

“Now, find something to slip into the lock opening here so we can push the key out the other side.”

“A pencil?” Matt asked.

“Probably too big around. The awl!”

Years before, the boys had learned an awl was a valuable tool – a bit dangerous, but valuable. It was pointed and had a six inch, narrow, metal shaft with a wooden handle – like a screwdriver with a point. It could be used to make holes, to pry, to etch words or diagrams into soft surfaces, to punch new holes in belts, and on down a long list of essential activities in which detectives engaged.

Matt removed it from the back pack and again handed it to his brother.

“Okay.”

Michael began describing the process out loud as preceded. “Insert awl. Gently slip awl into the lock. Make contact with the end of the shaft of the key. Push gently. Slip off the key and start again. Push gently. The key moves

backward. The key moves back some more and . . . wait for it . . . out of the lock. Clunk! The key falls to the floor.”

What would have been a clink on a hard surface was definitely a clunk on the soft shirt. Had the topic come up between them you can be sure there would have been a heated, clink, clank or clunk discussion.”

Matt had dropped to his stomach and was peering under the door with the flashlight.

“Did it land on the shirt?” Michael asked.

“Sure did. There it is. Good going.”

“Don’t touch that shirt!” Michael said as he positioned himself beside Matt. “This next part is an EASY DOES IT operation.”

Matt gave him no argument. His first idea related to getting back into Hank’s place had been just to run at the door and knock it down. Michael’s idea was really much better.

“You watch the key while I pull out the shirt,” Michael said. “Let me know the second anything goes wrong.”

“Should I get out the stop watch?”

“Doofus! Here I go. Easy does it.”

Michael took far longer to pull the shirt toward them than seemed reasonable to Matt, but he held his tongue. In matters of being *careful* he knew from years of experience that his brother was the one to depend on.

The key was soon safely in Michael’s hand. While Matt stowed the awl, and tape measure in the back pack, Michael pulled the T-shirt through his belt for safe keeping. Matt inserted the key and unlocked the door. He turned the knob and slowly pushed it open.

“Somebody’s been in here, alright. The room’s a mess,” Michael said looking around.

Matt nodded and added: “Mostly the books. Looks like they’ve just been pulled off the shelves onto the floor. What do you suppose caused it?”

“Casper, the angry bookcase ghost, maybe?” Michael said/asked, grinning.

“Who or whatever it was worked in a hurry. We haven’t been gone from here ten minutes,” Matt pointed out.

They crossed the room to examine the book case. It was wooden and had nine shelves floor to ceiling. The shelves were six feet wide and ten inches, front to back. The back was made of tightly fitted vertical boards, each twelve inches wide. It was built right back into the outside wall – recessed, was the builder’s term. There was a four-inch frame all around it – much like those around the doors.

The boys ran their hands over its surfaces. That really served no good purpose. It just seemed like the thing to do.

“What do you make of *this*?” Matt asked pointing to an area at the right end of the middle shelf.

Michael moved close and looked it over.

“Hmm?”

“Like a little wooden box set right up against the end, wedged in behind the frame. With books on the shelf, it would be hidden back there.”

“Can you take it out or is it fastened in place,” Matt asked.

“It fits snug all around. No place to get hold of it.”

They stepped back to think about it, surveying the area with their eyes.

“If somebody made a box to fit right there so perfectly, it has to have some purpose,” Matt said.

“And if it has some purpose it must have some purpose more than just sitting there, all hidden like it was,” Michael added taking his brother’s idea one step further.

“So, if it doesn’t come out maybe it opens – like a door,” Matt said. “Here, let me press around on it and see if it has a spring-loaded door maybe.”

“A spring-loaded door?”

“Yeah. I read mystery books sometimes, too.”

Michael nodded as Matt pressed and tapped on every square centimeter that could be pressed or tapped. Nothing

happened. He tapped again.

“Listen. It sounds hollow.”

Michael moved in closer and set his ear in its direction. Matt tapped again.

“Hollow for sure. A hollow box would have been made to hold something, I’m thinking,” Michael said. “Look at it and talk about it, Matt. You always see things nobody else sees.”

“Okay. Well, it is about ten inches tall and ten inches deep and from how far it sticks out from the side wall behind the frame, I’d say about two inches thick. When we pressed on the middle of this side that we can see, the wood gave – bent in – just a little. I think that means it’s made out of very thin wood. Maybe in order to leave more room on the inside. It couldn’t be plywood because that wasn’t used here in the states until during the Second World War – the early 1940s. If this house is over a hundred years old it has to just be a very thinly sliced section of . . . what kind of wood is this?”

“Smell it,” Michael suggested after taking a close-up whiff, himself. “I’d say Cedar. I read that lots of book cases were made of cedar a long time ago. Its aroma kept moths from laying eggs in the books and eating the paper pages.”

Matt nodded. He was always impressed with all the odd bits and pieces of information his brother had stored away in his brain. Matt had another observation.

“See how the shelves rest on pegs that fit back into the sides of the book case?”

“I do. And that observation leads us where?”

Rather than offer an answer, Matt moved back to the bookcase and lifted up on one of the shelves. It moved. It was just sitting in place on the pegs the way he had suspected.

“Now, brother, watch and learn.”

He lifted up the opposite end of the shelf from where the little box sat. The shelf slipped out and he removed it, leaning it up against the wall.

“Now, let’s see if we can pull that box out from

underneath,” he said. “It’s wedged in so tightly it’s just hanging there, or so I’m guessing.”

A few moments later the box was loose and in his hands. He took it to the table in the center of the room. He turned it one way and the other as they examined it on all sides.

“Look there,” Michael said. “It looks like the bottom slides out to the left side.

Matt nodded and worked it open by pushing on it with his thumbs. A small, thin book fell out – six inches high, four inches wide, and less than half an inch thick. Michael picked it up and read the title: *The Ghosts of Hawthorn Hill*. He paged through it quickly.

“No pictures, Matt. You’ll hate it.”

It was worth a quick fist to Michael’s shoulder. (Not at all unexpected!)

“Just sixty pages.”

“What’s it about,” Matt asked.

“The title would suggest it’s about the ghosts that live up here on Hawthorn Hill.”

“I got that. I mean anything pop out at you – you and your super-fast reading.”

“Well, let’s see. Just four chapters: The Ghosts Before the Hawthorns, The Ghosts Discourage the Building of Hawthorn Mansion, The Hawthorn Ghosts, and the last chapter is, The Battle of the Ghosts.”

“What’s that about the Battle?” Matt asked.

Michael quickly scanned that final chapter.

“The story seems to be that this hill had been a gathering place for ghosts for centuries before the Hawthorns decided to build this place. When the construction began the ghosts seemed to do everything within their power to keep it from happening – causing accidents, cave-ins, and things like that. The house got built anyway. Since they hadn’t been successful against the Hawthorns while they were alive, once they died the older ghosts began waging a war against each

new Hawthorn ghost as another family member arrived on 'the other side'. According to this, the war between the two sets of ghosts goes on to this day."

"But since we don't believe in ghosts, none of that seems important, does it?" Matt asked.

"I wouldn't think so. Do you think whoever tore this place up might have been looking for this book?" Michael asked wondering out loud.

"If they were they didn't seem to find it."

"And if they didn't find it that means they are probably .

..

". . . still here looking for it," Matt said finishing his brother's thought.

"And all that may be somehow related to the fact that Old Hank seems to be missing," Michael said, adding the obvious.

"So, do we keep the book or put it back?" Matt asked.

"I vote for keeping it, at least until we have a chance to study it for clues about all this," Michael said. "Let's put the box and the shelf back, though."

"Shall we put the other books back on the shelves?" Matt asked.

"We need to think about that. If we do, and the bad guy returns, he will know we have been here."

"But, since he closed and locked the door after we had opened it, don't you suppose he already knows we're here."

"I suppose you're right," Michael said. "What would be so important about that book that somebody would go to all this trouble?"

"And, kidnap Old Hank," Matt added looking around the room that had suddenly taken on a spooky, eerie, dangerous feeling.

They had soon replaced the box and had set the shelf back in place under it. Matt placed the backpack on one of the shelves so he could unzip it and slide the book inside. To make it balance well on the shelf he pushed it as far toward

the back as it would go.

At that moment, the right end of the whole bookcase – the opposite end from where the box sat – clicked open, swinging back into the wall several inches.

“You must have triggered something, Matt.”

“I’d say so.”

He handed the book back to Michael and sat the bag on the floor. They both moved in to examine the area just behind where the backpack had been sitting. They pointed at the same moment.

“That knot in the grain of the wood on the back,” Michael said.

Matt reached out and touched it.

“It might have been a good idea to have thought about possible consequences before touching it, Matt.”

“Somehow that just doesn’t sound like me, does it, now, Michael?”

They traded shrugs signaling they were both in agreement about that.

“What happened when you poked it?”

“It sank in a little, like a button that you’d press to release a latch or request a floor in an elevator.”

“Not just *‘like a button’* but a *‘for real button’*, the way it looks,” Michael said. “This whole bookcase is like a door. I guess there’s no reason not to see if we can push that end of the bookcase further back into the opening.”

Without hesitating they pushed. Without hesitating it moved all quite easily.

“Get out a flashlight, Matt.”

They had soon lit the area inside the wall.

“It’s like a hall off to the right – narrow, only two feet wide,” Matt said. “It leads back in the direction of that big room we were in. I’ve often wondered why there were no windows on this back side of the first floor.”

“Shall we follow it?” Michael asked.

“Can’t know where it goes unless we do.”

“Good point. You always see the practical side of situations.”

Again, as was typical in situations such as that, Matt took the lead.

They moved along the hall – a secret passageway, really. There was a century of dust an inch thick covering the floor and spider webs crisscrossed the area. Neither boy was afraid of spiders, but neither really enjoyed their thick, gray, messy, webs sticking to their faces and chests.

“Look just ahead. A stairway leading down,” Matt said moving the beam of the flashlight so they could examine the area.

“Into the cellar?” Michael said as a question.

“No. It leads *down* into the attic, doofus.”

Michael realized it had been a dumb comment as soon as it left his lips. He shrugged into the darkness, but didn’t respond further.

They started down the wooden stairs – ancient looking, unfinished, two by eights made slick from the dampness. The walls on each side were rock – wet, slimy, dark gray rocks a foot square, cemented in place with dark mortar, which had cracked allowing some of it to fall away.

They were about half way down the flight of steps when it happened. From above they heard the bookcase sliding closed. The small amount of light that had filtered in through the opening from the sitting room was gone. It was black as night below. It was black as night above.

“It probably would have been a good idea if we had looked to see if there was some kind of a release latch on *this* side of the bookcase before we started down these stairs,” Michael said.

“Things like that are *your* department, Michael. Where was your head?”

“You’re really blaming me because you are so undependable?”

“Better to blame you than the ghosts, I’m thinking. I know *you* never stay mad for long. Sounds like these ghosts have stayed pretty riled up for hundreds of years.”

It would have been worth a grin and a chuckle if they hadn’t found themselves sealed in a tomb beneath the haunted house on Hawthorn Hill. Matt privately hoped the ghosts were outside enjoying the nice day, perhaps washing their sheets in the creek. If Michael had known his brother’s thoughts he would have wondered if ghosts could lay in the sun and get tans.

CHAPTER THREE

“So, do we go back and see if the bookcase opens from this side or go on.” Michael asked.

“Well, if we hadn’t heard it close we’d have kept going. Knowing if it will open or not won’t change anything about our search. However it is, it will still be that way if we get back.”

“*When*, we get back not *if* we get back,” Michael said correcting his brother.

“I didn’t say, ‘if’.”

“You most certainly did say ‘if’.”

“Well, I meant ‘when’ so don’t get your underpants in a wad.”

They had been standing, facing each other during the discussion. Matt turned and refocused his flashlight down on the steps. He began moving again and Michael followed close behind.

“We left your backpack on the other side of the wall, you realize,” Michael said.

“I do.”

“You realize that means we don’t have any of our detective equipment.”

“I do, and one more ‘I do’ and I think we’ll be married so

cut it out.”

They moved down through the humid darkness. They had descended twenty-three steps when the beam from Matt’s light moved across a large door just a few steps below in a suddenly wider area. It was made of thick, upright boards, each eight inches across and nearly eight feet tall. The door was four feet wide and had a rusted, iron, latch on the right side. With no hinges on their side, they assumed it opened in – away from them.

“The latch and hinges may be rusted shut,” Michael said looking over his brother’s shoulder.

Matt reached out and pressed the thumb plate on the latch.

“Or not,” he said. “Works like it was brand new. Shall I open it?”

“I can’t believe you even asked. We’ve come this far to see what’s what, so I vote we open it. Slowly and carefully, I’d advise.”

Before Michael had finished, Matt was already working the lock and putting pressure against the door with his shoulder. It began to move with far less force than either boy had expected would be needed. He opened it half way, which provided more than enough room for their slender bodies to move on through.

