



BOOK ONE

**Matt
and
Michael
Snow
Investigate:**

**The
Shadow Imp**



By David Drake

**Matt and Michael Snow
Investigate
Book One:**

The Case of the Shadow Imp

A novel for 9 to 14 year olds

by
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Family of Man Press

**The Growing Series:
(Best if read in order.)**

**Book One: The Shadow Imp
Book Two: The Haunted House on Hawthorn Hill
More to come.**

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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

**CHAPTER ONE:
The First Encounter**

"Did not!"

"Did too!"

"Did not!!"

"Did too!!"

"Did not!!!"

"Did too!!!"

The boys sounded more like fussing kindergarteners than the mature, newly thirteen-year-old twins known and respected there in Springfield, their home town. They loved each other dearly, but that did not necessarily translate into an unruffled relationship in the privacy of their home. If things ran their usual course it would only take four sets of such verbal exchanges before they left words behind and pulled each other to the floor in a spirited tussle.

"Did not!!!!"

"Did too!!!!"

They were immediately onto one another rolling across their bedroom floor each trying to claim the upper hand. Neither ever really did. They were identical in more ways than sharing the same blond hair and handsome face. They were a match in height and weight and strength as well.

The purpose of these physical brawls was not really to inflict pain. It was more an ongoing means of monitoring each other's maturing strength and cunning. In the end, they rolled apart onto their backs and laughed themselves back into friendship, twiddling their fingers at each other the way they did when celebrating together. If asked, they would have probably been hard put to remember just what had started it all.

Although they were equally bright, Michael tended to use his intelligence more dependably. Matt had the quicker temper. Even so, it was seldom the cause for violence against anyone (other than playfully with his brother, as just demonstrated!).

They lived with their parents on five acres at the edge of a small, Midwestern, city. When they were six their father had converted the large attic into a spacious room for them. The beamed ceiling rose to a steep peak. There were dormers with windows along each side and huge, floor to ceiling, windows brightened the area from both ends. The plan had been to divide it into two rooms when the boys got old enough to want their private space. That had not yet happened.

Each had his own dresser, closet, and study table with computer and bookcase. Sometimes they had their extra wide bunk beds stacked. Other times they preferred to have them sitting side by side on the floor. Currently they sat there separated by a night stand between the headboards.

Matt and Michael kept no secrets from each other. They were best friends and untiring sources of mutual support. Although they managed well when apart, it was always more

comfortable being together – that's just how it had always been. Michael was the more outgoing talker while Matt was more the laid-back man of action.

Except for being twins, the boys were all quite normal young teens – well, except for ***that one thing***. Unusual happenings seemed to seek them out. Mysteries came their way. The unexplainable fell into their laps. It was well known among their acquaintances that when a strange or frightening situation needed investigating, it would be Matt and Michael to the rescue.

It was not surprising, therefore, that such an event began unfolding at the breakfast table that very morning. The boys' father was glancing through the paper as he worked on his second cup of coffee.

"A strange thing here," he began.

To the twins, words such as strange, odd, and hard to believe were like light to moths – they simply could not resist. Little wonder they perked up. They looked at each other and then back at their father.

"Seems we have a peculiar, new, robber in our city who only takes things at night or out of the deep shadows. Always just little things – apples, loaves of bread, clothing. Never much. And get this; he always leaves a small stone in place of the item he takes. What do you make of that?"

The boys pretended to show little interest. They had learned long ago it was best to do their own preliminary investigation before sharing information with their parents. Michael did ask a two-part, question.

"What kind of stones? Does it say?"

Matt frowned at his brother thinking the show of interest with the question had *not* been a good move. Their parents were less than enthusiastic about having their sons snooping into potentially dangerous situations.

"Doesn't say . . . Supposed to be in the upper 70's today. Pretty warm for May in these parts."

Clearly the questions had not tipped off their father and

the boys sighed as one, relieved.

"Got your homework done?" their mother asked.

"Sure have," Michael announced, smiling into her face.

"Sure will," Matt announced, over-smiling into her face.

Matt tended to put off such things, though always – well, almost always – managed to squeak them in at the last moment.

His mother looked at him over her glasses, a sure sign she was displeased.

"Hey. Have I missed a single assignment all semester?"

"I guess not," she said. "Just wish you'd learn to work before you play the way Michael does."

"Unlike *Nerd Boy*, here, I understand that at my age there are lots of important things to learn about besides what's in my teachers' assignments."

Their father smiled across the top of his paper at their mother, raising his eyebrows.

"It's hard to argue with that, I guess, isn't it?"

She smiled – one of those '*sort of*' smiles – clearly not satisfied with either Matt's approach *or* his father's response, which she felt supported Matt's bad habit. However, she said nothing else on the matter.

"End of the school year picnic is on Friday, remember," Michael said ignoring the 'nerd' comment. "Parents are invited as usual."

"We'll be there," mother said. "Family baskets or pot luck this year?"

"Family baskets," Michael said. "We'll eat together. Kyle and Josh never bring anything. We invited them to eat with us. Can't figure their parents. They never show for school stuff."

"