“It’s dark,” Michael said.

“You’re very good at describing the obvious. Did you expect to find sunshine?”

Michael ignored the comment. They moved inside.

“A chunk of rock over there,” Matt said, focusing his light on it. “Let’s move it to hold the door so it won’t close on us.”

“Good idea.”

“I have those sometime.” Matt said through a broad smile.

That finished, they began looking around the larger area.

“Look there! Lanterns and candles on that little table,” Michael said.

“Let’s see if they work,” Matt suggested. “If they do we can save the batteries.”

Matt picked up a lantern and smelled it.

“Kerosene.”

He shook it gently.

“Sounds to be nearly full.”

“Yeah. So is this one. Now to find a way to light them.”

“Rock on iron might produce sparks,” Michael said.

“I see lots of rocks in the walls, but no iron.”

“The latch on the door?” Michael said.

They turned around and explored the back of the door with their eyes.

“See those huge hinges?” Matt said. “Even better than the latch – bigger and stronger.”

He moved the beam from his light to the floor searching for a rock of the correct size and shape.

“There,” Michael said bending down and picking one up.

Matt nodded. Looks like granite – should be very hard.

“The trick will be in jumping the sparks onto the wicks in the lanterns,” he said.

[The reader might want to Google or Bing an image of a kerosene lantern if not familiar with how they look and work.]

Michael handed the rock to Matt, and while his brother continued to hold the flashlight, Michael removed the glass chimney from one of the lanterns exposing the loose woven fabric wick. He turned the adjustment wheel so lots of the kerosene soaked wick was exposed and moved it close to the middle hinge, which was at an easy working height. He turned the lantern one way and then the other until he found what seemed to be the best position.

“How can I strike the rock on the iron if I have to hold

the flashlight?" Matt said, more to himself than Michael.

"Here," Michael said, "fit it in under my armpit and focus it on the hinge. I can hold it and the lantern while you work with the stone."

That accomplished, Matt went to work. The striking of the stone to the iron hinge did produce lots of sparks, but they flew off in all directions. They soon understood that it would just take some chance, random spark and not one they could actually direct toward the wick.

"My hand feels like it's busted," Matt said after a few minutes.

"My armpit feels like it's sprouting a football."

They kept at it for several more minutes.

"Eureka!" Michael said at last.

A large spark had lit on the wick and it immediately began to glow red. Michael leaned down and blew on it. It burst into flame. Matt took the flashlight so Michael could adjust the wick. That done Matt picked up the glass chimney from the floor and set it in back in place. The area suddenly grew bright.

"It's not the Garden of Eden down here, for sure," Matt said. "Just more dirty rock walls and slick floors."

"Look at the size of those ceiling beams," Michael said pointing. "They must be twelve-inches square."

It was a large, square room that was perhaps half as wide as the house itself. There was a door at the far end toward the center of the house. They walked in its direction.

Something scurried across the floor not five feet in front of them.

"That's the biggest old rat I've ever seen," Michael said.

"I hope they don't run in herds," Matt added.

"It was brown, like the ones we've seen along the creek," Michael pointed out. "I hope that guy is just lost and not scouting for two-legged lunch for him and *all* his friends."

"Rats don't like the light. It'll stay away," Matt said,

sounding quit confident about it.

“I’d rather you’d said, ‘Rats don’t like human flesh,’ but what you said may be just about as good.”

“Yeah, until we run out of Kerosene,” Matt added.

“Luckily, I brought another lantern with me,” Michael said as a reminder.

He held it up for Matt to see. Matt nodded as if giving his approval. “This one should burn for six hours or so. Read about them in Jack London books.”

“It’s chilly down here,” Michael said. “We probably need to put on our T’s.”

“As I recall we stowed them in the backpack,” Matt said.

“I have the one we used to get the key – here, I pulled it under my belt. We can take turns wearing it.”

“You go first, you seem to be the coldest,” Matt said.

“Okay. We’ll wear it in fifteen minute shifts.”

Michael slipped into the shirt. Although it really didn’t provide a whole lot of warmth, he didn’t mention that to his brother. They entered the next room. It was much smaller in all dimensions.

“Look there. Is that a cell, with iron bars?”

“Looks like one to me. Right out of an old west sheriff’s office. Let’s investigate.”

It had, of course, been Matt’s suggestion to go investigate.

Matt tried to open the door – it was locked. He held the lantern higher to offer more light and a better view inside.

“That’s not a really good sign, brother,” Michael said pointing to the center of the floor inside the cell.

They stopped in their tracks. There on the floor was a skeleton.

“Either somebody didn’t feed him very well or they forgot he was down here,” Michael said moving his hands to the front of his own throat the way people will do when confronted with death in any form.

“I wonder where the key is kept.” Matt asked looking around. “No door casing like upstairs.”

“Why on earth would you want to go in there?” Michael asked.

Matt turned on his flashlight and focused its beam on something shiny on the floor near their new ‘friend’s’ neck.

“A necklace, I’m thinking,” Matt said.

“With a triangular medallion on it,” Michael added suddenly also becoming interested. “See, the chain is threaded through a small hole in the center of one of the flat edges.”

Matt moved off toward the wall just to the right in search of the key.

“Bingo, Brother! Right here hanging on a big iron hook. *Three* keys, in fact.”

Michael hurried to his side. He was something of an expert in locks and keys. He began talking about them.

“Big keys. Eight inches long. The plate that slips into the lock is a good inch square. Look, each key has a differently shaped plate – one is just solid, one has a V-shaped notch in it and one has two narrow rectangular notches.”

“I wonder why three keys for one door?” Matt asked.

“Good question.”

“Good question, *like usual*, you mean?” Matt said/asked.

“Like usual, yes. Shall we give them a try?”

It needed no response. Matt removed them from the hook. They were heavier than he expected and like all the metal they had come across, they were badly rusted. That suggested they had not been in regular use. Well, the skeleton probably suggested that as well!

As the boys returned to the cell, Matt turned off his flashlight and selected one key at random. He inserted it.

After repeated tries, it would not turn.

He removed it and inserted the second key.

It would not turn, either.

“Must be the third one,” Michael said.

Matt gave him that mocking look that said, ‘Doh! You think so?’

He inserted the last key. Click, scrape, clink.

“It worked.”

That time it had been Matt reporting the obvious. Maybe it was a twin thing! At any rate, Michael kept quiet about it.

Matt pulled the door toward him and, with some difficulty was able to open it. They looked at each other and each sighed a big sigh (twin sighs, you might say!).

They entered (guess who went first!). Matt knelt down beside the skeleton.

“MY best guess is, he’s dead,” Matt said trying to lighten the scene a bit. Touching your first skeleton at their age just might cause a little anxiety.

“The chain is still around his neck.”

“It may be a ‘her’, you know – with the necklace and all,” Michael suggested.

“I guess that would make this the first naked woman we’ve ever seen, then,” Matt said looking up with a smile.

“You have a twisted, twisted, mind, brother. A twisted, twisted, mind. Necklaces have a clasp at the back that can be undone, you know.”

Again, Matt had begun the process before Michael had finished making his suggestion.

He looked it over for just a moment before standing and holding it out.

“Heavy. Looks like bronze. Has stuff on both sides.”

“Stuff?”

“Engraving or etching. A picture on one side and words on the other. The words are in a language I don’t recognize.”

“But, look at the picture,” Matt said turning over the medallion and resting in Michael’s hand.

“What do you mean?”

“That’s the same picture that’s on the front of that little book we found. Wish we had it so we could compare.”

“Ask and you shall receive,” Michael said.

Michael reached into his rear pocket and produced the little book.

“Decided to keep it with us just in case.”

“Just in case we’d find a medallion with that picture on it hanging around a dead skeleton’s neck?”

“Of course. And, most skeletons *are* dead, by the way.”

“Mine isn’t and yours isn’t,” Matt came back.

Again, Michael ignored his brother’s comment – mostly because he was correct.

Still, it was worth a smile between them.

They compared the two pictures. It was indeed a match. Although it was only a line drawing – etching – it was quite clear what it represented – the haunted house there on Hawthorn Hill.

“Let me open up the Google translator site and see what the words mean,” Michael said taking out his phone.

“Not a good thing I think, Matt. I get no bars at all down here. I thought being up this high on the hill that wouldn’t be a problem. Too much dirt and rock around us, I guess.”

“So, you’re saying we can’t communicate with the outside world at all?”

“That’s about the size of it. What we have is you and me.”

“Me and you *and* a skeleton *and* the medallion we stole from it. Suppose that will rile up the ghosts?”

“You’re kidding, right?” Michael asked.

“Probably.”

“Probably?”

Matt put on a whisper.

“I didn’t want to offend the ghosts on the off chance there might be some listening.”

“That doesn’t even deserve a response. Come on. There’s still more cellar to investigate.”

Surprisingly, it was Michael who was urging them on into what could well be danger.

“And what are we looking for?” Matt asked.

“Old Hank, I guess,” Michael answered, suddenly not really sure himself. “And, maybe the locks those other two keys fit.”

“Okay. There’s another door right over there.”

Michael put the necklace in his front pocket and returned the book to his rear pocket. He removed the shirt and handed it to his brother. Once into it, Matt took charge of the lantern and started for the next door.

That room was similar to the first one – large and empty. There was some sort of low, circular structure, which rose a few feet above the floor and sat in the middle of the room. They approached it.

“Looks like an old fashioned well,” Matt said. “Let me light it down inside with the flashlight.”

It was made of stones and concrete, much like the walls in the passageway they had just been in. It was ten feet across. The top was covered by a grate, made of iron bars much like those in the cell they had found. It was hinged on one edge so it could be raised and had a lock on the other.

“Why put a grate and a lock on a well?” Michael asked.

Matt ran the beam from the light around the inside of the hole.

“It’s not a well,” he said. “Look, it’s a spiral staircase made out of stones that goes down farther than this light will shine. What do you suppose?”

“Well, first, I suppose it’s a spiral staircase that goes down farther than this light will shine,” Michael came back.

“Very helpful.”

“I try to be. How’s this, then. The lock is like the one on the cell. Let’s try another key and see if it opens it.”

“Now, that’s more like the brother I know and respect.”

Michael handed over the two keys that had not worked. Matt inserted the first one.

“Hey. Works, first time. Shall we raise the grate?”

It hadn’t been a genuine question because he began tugging at it immediately.

“Need your muscles to raise this, Michael. Heavy.”

Michael added his manpower and they soon found it was only half of the grate that actually raised. There was a hinged bar that swung down and held it open. The first step was right there on the inside of the stone circle – the low, stone wall that rose off the floor to a comfortable sitting height.

“So? Do we go down and look around?” Matt asked, already straddling the low wall, ready to begin the decent.

Before Michael could weigh in with his opinion, both boys perked up. There were men’s voices coming from the open door at the opposite end of the room – the end they had not yet explored. The darkness on the other side of the opening began to glow faintly probably from the light of a lantern.

“Douse our lantern,” Michael said in a frantic whisper.

“That’ll mean we’re here in the dark,” Matt came back without really thinking.

“Isn’t that the idea?” Matt said. “No light. Survive?”

“Oh, yeah.”

Matt turned down the wick and the flame extinguished. The voices became louder and angrier sounding. The glow of light on the far side of the door became steadier and brighter.

CHAPTER FOUR

The boys looked around the room – as if they could really see anything there in the inky darkness.

“Only one place to hide, I guess,” Matt said.

“Down the hole, you mean?”

Matt nodded and although Michael could not see that, he put his hands on his brother’s shoulder and pushed gently, urging him on down the steps. Together they managed to close the grate above them with very little sound.

Matt, who was still holding the key, found Michael’s hand in the darkness and pressed it into his palm. He whispered.

“Can you reach up and lock the grate? Won’t be much of a safe haven down here if somebody else can get in. For all we know it’s a dead end.”

“Gottcha! Great thinking.”

It was easier to accomplish than either had figured it would be.

“Let’s move on far enough down to where we won’t be seen from up above,” Michael suggested.

The steps were less wet and slick than the surfaces had been up in the cellar. They discovered there was a constant air flow – an updraft – coming from below. It was

surprisingly warm compared to the temperature they had experienced up above in the cellar.

Michael kept his hands on Matt's shoulders from the rear and they carefully made their way down the steps.

"I hope you're keeping your right hand on the wall, Matt. If we step off the stairs to our left, we'll get a free ride to the bottom of this pit – however far down that may be."

"I wasn't, but I am now. I have an idea."

"You always get your best ideas right when our life is being threatened. I suppose that isn't a complaint."

"Anyway, there are chunks of cement from the wall scattered on the steps. Let's stop a minute. I'll drop one off the side. That way we can get some idea about how deep this hole is."

"Okay. From the moment you release it, count the seconds and we can calculate the distance."

Matt understood. They stopped. Matt stooped over and felt for a chunk of cement.

"Okay. Here we go. One Mississippi, two Mississippi, hit. About two seconds I'd say," Matt offered.

"If I remember correctly a rock falls at 30 some feet a second to begin with, so two seconds would be about 60 feet and that would be clear down at ground level, by the creek."

"We better keep going," Michael suggested. "I think the area above the hole is getting brighter. Whoever is up there is getting close to this stairway."

They moved on cautiously. At about thirty feet they stopped and waited.

"This should put us out of sight don't you think?" Matt said.

"I'd think so. Let's see what happens up there."

They didn't have long to wait. The opening at the top suddenly lit up brightly. Somebody rattled grate. The boys couldn't make out details, but they guessed at least one head was peering over the edge. The voices grew louder – angrier, it seemed.

A minute or so later the opening darkened significantly, signaling whoever it was had moved on.

“At least two of them,” Michael said, “since there is a conversation going on. Hard to tell if there are more.”

“So, do we go back up or continue going down,” Matt asked, really just wondering out loud.

“I vote down,” Michal said. “We can’t compete with angry men up there. If somebody’s after the book they probably won’t harm Old Hank until they find it. And since they can’t find it because we have it, he should be okay for a while.”

“Down it is. I think we need to take a closer look at that book to see why somebody might want it,” Matt said.

“Why somebody BAD might want it,” Michael added.

The lower they got the drier the rocks became.

“Seems like the updraft is warm air coming from the outside,” Matt said. “Feel how dry the walls are.”

“If there’s an opening into this thing down there I’m not sure why we haven’t found it,” Michael said. “We’ve been all over down there and all over the hillside.”

“You’re right. It must be really well hidden. Why do you suppose somebody would build a thing like this? Think of all the work and all the dirt and rock they had to move.”

“Plus, a hundred years ago, they didn’t have all the power equipment there is today,” Michael added. “Maybe the book says something about that.”

“Maybe it leads down to a huge cave where the ghosts live,” Matt said, teasing his brother a bit.

“Yeah. I’m sure the builder would have included a stairway to make it easy for the ghosts to go up and haunt the house.”

They moved on down for a few more minutes.

“I’d think we’d be getting close to the bottom, wouldn’t you?” Michael said.

“Shall I use the flashlight?” Matt asked.

“I suppose that’s safe, now.”

Matt clicked it to life. They had been right. There were only a half dozen steps left. The stairway settled into a roundish cave or room some fifteen feet in diameter and ten feet high at the center.

“I don’t see a door,” Matt said moving the beam from his light all around the area. They stepped off the last step onto the solid rock floor. They moved around the wall searching for anything that might indicate an opening.

“Any idea which way points to the creek?” Matt asked. “We’ve gone around in so many circles on the way down I lost all track of directions.”

“Me too. Absolutely no idea.”

They continued examining the wall.

“What’s that?” Michael asked pointing.

“Looks like a big rock seat built into the wall,” Matt said, “flat on top and exactly at chair height. It’s not a natural formation – clearly been chiseled out.”

Before Michael could express his caution about examining it first, Matt plopped himself down on it like he would in the beanbag chair in their room at home.

And, before Matt could offer his impression of it as a chair, the ‘seat’ and a section of the wall behind it began to raise, slowly. Matt jumped to the floor. Hot air rushed in from outside. The door came to a stop about five feet above the floor.

“At least now we know where your brains are housed, Matt. I’ve often suspected they were in you backside.”

Matt made no effort at a comeback. He moved to examine the opening – with a great deal more caution than he had with the stone seat.

“Know where we are?” Michael asked surveying the area outside that they could see through the opening.”

“Just above the rapids, I think. Listen and you can hear the rush of the water just to our left.”

Michael listened and nodded. He was often impressed

by his brother's skills at such things, but seldom shared that with him. One twin doesn't dare give the other a big head or they would no longer look like identical twins.

"I wonder two things," Michael said. "How do we close up this hole and how do we open it from the outside?"

The first question was answered immediately. The slab of rock slid back down into place all by itself, again plunging the little, cave-like room into darkness.

"Seems it closes on its own just like the bookcase in Old Hank's living room," Matt said. "Our problem will be finding out how to get back in from outside."

"Maybe it can't be opened from the outside," Michael said. "Maybe it was built just so folks could get out – like an escape route. I read once that lots of mansions built about the time this one was had escape tunnels. Wealthy people were easy targets for bandits and bad guys."

"But, we don't know that," Matt said. "I'd hate to get out there and not be able to get back inside."

"Here's an idea, Michael said. "One of us stay in here while the other one goes outside to search. Then after, say five minutes, the one inside opens the door again with the stone seat – in case the other one can't find a way in."

"Sounds good," Matt said. "Who's out and who's in?"

"You're better at finding things than I am, Matt. You go on out, okay."

Michael pressed his foot against the top of the rock seat. The door opened.

"Okay. Five minutes from when the door closes you'll open it, right?" Matt asked making sure they were on the same page.

"Right. Leave the flashlight in here with me."

They exchanged a quick glance – they disliked being apart – then Matt walked through the door. He talked, letting Michael know what he was seeing.

"Lots of really tall evergreen bushes and grass. I can see why we never saw the door. The side of the hill here is a

huge slab of rock.”

“I remember it,” Michael said trying to visualize things as his brother spoke.

“I see several large rocks that sort of look out of place – one a foot wide and 18 inches tall. It’s sharp on top. Couldn’t sit or even stand on it. There’s another one that looks like its big brother a few feet away mostly hidden in the grass. Probably three feet tall.”

“Do they move?” Michael asked.

The door lowered itself and he got no answer. He clicked on the flashlight, looked at his watch and prepared to wait the five minutes they had agreed upon. He turned the light off to conserve the batteries.

About three minutes into that wait the door opened.

“Hey. You still in there?” came Matt’s voice.

“As if I had any place to go. You must have found something.”

“Two somethings, actually. Come on out and I’ll show you.”

Michael went outside. Matt indicated the two pointed rocks he had referred to earlier.

“Which one?”

“Both *ones*, actually. I found the one on the right of the door tipped back toward the hill, but nothing happened. I tried the same thing with the one on the other side. It tipped back, too, but still, nothing happened. Now, large heavy rocks don’t just tip that easily. So, being the brilliant young man that I am, I said to myself, ‘Maybe they both have to be tipped at the same time’. When both of them were tipped back, the door opened.”

“I’ll have to admit some folks just might consider that brilliant,” Michael teased. “And you were right – it’s just above the rapids.”

“Sure would be a good day for a swim,” Matt said looking longingly at the creek.

“Not ‘til we find Old Hank and figure out what’s going on

inside the house. Let's find a spot in the shade and go through this book."

They found the spot.

"You read, let me see that medallion," Matt said.

Michael sped through the pages. Fifteen minutes later he had finished the book – a quick read, not a studied read.

"Not really much of any interest unless you're into ghosts and such. There is a bit of family history we may want to study later. The Hawthorn branch of the family is from western England. Late in the 1800's an English boy married a Welsh girl and that's the branch of the family that eventually built this house."

"Like you said, pretty boring," Matt said.

"What I said was it didn't contain much of interest. Any ideas about the medallion?"

"The picture of the house shows this side, the one right above us. The other side has something written in a foreign language. The medallion is almost an equilateral triangle, but not quite – it's just a bit taller than it is wide."

"Our friend Google will give us the language. Spell out one of the longer words and I'll search for what language it is."

"Okay. How about e-h-w-i-t-h."

No more than fifteen seconds passed.

"It means 'left' in Welsh. That makes sense since there is Welsh in the Hawthorne family tree. Hold up the medallion so I can see the words. I'll have it translated in a jiffy."

"Jiffy? You sound like old Zeke. [A character in book one – The Shadow Imp] That reminds me, we haven't looked in on him this week. He's probably well into a new invention by now. We need to check and make sure he's taking his medicine."

"All good thoughts, brother, but we are just a bit deep into something else here. Let's get that translation."

The Welsh words were: Maer cytfoeth y teulu yn gorwedd islaw fy ffurflen – ir dde, chwith, chwith, dde, chwirth.

In less than a minute they had what they needed.

“Here’s what it is in English: ‘The family wealth rests below my form – right, left, left, right, left’.”

“Two things jump out at me,” Michael said, “wealth and what might be a combination like to a safe or lock – the left and right stuff.”

“And,” Matt went on, it looks like the first step is to find something shaped like the medallion – the triangle – don’t you think – the ‘my form’ part.”

“It sure seems like that. You remember any triangle shaped anythings up in the house?”

“Can’t say I do, but then we weren’t looking for such things. Lots of rectangles – doors, windows, rooms, bookcases.”

“Hmm? Not sure how to proceed from here. Our main objective is still locating Old Hank, don’t you think?” Michael said.

“Right, but if somebody knows something about the treasure – I’m using that word for the wealth – then they may think Old Hank knows about it and they’re trying to force him to lead them to it.”

“So, you’re saying find the bad guy or guys and find Old Hank.”

“That’s how I’d do it if I was a bad guy,” Matt said as if offering the clincher.

“Back inside then, I guess,” Michael said.

“Backdoor like we came in or staircase like we came out?” Matt asked.

“I vote for staircase. Doors are obvious. I don’t think they’d be expecting anybody to emerge up out of the floor.”

“You really think they’ll be waiting for us?” Matt asked.

“Hard to know now that the bookcase is closed. They may not know we’re here.”

“Unless they saw us, but didn’t show themselves.”

I suppose that could be. I’m worried about Old Hank.”

“Yeah. Me too. He’s a pretty smart old dude, though. I’ll bet he’s leading them on a merry chase.”

“Too bad he doesn’t know we’re here to help. That might change his strategy – or at least give him hope,” Michael said.

They returned to the spot where the brush and trees hid the opening to the stairwell and the spiral staircase.

“We’ll need light in there and the batteries are about spent. Better light the lantern. We can keep the wick really low so it just produces a big enough glow to light the stairs in front of us.”

It had been Matt. He loosened his belt and unzipped a long narrow pocket in the underside of it. He removed a small lens to use as a magnifying glass. They had done it so often it was as if it had been there well-practiced plan. Michael arranged the wick and Matt focused the sun’s ray. In very little time they had a flame. Matt put the lens away while Michael replaced the chimney and adjusted the wick.

They looked around to make sure nobody was watching, then moved in behind the bushes that hid the lower section of the rock slab from sight. They worked the stones and the heavy door opened.

“Sometime after all of this is over, we’ll need to come back and figure out how this door works,” Matt said. “Probably a system of weights and pulleys. I’ll bet it’s ingenious, however it works. Old Zeke would love it.”

“Old Zeke is soooo *old* he may have been the guy who invented it!” Michael said joking.

It was worth a set of smiles and chuckles.

They entered and waited for the door to close before starting the long climb up the spiral of heavy rock steps. Again, Matt led the way. As they approached the top they saw no light so assumed whoever had been there had moved on.

On the way up, they had both been thinking. They stopped just under the grate and shared their thoughts.

“Do you think they discovered the bookshelf was a door

and got down here that way or do you suppose they used some regular staircase?” Michael asked.

“I was wondering that same thing. We didn’t find another set of stairs.”

“But we barely got started on exploring the house. I’m thinking the regular cellar stairs are behind that little door at the end of the hall behind the open stairs that go way on up to the third floor.”

“You’re probably right – that or a closet, I was thinking. We may get a chance to check that out later.”

“Should we go back upstairs first to search for Old Hank or should we finish exploring the cellar?” Michael asked.

“I vote we give the cellar a quick once over so we at least have a good idea what we’re dealing with down here. Then head back upstairs.”

“Sounds good to me. Let me get this grate unlocked.”

Within moments they were out of the stairwell and back in the cellar. Michael relocked the grate and slipped the key into a back pocket with the other two.

“Over to the right? Where the voices came from?” Michael suggested as if a question.

Without offering a response, Matt began moving in that direction. They maintained the very low light level from the lantern and Matt held it low, close to the floor to light their way.

They reached the doorway and slowed, peeking around the corner. It opened into a long narrow room that ran the length of that side of the cellar.

“Which way?” Matt asked.

“The voices came from the left.”

The boys turned in that direction. At the far end of that room was a door that faced back into the cellar.

“I’m betting that’s the regular cellar steps,” Matt said. “Shall we open it and take a look?”

“I guess it can’t hurt,” Michael said.

He had been wrong. It really, really, could hurt!

CHAPTER FIVE

“A ghost?” Matt said.

It had definitely been a question although it certainly described the flowing white sheet that paused a moment, appearing to be as startled as they were, and then raced up the stairs. They had found the cellar stairs for sure. Just what the white, flopping sheet might be, was still up for grabs.

“My pants are still dry,” Matt said, “How about yours?”

“I’m fine. Not sure if ghosts can wet themselves or not but if they can I’m betting that one is drenched.”

“Whatever it was sure did seem surprised.”

“And bothered if not terrified,” Michael went on.

“I think we should follow it,” Matt said.

“Of course, you do. You’d think we should follow a two-headed, fire breathing, boy eating dragon if we came upon one. I advise a bit of caution here.”

“It didn’t seem dangerous. It was obviously more afraid of us than we were of it. Plus, how could a flimsy old sheet harm two strong flesh and blood guys?”

“I think it’s the ‘blood’ part of that that bothers me the most,” Michael said.

“Aren’t ghosts supposed to say, ‘boo’, or something?”

Matt asked.

“I think that’s for when they’re trying to scare us humans. In this case, it was the humans that were scaring the ghost.”

“I suppose you should invent a word for humans to use in that situation – wanting to scare ghosts,” Matt said.

“Yes. It comes up so often I’m sure it would soon be in everybody’s vocabulary – and, that was sarcasm in case you missed it.”

“So, up the stairs or just stand here like a couple of idiots?” Matt asked, clearly growing impatient with his brother’s reluctance.

“At least down here we are *live* idiots?” Michael said before answering the question. “Okay. Up the stairs, but first I think it must be about my turn to wear the T-shirt.”

As the exchange was made Matt had a comment (of course).

“You just want to be wearing white so in case we come upon the ghost again it’ll think you’re his cousin or something.”

“I’ll take any advantage I can find. I wonder if ghosts get cold.”

“You’re talking nonsense, you know,” Matt said.

“And you aren’t???”

Matt shrugged and started up the stairs. They were well constructed out of finished and varnished wood, four feet wide, with a railing on each side attached to the walls. They kept to a gentle slope.

“I’m predicting the stairs will come out at the back of that main hall on the first floor,” Michael said.

Matt just nodded and held the lantern high to light the steps in front of him. He stopped.

“Really can’t see well enough. I suppose in here we could turn up the wick, couldn’t we?”

“Shouldn’t be a problem.”

Matt turned the little knob and the area was suddenly

flooded with light. They could see the walnut color of the steps. They could see the brass colored fixtures that held the hand rails in place. And they could also see the ghostly figure at the top of the stairway.

“I thought ghosts could just float right through walls and doors,” Matt said backing down one step.

“Now who’s talking nonsense? Hold the light higher.”

Matt described what they were looking at.

“The sheet is just lying there on the top step in a heap. It looks like it’s vibrating or something.”

“Maybe when ghosts get scared they collapse into heaps and tremble in fear,” Michael said understanding it was foolish talk even as he was saying it.

Matt moved closer, up one careful step at a time. Against his better judgment, Michael followed, his hand grasping the back of his brother’s belt. The sheet remained in place. Matt was often braver than he was sensible. He reached out and began to pick up the sheet. Michael stopped breathing, expecting the worst.

Just as Matt began raising the sheet, the largest rat they had ever seen – 15 inches long if 1 – raised its head from underneath and opened its mouth showing rows of shiny, sharp teeth. Its eyes glowed green in the yellow light of the lantern.

Hesitating only a moment, the rat apparently decided it was outnumbered and darted back down the stairs through the boys’ legs and disappeared into a hole in the inner wall.

“So much for ghosts,” Matt said pretending to be braver about it all than he really was.

“Let’s think about it,” Michael went on. “Either the ghost shed his sheet and dropped it on top of a rat before oozing himself through the door, or the rat was dragging a sheet around. I’ll vote for the second possibility.”

“A sheet from the furniture covers in the living room, you think?” Matt asked.

“I assume so. If not, there’s a naked ghost somewhere

up ahead.”

“I’m going to open the door,” Matt said moving up one more step.

He turned the knob. It opened easily. They were right where they thought they’d be – at the rear end of the big entry hall on the first floor. The large spiral staircase stood right in front of them.

“I think we’re done with the cellar and the first floor,” Matt said. “On up to the second, then?”

It had been phrased like a question, but clearly hadn’t been, since he immediately walked to base of the steps and began to climb them.

Michael followed, quickly catching up. They walked side by side up the extra-wide steps. At the top were several large windows that lit the area well. The stairway came to a landing before continuing on up to the third floor. They crossed the landing to the hall.

Like on the first floor there were several doors on each side, which led into rooms – probably bedrooms, up there, they figured. They approached the first one on the left. Matt turned the handle and pushed it open ever so slowly. From what they knew of the outside of the house they expected there would be a window to their left. There was and it had no curtains or drapes. The light from outside filled the room. They entered. The wooden floor was covered in a thick layer of dust. There were numerous foot prints scattered about. Matt turned off the lantern as they moved toward the center of the large, empty space.

Michael spoke.

“What’s that on the floor over there by the other door – the one toward the front that leads back into the hall?”

They walked to it.

“I’d say it’s an arrow pointing out toward that door,” Matt said.

“An arrow made in the dust by somebody’s shoes, the way it looks to me,” Michael went on.

“Not just anybody’s shoes,” Matt said stooping down and pointing. “I’m betting those prints belong to Old Hank’s slippers. They’re not like any shoe sole prints I’ve ever seen – they’re slick as slick can be.”

“I’ll bet with you on that. So, let’s think about what that means.”

“For one thing,” Matt began, “it means Old Hank has been right here very recently – the prints are clear and not filled with new dust.”

“It also suggests that it is a signal – an arrow. He wouldn’t just go around etching arrows onto the dusty floors for no reason.”

“Who would they be for?”

“Us, I’m thinking,” Matt said with some enthusiasm. “He’s hoping we’ll come for a visit and when we don’t find him we’ll go looking for him.”

“That’s really stretching it, I think, but I suppose it’s not out of the realm of possibility. It could be that he DID hear us calling earlier. At any rate, it’s an arrow and arrows point at things. If he made it, what could it be pointing at?”

“The door which leads to the hall, I’d say,” Matt said pointing out the obvious. “Let’s take a look on the other side.”

He pulled the door open – in toward them. They were careful not to disturb the arrow in the dust. Outside they found what they expected. There was a second arrow pointing back toward the spiral staircase. They returned to the landing and stopped to look it over. There was no arrow there.

“Up or down?” Matt asked.

“We’ve been down. No arrows down there.”

“Okay, then, up it is.”

Side by side again they climbed the steps to the third floor, in more of a hurry and with less caution than before.

“Look at the steps. Somebody has climbed them recently. Look at the marks in the dust. I didn’t notice that on the way up from the first to the second, did you?”

“I didn’t,” Matt said verifying his brother’s observation.

They reached the top. They searched the floor, but there was no arrow.

“Lots of footprints in the dust leading down the hall,” Matt said.

They moved in that direction. Michael tugged on Matt’s belt, trying to slow him down. He figured it was time to return to being cautious in their search. Matt nodded that he understood.

The footprints stopped at the first door to their right.

“Look in through the keyhole first,” Michael suggested.

Matt nodded and knelt down. He spent several moments surveying the inside of the room through the large, old fashioned keyhole. It actually gave a pretty good view except for the wall and two corners that butted up against the hall. He described what he could see.

“A small room, more like a bed room than any we’ve seen so far. One large window on the back wall to the right. All the other rooms have really tall ceilings – I’d say maybe fourteen or fifteen feet tall. But this one is much lower – like ours at home, about eight feet.”

He put his ear to the door.

“I think I hear humming in there. Do either ghosts or huge rats hum?”

It hadn’t been a question to be answered. He moved aside and Michael took his spot. First, he looked around inside the room, seeing the same things Matt had spoken about. Then he listened.

“Humming for sure. I’d say human humming. I don’t recognize the tune, did you?”

“Nope.”

“If there is humming, there must be a person in there – in someplace we can’t see from the keyhole.”

“Right. So?”

“So, I don’t know, ‘so’. I doubt if it’s a good idea just to open the door and barge in. It might be a bad guy.”

“Or, it might be a bad guy keeping Old Hank in there with him,” Matt said. “Let me look again. I may have seen something.”

Michael moved and Matt put his eye back to the hole. After just a moment he moved back and spoke.

“Look back into the far corner of the ceiling to our right.”

Michael moved into place and looked.

“I see. Could be the bottom of a set of fold down stairs, like in grandma and grandpas upstairs hall that lead up to their attic. About the right size, but there’s no chain or pull or handle anywhere on it.”

“Whatever it is,” Matt said, “it’s different from the rest of the ceiling – having a crack all around it like that – like a border. I don’t see any other sections in the ceiling that resemble it.”

“Maybe that’s why the ceiling is so low,” Michael said “– a secret room up there or some such thing – right above this room.”

“We mustn’t let our imaginations run away with us (a *really* uncharacteristic comment from Matt).”

“I know. It might just be a section of the ceiling that needed to be repaired from water damage, maybe.”

“I like the secret room idea better,” Matt said.

Michael was still at the keyhole.

“Hey. Did you see that picture on the far wall?”

“No. Let me look.”

They traded places again.

“I see it,” Matt said. “So? It’s hanging crooked. Is that what you’re seeing?”

“Yes. *Really* crooked. The top corner is pointing straight up. Do you suppose it could be another signal – like an arrow – from Old Hank?”

“Could be, I suppose. For sure none of the other pictures we’ve seen in here were crooked. What could that mean?”

“That we need to search up in the attic, is what I’m thinking.”

“The attic. This place have an attic?” Matt asked.

“All old houses like this have an attic – up inside the pointed roof. We need to find a way to get up there.”

“What if those pull-down stairs are the only way up there?”

“Then we have a problem. I’m betting there is a regular stairway. Let’s look further.”

They backed away from the door and looked up and down the hallway.

Matt began walking down the hall to their right toward the front of the house.

“See that next door. It’s narrower than the other doors on this floor.”

“Narrower?” Michael said with a question in his tone, trying to figure out what significance that might have.

“I figure that means its purpose is different from the other doors.”

“Like a closet, you mean.”

“A closet or a stairway to the attic where we think we need to get to.”

“Ah ha! Very good, Matt. One problem I see. It doesn’t have a lock so no keyhole to peek through.”

“I guess a closet or a stairwell wouldn’t need to be locked. I’m saying we should open it.”

“Okay. Your logic seems reasonable – as much as I hate to admit that. Let’s do it.”

Matt turned the knob and pulled – the hinges were on the outside so they knew to pull not push. The door squeaked so he stopped at the point where it presented an opening just large enough for them to squeeze through.

“See! A stairway, just like I figured.”

“There’s light at the top of the stairs,” Michael said, as he pulled the door closed behind them.

They climbed the steps cautiously. The stairwell was dark so they couldn't tell if the dust had been disturbed or not.

Matt stopped them.

"Listen! You hear that?"

"Yeah. More humming? I can't tell what it is."

"Like a hum, or a low tone on a clarinet," Matt said. "Doesn't really sound human do you think?"

"No, it doesn't. Sounds a lot like ghosts to me, if ghosts made sounds, that is."

They remained quiet and listened for another moment. The tone varied between a high pitch and then a lower pitch. Sometimes both at the same time. Sometimes it was like a shaky or vibrating sound and sometimes not.

"Let's at least go up and take a peek over the top of the steps," Matt suggested.

"Okay."

They made their way up the stairway, slowly and silently as if they were sneaking up on someone to scare them out of the darkness in a cemetery on Halloween.

At the top, Matt moved to one side so Michael had room to share the step with him. They looked around the huge room that seemed to occupy the area over the entire house. It was mostly empty. There was one fairly small, odd shaped window on the outside wall to the back – their right. It was made of colored glass – yellow, orange, pink and white. For its size, it let in a good deal of light that cast an eerie set of colors across the floor and rafters and up the unfinished walls.

The humming noise continued.

"Let's go on up into the room," Matt suggested.

"Seems safe enough. Okay."

"No ghosts," Matt said.

"No monster rats," Michael said.

'BANG'

The door at the bottom of the stairs slammed closed. Chills ran up the boy's spines. The hair on the back of the

boy's necks stood up and the skin on their arms prickled like it will do during frightening situations.

They waited to see what would happen next.

CHAPTER SIX

After all that, nothing happened.

“Probably a draft,” Michael said trying to explain the door closing.”

“Seems like doors just close by themselves in this place,” Matt said thinking back on their day up to that point.

“Shall we go back down and see about the door?” Michael asked.

“If it’s locked it’ll be locked when we try to leave. If it isn’t it won’t be. Can’t see how checking now will change anything.”

“Another very practical analysis, Matt. So, why are we up here again?”

“Not sure, now that we’re here. Looking for a way into that secret room below us, I guess.”

“The stairway is nearly eighteen feet high,” Michael said beginning to think things through. “That room down below on the third floor was no more than eight. That confirms our suspicion about the extra space in the ceiling.”

“Or, in the floor as we look at it from up here,” Matt pointed out. “Whichever, it’s over to our right.”

They walked the area surveying the floor in particular.

“I sure don’t see anything that looks like an entrance into that hidden room just below us,” Michael said.

“I don’t either.”

“You know what that probably means.”

“That the only way into it is up through that trapdoor in the ceiling of the room down on the third floor,” Matt said, also understanding the situation.

Michael nodded. He stood back and put his hands on his hips. He studied the colorful window.

“Something about that window bothers me,” he said.

“Bothers you?” Matt asked. “Like makes you sick to your stomach bother, or teases your brain bother?”

“The brain thing, I guess, if those are my only choices.”

“What about it is discombobulating your gray matter?” Matt asked.

“Discombobulating – confusing or mixing up – that is exactly the sort of *bother* I’m having.”

“You’re welcome.”

“I didn’t thank you.”

“So you owe me one.”

“This is one of our weirder discussions.”

“And you’re welcome for that, as well.”

The boys loved their off the wall conversations. They amused their friends and drove their teachers wild!

“Anyway,” Michael said continuing with his original thought about the window, “this outside wall follows the roof line. It is a peak, pointed at the top and broadening out to meet the floor down below, making a huge triangle. The window is also shaped like a triangle, but it is upside down – the point is heading down toward the floor. Wouldn’t it seem more logical to have that point, mirroring the point of the roof and have it heading up instead of down?”

“I guess it would. We’ve seen triangular windows like that before in old houses and they all had the point on top,” Matt said agreeing with his brother’s observation. He took it

one step further.

“What kind of a triangle would you call that window?”

“An equilateral. Is that what you’re going for?”

“Sort of. But is it really?”

Michael stepped back as it to get a broader view.

“You’re a genius, Matt. It is shaped just like the medallion we found on the – well, that we found. Do you suppose they’re related or is it just our imaginations trying to make sense of a problem we can’t even really state?”

“Since I seem to be the genius here, let me suggest that we go with it like the two are related.”

“Okay. So, like the medallion, the triangle is pointing down and is flat on top,” Michael said.

“I’m thinking the pointing is more important than the flatting.”

“Is flatting a word?”

“Did it make sense to you?”

“Yeah.”

“Then it’s a word.”

“I’ll buy that,” Matt agreed. “But what is the point, pointing at?”

“The floor, I guess is most obvious.”

There were several large wooden crates on the floor beneath the window.

“In the crates?” Matt asked.

They walked across the twenty feet to where they sat. Matt immediately cupped his fingers under the lid of one of them and raised it. They looked inside. It was empty.

They opened the other three with the same result.

“What do you suppose these big crates were used for?” Michael asked. “And why would they be clear up here. They look ancient and like they’re really heavy.”

“Big enough to be caskets. Maybe it’s where the ghosts sleep at night.”

“Be serious! And besides they’re the wrong shape.”

“Well, they have knot holes in them so it had to hold something that wouldn’t spill out through them – larger than sand, or diamonds or marbles or something else that small.”

“You realize your examples were ridiculous – a huge crate of sand or marbles or diamonds. It would have taken a crane to lift them.”

Matt shrugged. It was worth a smile between them.

The smile was short-lived. They heard the door open at the foot of the stairs. The boys looked at each other, standing as if frozen in place, listening. They heard footsteps begin the climb.

“Too heavy for thin Old Hank,” Michael said.

“Or for a ghost,” Matt added sounding serious about it. “I think I just figured out what these crates are for, though.”

Michael understood and immediately they each crawled inside one of them and pulled the lids back in place overhead. They each found a knothole that was positioned so they could watch the top of the stairs. They were hesitant to even breathe for fear of giving away their hiding places.

Presently, an enormous man – tall and wide with a huge chest and upper arms the size of watermelons – stepped up onto the floor. It appeared he was there to just look around rather than having come to get something specific. He turned around 360 degrees taking it all in. He really was huge! Then he walked to the far wall – opposite the boys – looking left and right as he went. He looked out the window over there. It was a regular window with plain glass. He turned and made his way back toward the stairs. He passed the stairs, then moved closer and closer to the crates.

‘We’re goners,’ Michael thought to himself.

‘I wonder if my skeleton will be as handsome as I am?’ Matt thought to himself.

The man was still breathing heavily from the climb up the 27 steps – yes, Michael remembered things like that!

The man stopped right in front of the crates. He turned

and sat down. It was the crate, which held Michael. He had visions of being crushed into a giant splat right there on the bottom of the wooden box.

The top gave, but didn't break. Matt watched from inside his place of safety a few feet away. He began formulating ideas about what he could do to protect his brother. Not having a lasso, a blowtorch, or a five-hundred-pound trained guerrilla, he was soon out of ideas.

About that time, the man struggled to his feet and walked to the top of the steps. He turned and looked around one final time before making his way down the stairs. The moment they heard the door click closed, the boys popped up out of the crates as if they had been holding their breath too long under water.

"Wow. That was the definition of 'too close for comfort'," Michael said.

"Yeah. I found myself wishing it *had* been a ghost instead of Hippo-Man," Matt said.

"Have you ever weighed a ghost?" Michael asked.

"Of course, not, doofus. It was an attempt at humor – you remember 'humor' – stuff most people laugh at instead of question."

"Sorry, Matt. My brain tends to stop working when it's flooded with terror-induced adrenalin."

They just stood for a moment and tried to regain their composure. Then, Michael continued.

"Well, that might have actually been good, I think."

"Good?" Matt said in disbelief. "Almost squashed by an over grown ape is 'good'?"

"Sure. Now we know what we're up against – the bad guy – the big bad guy – the really, really, really, big bad guy."

"I hope that unlike us, he doesn't have a twin brother," Matt said. It didn't need a response.

"How does any of this help us find and rescue Old Hank?" Michael asked.

"Maybe we could try mental telepathy – try to send him

a message that we're here," Matt said not entirely joking.

Michael suddenly became serious.

"Maybe. Almost. Sort of," he said.

"As your twin, I usually know what you're thinking, but I believe you just lost me," Matt said.

"Not telepathy but telegraphy."

"Telegraphy like using a telegraph?" Matt asked.

"Right! The Morse Code. Remember, Old Hank told us that when he was a young man he worked the telegraph for a railroad."

"So?"

"So, we send him a message in Morse Code – dots and dashes."

"I'm beginning to understand. If we start knocking on the walls or the door, though, whoever has him will hear."

"You're right," Michael said suddenly growing serious again. "It's time to think out of the box, like our math teacher is always telling us to do. Look at the problem from a brand-new angle."

"Well, let's see then," Matt said, following his brother's lead. "Morse Code can be sent by sound and sight – sight, like the light flashers that navy ships use to communicate back and forth during periods of radio silence."

"I think you got it. We'll use the flashlight to send the code silently."

"You may have missed this some place along the way, Michael, but light doesn't travel through walls or floors or ceilings."

"But it does travel through keyholes."

"So? Oh, I think I see. Even if he's in that room downstairs, there's no guarantee Old Hank will be in position to see the keyhole."

"Seems to me it's all we got," Michael said.

"I suppose so. Let's go with it. What will we say?"

They grew silent while they thought. Michael spoke first.

“Best to keep it short and to the point. How about. *Hank. Twins working to free you.*”

“That’s good. We’ll need to send it several times since he probably won’t get in on the beginning of it the first time. He won’t be expecting something like that.”

“Who sends the code?” Michael asked.

“You’re better at it than I am.”

Michael nodded understanding it was the truth.

“Let me practice sending it to you to make sure I get it right.”

“Okay. Here’s the flashlight. Go!”

It was perfect the first time, just like Matt knew it would be. Michael worried too much! They moved down the stairs, taking care to be quiet.

“The ninth step from the top squeaks,” Michael said. (Michael remembered things like that.)

They were soon back down to the third floor – it had been a squeak-less mission! They moved directly to the door of the room in which they felt certain Old Hank was being held. Michael knelt and positioned the flashlight over the keyhole. With a deep breath and a glance up over his shoulder at Matt, he began. He paused about fifteen seconds between messages, sending it three times in all.

“I sure wish we had some way of knowing if he got the message,” Michael said as he stood up.

At that moment, the boys heard a noise coming from inside the room – a series of noises, actually.

“I think that’s Morse Code,” Matt said.

They listened attentively. Matt called out what they were hearing. “

“Dot, dot; dash, dash, dot; dash, dash, dash; dash; dot, dot, dash.”

I read it as, *‘I got it.’* That what you got?” Michael said.

“Sure is. How do you suppose he did that?”

“I guess we can ask him later.”

Matt nodded and then said:

“Since he answered us, do you suppose he’s alone in there?”

“Interesting take on it. I suppose we could try the nob and see if it’s unlocked.”

Without considering the matter further, Matt turned the knob and pushed very gently. The door was locked. It didn’t answer the question about whether or not Old Hank was alone, but it did give them some direction – they could not enter the room so they needed to try something else.

“I suggest we get out of this hall in case Hippo-Man isn’t in there and he decides to come lumbering back this way,” Michael said. “Where shall we go?”

“Hippo has already checked the attic to maybe that’s the safest place – why would he check it twice? I’m thinking climbing stairs doesn’t rank high on his list of favorite things.”

“Good thinking,” Michael said. “Remember the 18th step from the bottom squeaks.”

In a matter of minutes, they were back in the attic and found themselves sitting on the very crates that had hidden them from the big man – the big man who they suddenly had no doubt was a bad guy. For one thing, they had never seen him before. For another, Old Hank was being held captive in a locked room, and for a third, his apartment downstairs had been taken apart as if somebody had been searching for something – the book they concluded.

“Nothing else in that book that’s interesting?” Matt asked.

“There was one thing. Let me find it. It was too confusing to bring up before.”

He slid off the crate and walked around, working off some of his tension, as he took out the book and began thumbing through it.

“Here. What do you make of this?”

Jethro Hawthorne was a poor steward [keeper] of the family fortune and by the end of 1900, he reported that he had put all that was left of it into the new house on Hawthorne Hill. Although magnificent in size and design, it was so large he was unable to afford the servants necessary to maintain a proper social status. Many of its rooms were never furnished. That makes no sense since the family fortune could have built a dozen dozen such houses. Gatsby Hawthorne, his cousin, had threatened to have him declared incompetent [crazy] and take the property from him believing the fortune continued to exist. Soon after that Gatsby went missing. The rumor was that Jethro had kidnapped him and had held him for years in a dungeon beneath the house. Oddly, in his diary he wrote that he had never been happier than after he and Annabelle moved into the house on the hill. Annabelle, however, had died ten years before the house was completed. It was at that point in his life that he began writing about the ghosts and the haunting of the hill and house and the 'war' of a sort between the factions of ghosts. He wrote of apparitions that walked the halls at night and called out to him from beyond the grave. Jethro disappeared all quite mysteriously a decade later. In his last diary entry he noted the power of the old ghosts was getting stronger and that they were keeping him from Annabelle. He was afraid for his life. He also added this final phrase: 'One, two, three. Beneath is sometimes above. Three is sometimes also four. Rondure, my son, rondure.

Matt tried to summarize what he thought he had heard.

“So, the old guy, Jethro, went batty, and built this big house for him and his dead wife to live in, and when his cousin got greedy, Jethro did him in down in the cellar. He claims to have communicated with the ghosts – his dead wife among others – and in the end, became afraid they were trying to do him in. Then he wrote that odd, ‘one, two, three’ phrase.”

“That seems to be most of it. It also hints that even though Jethro claimed the family money was gone it probably wasn’t – that could be the treasure that’s mentioned on the medallion. What’s that Rondure thing he talks about?”

“I have no idea. Never heard the word before. Let me look it up.”

A minute later.

“We’ll I’ll be. Do you know what it means?”

“I think I just said that I didn’t.”

Michael ignored that.

“It is another word for medallion – usually round or oval, however. It’s French. Languages borrow words from each other so maybe the rounded, *rondure*, medallion from French was borrowed by the Welsh language and became a synonym for any medallion.”

“Not sure I really care about any of that,” Matt said, which didn’t surprise Michael at all. “What I do like is that we may finally have a connection between the book and the medallion. What about the rest of that ‘one, two, three’ phrase? I’m thinking it’s a clue to where the treasure is.”

“And Hippo-Man is here to find it.”

“Sure looks that way. Suppose Old Hank knows about the treasure?”

“I have no idea, although it’s usually said that the servants and helpers around a place like this know everything.”

Just then the humming sound they had heard the first time they entered the attic came back, louder than before. The lower sound was so powerful it seemed to shake the crates. The higher tones so piercing they hurt the boy’s ear.

“I didn’t know Ghosts harmonized, did you?” Matt asked only sort of joking. “Soprano and base – maybe ghosts of a woman and a man – maybe Jethro and his wife.”

Again, it was hands to his throat time, having sufficiently frightened themselves so they looked around into the dark corners.

As if all that weren’t frightening enough, something unseen knocked the book out of Michael’s hands.

“I get the idea these ghosts didn’t want us to read that book,” Matt said.

“I just hope they’re satisfied with knocking the book around,” Michael added. “I’m not sure how to throw punches

at a ghost.”

///

CHAPTER SEVEN

“Okay! Now they’re making me mad!” Matt said sliding down off the crate he had been sitting on and storming around the attic.

“They?” Michael asked.

“They, the ghosts or whatever the heck is screaming at us and knocking books out of our hands.”

“To begin with, we don’t believe in ghosts. In the second place, there was only one book. In the third place, it was only knocked out of my hands. I think I’m getting a handle on it.”

“Well, if you’re getting a handle on it then of course it can’t be a ghost.”

Michael frowned indicating he didn’t understand.

“Have you ever seen a ghost with a handle?”

It was worth a smile.

“So, give,” Matt said picking up the book and handing it back to his brother.

“See the pipe sticking up out of the floor here.”

“Yeah. Four inches wide and a foot high.”

“And that one way over there?”

“Okay. One inch or less wide and eighteen inches

high.”

“Now look up above them – in a direct line above each one of them.”

Matt craned his neck and took a long look.

“Looks like the roof’s been patched right above each of them.”

“And that could mean???”

“Clearly you’re going to make me figure this out. Let’s see. I suppose what you’re thinking is that once upon a time these pipes extended up through the roof like vents from something on floors below, vents from the plumbing or kitchen maybe.”

“You are very clever when it comes to interpreting my brilliant deductions.”

Michael got ‘the’ look, but Matt didn’t follow up on it. He was intrigued by where else Michael’s brain had taken it all.

“You’ve made a connection I don’t have,” he said.

“Watch the patch on the roof above the big pipe. It’s considerably larger than the other one.”

“Okay. Ah! It’s vibrating like the wind may be blowing against loose shingles up there.”

“Pretty close, I think. Air power at least,” Michael said. “Sit on that large pipe.”

“What? It’s sharp. Look at it. I’ll have a permanent circle branded on my butt.”

“At least that way people will be able to tell us apart.”

“Get serious.”

“Just do it.”

Matt slowly lowered himself down toward the open pipe.

“There is quite an updraft coming out of it I can tell you that even before I’m sitting.”

He sat. The rattling in that part of the ceiling stopped – so did the lower wailing tone.

“I get it now. The updraft comes out the pipe and then up through the opening in the roof making the shingles vibrate causing a low pitch sound. Very good. I assume the little pipe is responsible for the high pitch sound.”

“Let’s see. Sit on the little pipe.”

“I can stop that one up by just putting my hand over it.”

“Yeah. It’s just so much funnier to watch you do it with your butt!”

“You just earned yourself one prolonged thumping when all this is over.”

“Won’t be the first. Won’t be the last. Aren’t you curious about how your ghost pals managed to knock the book out of my hands?”

“Yeah. I suppose so. It had slipped my mind. You got a theory about that too?”

“Not only that, but I will demonstrate exactly how it was done.”

“This I gotta see?”

“And you will. You’ll remember I was pacing around while I read from the book, holding in front of me like this.”

Matt nodded, more interested than he wanted to let on.

“At the moment, the book left my hands, I was . . . right here.”

Again, the book swished up out of his hands. Matt understood immediately.

“You were right over the big pipe. The force of the updraft loosened the book and sent it flying.”

“Very good. Two parts of the mystery solved.”

“Three if we count finding where Hank is,” Michael said.

Matt nodded.

“Okay, then, three.”

“So, we have a couple of things left,” Matt said.

He began pacing.

“We need to rescue Hank . . . “

“. . . which will entail getting Hippo Man out of the way,” Michael added, butting in.

Matt nodded and continued.

“And, finding the treasure,” he said rolling his hands together like a mean old man about to take candy from a child.

“I have a suggestion,” Michael said.

“You always have a suggestion,” Matt came back.

“You complaining?”

“I guess not in this instance. Maybe. Let me hear it first.”

“We have established there are odd things about the window in the wall above us – a triangular shape pointing down instead of following the pitch of the roof, right?”

“We have, but that’s not a suggestion.”

“Patience. My suggestion is that we need to get up there and examine that window. It may hold a clue we can’t see from down here.”

“Not bad as your suggestions tend to go. First, let’s see what we can tell about it from down here.”

“Go!” Michael said, wondering what his brother might come up with.

“Okay. It’s about three feet across the top and three and a half or so, top to the pointed bottom – that not quite an equilateral triangle thing – two sides longer than the third.”

“I know what an equilateral triangle is!”

“Just hold your horses. I gotta start somewhere. It is made up of seven pains of colored glass. Left to right: white, yellow, white, pink, white, orange and white. You see any significance in the colors?”

Michael thought it was a good question and he contemplated it for a long moment.

“Three pale pastel colors separated by white. Being light in hues they let in a lot more light than most colored windows do – like the ones in churches with darker more vivid colors. Actually, I got nothing.”

“Me either. Let’s go up and take a look.”

“Fly? Levitate? Sprout twelve-foot-long legs,” Michael said wondering how they would get up there.

“Something humorous about FOOT long LEGS,” Matt said, trying a half-hearted chuckle. “Well, maybe not.”

He let it go and became practical.

“These crates. Think the two of us can stack them? There are six if we count those across the room. Three across the bottom, then two on the next row and one on top. Stacking them right against the outer wall, with the four-foot dimension up and down that’s twelve feet. We climb up the sides – they’ll be like gigantic steps.”

“I must say when you come through, you really come through. Let’s do it.”

“They all need to be rearranged. Let’s begin by pulling those two back there in close. Then we pull these out from the wall and put them into proper order.”

Michael agreed. They discovered the crates were not as heavy as they figured they would be. They easily picked them up and carried the strays from across the room in close to the window. Then, they pulled the ones under the window out from the wall.

“Whoa, brother! Look down there,” Michael said pointing to the floor that had been covered by the crates.

“It could be what we need.”

“Exactly what we need.”

“Two feet wide and three long, would you say?” Matt asked kneeling down.

“Just about the right size for a trap door, I’d say,” Michael said, joining his brother on the floor.”

“And, where does it sit?” Matt said pointing up.

“Under the window or better put, maybe, under the medallion form like the saying says.”

“I’ll overlook the obvious fact that sayings usually DO say something,” Matt said, mostly joking, but always delighted

to catch his word-wise twin in a small blunder.

“It has a pull ring set down into the wood at this end,” Michael said brushing the dirt and dust away.

“Shall we open it?” Matt asked reaching for the ring as if it really hadn’t been a question.

“Wait now. Let’s see if we can make sense out of it from the clue to see if it really is connected to all this.”

“Okay. The one, two, three could refer to the three sides of the medallion,” Matt suggested.

“They could also refer to the floors – first, second, third.”

“But we’re above the third in the attic. If anything, it’s like the fourth floor up here,” Matt said frowning.

“See what else there is. Let’s see. It says, ‘Beneath is sometimes above’.” Michael repeated. “You got anything from that?”

“That could be in the middle between two things – one above and one below or beneath.”

“It could be referring to the secret room we think is sitting right below us and right above the room where Hank is being held.”

“Ah! Like above the third floor and yet below the fourth floor or attic.”

“That makes sense to me.”

“There’s even more makes sense,” Matt said.

“More makes sense? What does that possibly mean?”

“Okay. I’ll admit to poor wording, but I meant something else fits – maybe. ‘Three is sometimes four’ could mean that that room below us is like hanging between third floor and fourth floor – It’s neither third nor four.”

“I got it. Three is also four. Or, in this case, three contains both the third floor and the fourth floor.”

“Now,” Matt began more thoughtful than he tended to be, “put all that together with what’s on the medallion – rondure – and what do we get?”

“The family wealth rests below my form – meaning below the upside-down triangle window up there,” Michael went on.

“There were some other directions at the end,” Matt said. “What were they?”

“Right, left, left, right, left,” Michael said remembering. “Maybe like a lock combination.”

“So, there is probably a big old safe in the room down there on the third and half floor.”

“Well put, oh one of few words!”

“I thank you my humble servant and great teacher,” Matt joked.

“I still think we need to proceed with extreme caution when we start to open this trapdoor,” Michael cautioned. “We have no idea what to expect down there.”

“W-o-o-o!! Like maybe it’s guarded by lions or is surrounded by a moat filled with hungry alligators.”

“You’re being ridiculous, you know. You also know you’re the one who just goes off halfcocked, sometimes – usually – always!”

“You got me there,” Matt said. ‘*What you suggest*’, asked the reckless, irresponsible twin to his revered and cautious brother?”

Michael looked a bit sheepish.

“I don’t have the faintest idea, really. Just don’t go ripping it off its hinges in your enthusiasm to get it opened.”

“That I can do, or I cannot do, or whichever is correct.”

Matt lifted the big iron ring. It squeaked.”

“Seems it hasn’t been used in, oh, say, 99 years,” he said.

“Is the door heavy? Do you need my help?” Michael asked.

“Let’s give her a rip and see.”

Matt positioned his legs so he would be lifting mostly with his legs and gave a mighty tug. Nothing happened, other

than perhaps pulling several muscles in his back.

“Either this door is made out of lead or there is some kind of lock keeping it shut. I couldn’t budge it a single millimeter.”

“I suppose it could be locked from down below.”

“Then why have this ring up here?”

“Good point, Matt. Let’s search around the periphery.”

“Periphery? You could have just said ‘edge’.”

“Did you understand?”

“Of course.”

“Then why would I have needed to say ‘edge’ instead?”

“You use big words too often. Some day one of them is going to make your brain explode.”

“At least that will show mine has been active compared to yours that keeps shrinking from lack of use.”

“That was one of your very best comebacks, brother. I’ll concede that one to you. Now, about this trapdoor.”

They searched, scanning the edge and running their hands along the *edges* of the crack in the floor that defined it.

“I found nothing,” Matt said.

“Me either. Maybe if we step back and look it over,” Michael suggested.

They did just that: four feet away; six feet away; ten feet away.

“This is interesting,” Matt said kneeling down some twelve feet to the right of the door.”

“What?”

“Come look. This spot on the floor was under one of the crates we just moved. There’s an open space in the floor. Like a two-inch gap between the end of one floor board and the next one coming along behind it out from the wall. And see, there is a hole the size of a nickel here near the end of the long board that fills the space between here and the trapdoor.”

“It doesn’t look like a natural knot hole,” Michael said moving down closer. “It’s been drilled – see the smooth sides.”

Matt’s face lit up.

“You know that Chinese puzzle box grandma got us for Christmas a few years ago?”

“Yeah, and I think I see where your head is going with it. In order to open that box one end – a false end – had to be slid an inch to the left. Then the lid popped up.”

“Right. Here’s what I’m thinking. The other end of this board up by the door has some sort of a tongue in it that fits into a groove or something in the door and holds it down so it can’t be opened by just pulling on the ring. If that’s right, and if this floorboard will slide back toward the wall – like to fill in this gap – then that tongue will be slid out and the door will be free to be lifted.”

“Ingenious, Matt!”

“Did I just hear you refer to me as a genius?”

“Accolades like that aren’t often deserved. Enjoy it.”

It worth pausing to enjoy a smile between them. It was Matt, of course who slipped his finger into the hole and pulled, tugging away from the trapdoor. After considerable effort, the board moved to meet the one set in behind it. The gap was closed.

“Let’s give that lid another try now,” Matt said.

They moved back to the trapdoor. Uncharacteristically, Matt waved his brother on to do the honors. That would be as close as he’d ever come to admitting he had hurt his back with the clearly reckless jerk he had administered on their first attempt.

The trapdoor opened with ease. Michael laid it way back down against the floor as quietly as possible. As one, they peered over the edge of the opening. It was pitch black in the area below. The room could have been forty by forty or as small as a coffin. They couldn’t tell. There was a wooden ladder attached to the attic floor at the front edge of the opening and seemed to descend to the floor below.

Matt rescued his flashlight from where he had left it inside the crate in which he hid when Hippo-Man had entered the attic. Its batteries were weak so the beam was pretty faint. He moved it around the area.

“We’ll need the lantern to really see anything,” he said, “but from what I can see the room is completely empty. That’s a bummer!”

“A b-u-m-m-e-r,” Michael said spelling it out to emphasize his disappointment.

“I know how to spell bummer, dooffus!”

“I was just commiserating with you.”

“You got me there. NO way I’m going to try and spell commiserating!”

CHAPTER EIGHT

“I still think we should go down and look around,” Matt said.

I agree. We’ll need to light this lantern again.”

“Sun’s coming through the front window. I’ll get out my lens.”

In a matter of minutes the lantern was doing its thing.

“Still lots of kerosene left,” Michael reported.

He handed the lantern to his brother. As was their usual routine, Matt went first.

“Less than eight feet high – closer to seven, I’d say,” he reported looking up at Michael who had just begun his decent down the ladder. “Not much bigger than that square, either – eight feet at most. I’d say there is some space missing. The room below this is at least fifteen feet long. This room is only about half of that.”

Michael stepped off the ladder onto the floor.

“I see what you mean on both counts.”

“Both counts?” Matt asked.

“Empty and way smaller that seems reasonable.”

Matt nodded.

Michael commented on what he saw.

“The walls, floor and ceiling seem to all be painted

black. Odd, don't you think?"

"Yeah. Very odd. Why even paint a room that was never used."

"I guess we don't know it was never used," Michael said.

Matt wasn't in the mood to argue the point.

"So now what?" he asked.

"I guess search the walls and floor to see if anything pops out at us," Michael suggested.

"Pops out as in ghosts?"

"I won't glorify that remark with a reply."

"And yet you just did."

Michael ignored the remark – largely because it had been true.

"We believe there is a pull-down stairs in the ceiling of the room below. That would be in the floor of this room. Where would it be?"

"Over there in the outside corner," Matt said holding the lantern high and moving in that direction.

"That looks like it to me, right down there," Michael said pointing.

"Sure does," Matt agreed. "Not certain how it helps us. We can't just force it to swing down for fear Hippo-Man is in the room below with Hank."

"Let's see if Hank can help," Michael suggested.

"Like call him on his cell phone, which he doesn't own?"

"No, call him on his telegraph."

"Ah! Clever. Like tap on the floor you mean. What do we say?"

Michael thought for a moment.

"Needs to be short and to the point. How about, 'Snow above you. stop. You alone QM.'"

"Explain the shorthand," Matt said.

"Morse Code doesn't have punctuation marks –

something I could never figure out, by the way – so the ends of sentences were marked by the word ‘stop’. The QM means ‘question mark’.”

“Gottcha. Let’s do it, meaning you of course,” Matt answered.

Michael rehearsed it mentally to be sure he had it all in mind and then, using the metal end of his pocket knife, tapped out the dots and dashes on the floor.

“He may have no way of responding if Hippo-Man is in there with him,” Matt pointed out.

“Shh! Listen!” Michael said.

They heard nothing. After a minute, Matt spoke again.

“This is a double floor/ceiling thing. There has to be at least a foot between them in order for the swing-down steps to fit in between and be flush with both the ceiling down there and the floor up here.”

“Like a great sound barrier, you mean,” Michael said spelling out where Matt had been going with the idea.

Matt nodded and responded.

“So, we are not going to know if he heard us or if he just can’t reply to us.”

“I’m thinking the sharp rapping of my knife would have penetrated both surfaces. He is responding with something blunter, like the back of a chair against the wall or the legs of the chair or his foot against the floor. That will make a much duller sound and be harder for us to hear.”

Again, Matt nodded. “What’s next then?”

“Let’s finish our search of the walls and floors. That will also give us some time to think and wait for Hank’s response in case it has to be delayed.”

They continued examining the area.

“Something over here on the inside wall,” Matt said.

Michael turned and moved to his brother’s side. They both reached out and ran their hands across the wall.

“Looks like a big, permanent, picture frame,” Matt said.

“Or, like a removable panel, maybe,” Michael suggested.

“A panel at least. The removable part is still up for grabs,” Matt said feeling around the edge.

The walls were all finished in upright boards six inches wide. At shoulder height to the boys was the section in question – it was square, measuring two feet in each dimension, and it was outlined in one by two-inch framing wood. It appeared to serve no purpose. They searched its edges for some time.

“I give up,” Matt said, not hiding his frustration. He pounded the end of his fist against the area.

“Look at that,” Michael said. “And who said physical violence has no place in civilized society?”

The right side of the panel popped open.

“A pressure lock of some kind you suppose?” Matt said clearly surprised and suddenly back in the hunt.

“I suppose!” Michael said as Matt reached out and swung it open out into the room and on back against the wall.

There were two, time-dulled, circular metal plates, each one about four inches in diameter. They were secured flat against the middle of the space about six inches apart, left to right.

“What do you suppose they are?” Matt asked being uncharacteristically careful – meaning he didn’t immediately begin tugging or turning or punching or Karate kicking them.

“Well, I’ll tell you what I see, is one plate on the left and one on the right, and that makes me think about the left and right line on the medallion.”

“That’s good. Now, what do we do to them – turn, push, what?”

“We need to think this through before we do ANYTHING,” Michael said trying to emphasize that caution was really important. “Do the wrong thing and we could blow it.”

“If it was just one circular wheely thing-a-ma-bob

instead of two, I think it would mean turn it to the left and then to the right like a dial on a safe or padlock.” Matt said.

“That’s what I’ve been expecting all along, too. So, if we find they won’t turn then perhaps pulling, but there’s no way to get hold of them to pull them.”

“I guess that would only leave the push thing, then,” Matt said.

“First, let’s see if they turn,” Michael said.

They each reached for one of the plates. They would not turn right and they would not turn left. They did not turn.

“That leaves push,” Matt said. “You remember the sequence, of course.”

“Of course: right, left, left, right, left.”

“You do it,” Matt said. “If it can be messed up, I’d mess it up.”

He got no argument about that from his brother.

Michael repeated the sequence out loud before beginning.

“Right, left, left, right, left. It doesn’t give any indication about how deep or fast to press them.”

“Probably because it doesn’t matter,” Matt said, “because if did, it would have said something about it.”

“You’re probably right. The purpose of the instruction was to make it work. Here I go.”

Matt covered his ears with his hands.

“What’s that about?”

“In case it blows us up instead of getting us into the treasure.”

“That’s idiotic.”

“You won’t think so if it blows our ashes to kingdom come.”

“I won’t think *anything* if it blows our ashes to kingdom come.”

Michael took a big breath and reached out. He pressed

the right plate and released it. It moved back into the wall nearly an inch. He pressed the left plate and released it. Then the left again, the right again, and finally the left.

Matt uncovered his ears and looked around.

“We’re still here. I think that’s a good sign, don’t you?”

Michael ignored it and pointed to their right. A floor to ceiling section of the wall, two feet wide opened back into the space behind the wall.

“A door!” Matt said.

“A secret door,” Michael said.

“A very, very, secret door,” Matt came back as they moved toward it.

Matt looked inside the opening, raising the lantern high, but wisely remaining outside the newly revealed space.

The two of them looked inside.

“Dark,” Matt said.

“That often happens in the absence of light,” Michael came back.

Matt was willing to ignore it.

“Shall we go in?”

“I guess so. Maybe one of us should stay out here in case the door closes to lock us inside.”

It had been Michael’s suggestion – a replay of what they had done at the rock slab opening down by the creek.

“Good idea,” Matt said. “I’ll go in since you know how to do the unlock thing.”

Michael nodded his agreement and Matt walked through the door carrying the lantern. Michael thought it was humorous that his brother ducked as he went through the seven-foot-high opening, but didn’t say anything. He stood at the door of the suddenly darkened outer room and watched.

“Tell me what you’re seeing in there.”

“Yeah. Okay. A large wooden table in the center of the room. It is a large room. Easily takes up the rest of the area

above the room Hank's in down below. Wow! Look at this. The floor and walls, and maybe the ceiling, are all concrete."

He wrapped on them with his knuckles.

"That must call for some major supports underneath. There are metal shelves along the wall to your left – about two feet deep and twelve inches between them up and down. Sitting on them are metal boxes. They each have a key lock opening on the front under the lid that forms a cap down over the sides about an inch. I'm thinking this is a fireproof room that holds fireproof boxes that holds the Hawthorn, not so fireproof, family treasure."

"See any keys hanging around in there?"

"Nope. Let me try to open one. They may not be locked."

Michael thought to himself, 'Sure, put your treasure in the metal lock boxes and then don't lock them'. He chuckled, but kept it to himself. That had probably been a good idea in light of what happened next.

"Hey! Michael. They aren't locked. Can you believe that?"

Clearly Michael had *not* believed it – before – but managed a response.

"How lucky for us. Good work. Are the others also open?"

"All that I've tried, yeah!"

"What's in them?"

"Lots of old money – mostly in coins. I think big money coins like dollars and five dollars and here one that has a fifty on it. There must be thousands of dollars just in this one box."

"How many boxes?"

"Dozens, like maybe one, two, three, fifty."

"I think you better come out so we can talk this over," Michael said. "Why don't you bring one small denomination coin in case we need proof."

"Are you saying I need to put the other twenty back?"

“Yes, Doofus. That’s not our money.”

Matt left the room and showed the coin to Michael.

“A really old looking hundred-dollar gold piece. I said *small* denomination.”

“I saw the 1 and didn’t look further, I guess.”

“I suppose we better close the door and put the panel back in place over the plates,” Michael said. “In case somebody finds us in here.”

Matt nodded and together they soon had those things accomplished.

Stop! You hear that?” Matt said.

“Yeah. Hank’s telegraph, I’m thinking. Let me get out a pencil and my pad.”

He copied down what they were hearing. After a few moments, Michael spoke.

“It’s repeating. Here’s where I think the message is,” he said showing Matt the paper and drawing a line under one section.

“Those are dots and dashes. What does it say?”

“First let me let Hank know we got it.”

Again, with his knife he tapped out two words: ‘Got it’.

He returned his attention to the paper.

“Just let me write the letters above the dots and dashes. . . There. Oh, oh! It says, *Get out now*. I assume he would have added an exclamation mark if old Samuel Morse had invented one.”

“What could that mean?” Matt said truly confused.

“I’m thinking we are *here* and we need to get *out of here*, pronto! Maybe Hippo-Man heard us up here and he’s on the way to do whatever angry hippopotamuses do to their enemies. He must have been down in the room with Hank. That’s why Hank didn’t acknowledge our message right away – but clearly, he received it. If he’s sending now, it must mean Hippo-Man has left him alone.”

Left him alone and on his was up to find us – I get the

picture,” Matt said heading for the ladder.

“Shh!” Michael said pointing to the ceiling. “Hear that, footsteps up above.”

“*Heavy* footsteps up above, bro. Now what?”

“Two things in our favor if that is H-M up there. I doubt if the ladder will hold his weight, if he can even fit through that narrow opening in the first place.”

“Okay. And the second thing?”

“We couldn’t see into the dark corners down here from up in the attic. Take off the T-shirt and hide it. Our tanned skin will have a better chance of not being seen than that. Turn the lantern down to just a glow. We don’t dare let it go out.”

With that accomplished, he pushed Matt along ahead of him into the corner furthest from the opening. They stood back, flat against the walls, hardly breathing.

Then they heard it. The door in the floor above that they had used to enter slammed closed. What light it had provided went dark.

“That’s not good, Michael.”

“Worse yet! Hear that?” Michael added.

“Yeah. He found the sliding floor board and he just slid it closed, locking us down in here.”

The big man’s belief that he had won, seemed to be confirmed when they heard him laughing – loud and long from up above.

“Is it time to wet myself, yet? Matt asked.

“I’d really rather you didn’t. Grandma says every situation has its silver lining. We just have to figure out what that is in this situation.”

“The silver lining consists of mounds of silver coins in that next room,” Matt said. “Coins it appears you and I will never get to spend.”

“I told you, it’s not ours to spend in the first place.”

“Come on. Give a dying man his last fantasy!”

“We’re not going to die in here,” Michael said, “but your moaning and groaning did give me an idea. At the moment, we suspect H-M or somebody else is coming down to get us, we can escape into the secret room. Nobody will ever suspect where we are.”

“Not entirely a bad idea except for one thing.”

“And that is?”

“We’re not sure we can get out of that secret room once we close the door behind us.”

“If worse comes to worse, we can cut a hole in the floor with my knife and yell for help,” Michael said.

“Cut our way through a six-inch cement floor?”

“Okay, so it just may be time for ‘Plan B’. Got one?”

They slid their backs down the wall and took seats on the floor.

CHAPTER NINE

Michael spoke first.

“Watching that wick glowing in the lantern makes me think it is important to make the best use of the lantern light we can while we still have some kerosene. It won’t burn forever.”

“Like?” Matt asked not sure he understood.

“Several things. Let’s examine the door to the secret room and see if we can’t find a lock release from the inside. It only makes sense there should be some way out if there’s a way in.”

“Unless it was built to be a trap if anybody – like us – managed to discover it,” Matt pointed out.

“Good point. Then, devise some way to make sure it stays open – block it with one of the metal boxes.”

“That sounds good,” Matt said. “Then we can take some time and scope out the whole room. I really didn’t have a chance to do that.”

“Fine. It sounds like a plan. Let’s do it. Turn the lantern up the tiniest bit so it just gives us what light we need. Right now that kerosene is our most precious commodity.”

Michael soon had the panel open that exposed the two plates and had pressed in the code. The large door opened. They closed the panel and entered the secret room.

“I’ll hold the door while you bring over one metal box,” Michael said.

“These boxes are really heavy. I’m not sure I can even lift one.”

“How about scooting one off the lower shelf and then pushing it across the room to the base of the door. Make as little noise as you can.”

“See. That’s why I keep you around, Michael.”

“To tell you how to move heavy metal boxes from one place to another?”

“No. To save our skin.”

“If that was a thank you, then you’re welcome. If it wasn’t you’re still welcome.”

By the time the pointless chatter was over Matt had the box in place. The door remained open twelve inches, the width of a box.

They searched for a way to unlock the door from the inside. They found the four latches that locked the door in place, but soon determined once they were locked there was no way to open them from the inside. They would have to hope that H-M or some more slightly built accomplice did not return. They would have to decide which would probably be worse – be caught or be trapped. Hopefully they had some time to think about that.

They turned back into the room and began looking around.

“Here are four big bottles of liquid under the table,” Matt said.

He lifted them up onto the table.

“Half gallon glass jugs,” Michael said. “Look to be clear liquid. Water I hope. I’m really thirsty.”

“Me, too,” Matt said. “Hadn’t mentioned it because I didn’t want to make you thirsty, too.”

Matt unscrewed one of the lids and sniffed.

“Not water, but sure is something we can use. Sniff!”

“Kerosene. That is a good thing. Suppose that’s what’s in all of them?”

Matt had already opened a second with the same result. He shook his head.

“More kerosene.”

“Together they each opened one of the two that remained.”

“This is not kerosene,” Matt said.

“Neither is this. Could be water. Looks like water. No odor. Feels like water.”

“Think it’s safe to drink?” Matt asked realizing his brother made better decisions about things like that.”

“Only one way to find out. One of us should put some in his mouth and get a better idea about it.”

“Why just one?” Matt asked.

“So, if it kills him the other one will still be alive.”

“That makes sense in a spine chilling, skin prickling, makes me want to throw up sort of way. How do we decide who goes first?”

While he was asking the question, Michael picked up a bottle and took a swig making sure he didn’t swallow it.

“That was such a dumb thing to do, people who know us would swear it was me,” Matt said clearly upset. “Any ill effects?”

Michael shook his head and kept swishing it around. He pointed to his mouth, drew his index finger and thumb close together and ran his finger down his chest as if from his throat to his stomach.

“You’re going to drink just a little bit?”

Michael nodded and did the deed in a hurry before Matt could do some dumb thing trying to stop him. He raised his eyebrows. He frowned and held it for a few moments, then broke a small smile. He swallowed the rest of it. He cocked his head and nodded.

“I’m really fairly sure it’s water,” he said.

“I know,” Matt said spreading an ear to ear grin.”

“You know? How do you know?”

“When you raised the jug up to take the drink I saw where somebody had painted H2O on the bottom. You didn’t think I’d just stand by and let you make a corpse of yourself, did you?”

“Well played. Your time will come, you know.”

“Oh, yes. I know.”

It was worth a hug. Twins brothers allowed hugs between them.

They drank their fill. They had been REALLY thirsty.

Then, they proceeded with their search of the room. Michael counted 48 metal boxes confirming what Matt had estimated. Almost all of them held coins. A few held paper money and bonds.

“Look here!” Matt said. “Maybe another trapdoor clear over here against the far wall.”

“That would be the wall that encloses the attic stairs on this side,” Michael said trying to get his bearings.”

“And means it might not open into the room below,” Matt said.

“What makes you think that?”

“First, we didn’t see two openings in the ceiling down there. Remember, we even searched for another one. Second, being this close to the wall it could open into another passageway or some such thing – a double wall like behind the bookcase down in Hank’s sitting room.”

“So, what are the possible consequences if we open it – assuming we can?” Michael asked.

“If it’s into a secret passageway we probably have another way out of here besides that door into the other room.”

“Okay, and if it does open into the room where Hank is and H-M happens to be there and sees us peeping down at him . . .?”

"I fielded the first option. This one is yours," Matt said managing a minimal smile.

"Well, he'd know where we are. He'd realize there must be some place other than the little room with the ladder leading down from the attic that he saw before he closed the trapdoor on us. He'd come looking for us."

"Or, blast a dozen shots in our direction from that hand gun I suspect he is carrying," Matt added.

Michael raised his hand and turned his head.

"What's that?" Michael asked. "Shh. Listen. I think somebody's back in the attic."

It took no more than ten seconds for each of them to confirm that.

"I vote to close that door and take our chances in here," Matt said.

"I make it unanimous," Michael added quickly.

They hurried to the doorway and pushed the metal box out of the way, closing the door. The metal latches all clicked shut. They had successfully sealed themselves inside. They each silently hoped that meant they were just safe and *not* doomed.

As a next step, they had twin ideas and shared it like they often did, one finishing the other's sentence.

"I'm going to suggest that we . . ."

". . . open that other trapdoor."

"And do it . . ."

"Right now."

"If we do find a way out of here we should probably take a Jug of water and a jug of kerosene with us," Michael suggested.

"You mean *when* we find a way out, Michael. Who's the one always talking about keeping a positive attitude?"

"Well, actually, that's grandma, but she doesn't seem to be here right now. Is there a lift ring on that door?"

"One very similar to the one in the attic except it's set

down into concrete.”

“Oops! We may have made a little error here. How will we ever open something as heavy as this is going to be?” Michael asked as much to himself as his brother. “That’s like four square feet of concrete!”

“I guess we’ll find out when we try. It doesn’t make sense somebody would have built an escape hatch that nobody could lift.”

“That makes sense, of course, Matt. Okay. Is that ring big enough for both of our hands?”

“It is if we put them one on top of the other.”

“You’re full of good ideas today.”

Matt reached down and lifted the ring out of the indentation into which it laid.

“Hey. Look what happens when the ring is swung upright. It’s attached to a tongue, a lot like that one in the floor upstairs, but here, when the ring is pulled up the tongue is slipped out of the way and back into the trapdoor. I can see it move through the crack between the door and the floor. Let’s give it a pull.”

Matt tried, of course, before Michael had his hand in place. Much to his amazement it raised – well half of it raised. The other side sank into the opening.”

“A weight balanced arrangement,” Michael explained. “Half the weight on each side of some sort of axil that connects into the cement on each side of the opening. That way the weight of door on the left, counter balances the weight of the door on the right and it opens with virtually no effort. When open, the door sits there straight up and down in the center of the opening leaving plenty of room for a full-sized man to enter down into it. Good thinking old Fairfield builder guy!”

“So, what are we waiting for?”

Matt lowered the lantern down into the opening just enough to get a quick take on what was there.

“It’s a very long metal ladder going straight down,” Matt

said after his initial look into the hole. Round rungs instead of flat steps. I won't be able to carry both the lantern and a bottle – I need one hand to hold on with."

"Alright, then, let's completely fill the lantern with kerosene. We know where the rest of it is if we need it. I'll carry a bottle of water."

That decided and the lantern filled, they started down the ladder. It was strong and fastened to six inch by six inch studs which ran up and down and were part of the support structure for the very heavy cement room. It was steady and appeared safe.

"Where do you suppose, it lets us out?" Matt said.

"At the opening, I'd think."

"Sometimes you are absolutely no good at all, brother."

"Not even for a little comic relief?"

"Well, yes, that, I suppose."

They continued down the ladder.

Michael became serious.

"The rungs on this ladder are one foot apart. We're coming upon number thirty-eight. That means we're already below the third floor and right at the second. I'm betting this goes clear back down to the basement. Let's stop a minute. I think we're ready to call the cops. What do you think?"

"I'm with you on that. We've established that Hank is being held against his will and we have a pretty good idea why, now."

"Let me make the call before we get into the basement. Remember I couldn't get any service down there."

Michael placed the call and explained the situation in a short though completely accurate manner. That skill Michael possessed had always amazed Matt and he admired it.

"Okay, let's get going again," Michael said once the call had been completed. "For some reason the woman at the police station didn't really seem interested in what I had to say. I hope she comes through for us and doesn't just think I'm some punk kid pranking her."

“Me, too. I mean you *are* just some *punk* kid, but I’ll vouch for the fact you weren’t pranking her.”

“One more thing, Matt and it concerns your dependably over active mouth. I think if anybody is going to disclose information about the treasure, it should be Old Hank and not us, okay?”

“Yeah, Okay. That makes sense. Like you said it’s not ours.”

They reached the bottom of the ladder and just as Michael had predicted it was in the basement – the room with the cell made of iron bars in it.

“One more swig of water, Matt? I’m going to leave the jug here. Too heavy and slows me down more than I figured it would.”

They both took a long drink and then headed on the trot for the stairway, which they had earlier used to get upstairs.

“Hope our friend the Rat Ghost has moved on,” Matt said, mostly just to be making conversation as they ran.

He didn’t hesitate at the door, pulling it open. He turned up the wick to provide better light and they began climbing the steps. The sheet was still there near the top, but the rat was gone.

They arrived at the first-floor landing, and continued to make their way up to the second floor and then the third. They hadn’t discussed what they were going to do. It would still be impossible for the two of them to corral Hippo-Man and they had no idea what kind of shape Hank might be in, so wouldn’t plan on getting any help from him.

They walked slowly and quietly down the hall – one behind the other, up close to the wall – and stopped just before reaching the door of the room where Hank was – or at least had been.

“Oh, oh,” Matt whispered pointing at the door.

It was open a crack – more like a triple crack, actually. There were voices coming from inside. One was definitely Old Hank’s.

“You make out Hank’s voice in there, Matt?”

“Yeah. Doesn’t sound frightened, I’ll give him that.”

The voices quieted.

“How about sending Hank a message to tell him we’re out here?” Matt suggested.

“Good idea.”

Michael took out his pocket knife and began tapping on the door frame.

Then it happened. The door opened, swinging into the room. A man stepped out into the hall beside them. It was Hank.

The boys had another set of twin ideas, but kept them inside their heads: ““Could it be that Old Hank has been in on this all along?””

They stood there stunned. Old Hank turned and called back into the room.

“Captain. I want you to meet the boys who have been looking after things and me today.”

‘Captain?’ They each thought. Was he calling Hippo-Man, Captain?”

Then, from inside the room came a far more familiar voice.

“Michael? Matthew? You two alright?”

Just as the man reached the door the boys began to understand. It was their father. He drew them close and the three of them shared a hug.

“Somebody please tell us what’s going on here,” Matt said, sitting down the lantern and placing his hands on his hips.

Hank began the explanation.

“When you didn’t return home at a reasonable time today you parents became worried. They knew you were coming here to visit me so your father came looking for you.”

Mr. Snow took over the story.

“You didn’t answer your cell phone. When I arrived I saw the backdoor open. I looked inside and saw that the living room had been torn apart. It was clear that something was very wrong. I called the police and Captain Miller here and a half dozen officers arrived a few minutes later.”

The Captain began.

“We did a thorough search of the house and found Mr. Bradbury, Hank, here in this room tied to a chair and gagged. He told us of the large man who had taken him and that he was apparently after some treasure that was supposedly hidden here in the old house. At that point we all heard him walking in the attic right above this room. Two officers went up and apprehended him. He had two accomplices, which he apparently double-crossed. We found them tied up in a cell in the basement. They were happy to incriminate the big man.”

Then it was Hank again.

“When I wouldn’t tell the big man anything, and he had been very rough with me, you boys arrived and he somehow discovered you were here. He figured you meant something to me and said when he caught you he was sure I’d tell him what he wanted to hear or he would hurt you. Well, searching for you two distracted him and he stopped – what’s the term, working me over – and set out to find you. That seemed to have bought us time and now, here we are, hardly any worse for wear.”

“Do you need somebody to stay here with you tonight, Hank, Mr. Snow asked.

“Goodness no. I’ll be fine.”

“We’ll be back in the morning to help you pick up the mess down in your quarters,” Michael said.

“We got cookies for you downstairs in our backpack. That should help ease you through the night,” Matt added.

They made their way down to Hank’s apartment. The Captain and the one remaining officer left. Mr. Snow stepped outside waiting for his boys.

Inside, Michael, offered his hand to Old Hank for a shake.

“Can you imagine, Hank, anybody thinking there would be a treasure hidden someplace in this old house?”

During the shake, he pressed into the old man’s palm the gold coin Matt had borrowed. Hank looked at it puzzled for only a second. He looked at the boys.

“You know?”

The twins looked at each other.

“Know? Us? You must have some other set of twins in mind, Hank. And anyway, we have exceptionally short memories. You understand, Hank?”

Hank nodded.

The boys winked at him. He winked back. No more would ever be said about it.

Michael pulled the little book out of his back pocket.

“Oh. We stumbled across this. Matt hated it because there were no pictures in it. We believe it belongs on your bookshelf –sort of.”

Hank’s face flooded with tears. The boys pretended they didn’t see them, turned, and left.

“So, hope we haven’t missed supper, Dad,” Michael said once outside.

“Yeah. Pot roast tonight, right?” Matt added going along with what they hoped would be a permanent change of topic.

The boys winked at each other. Their father noticed, but long ago he had learned never to ask.

THE END

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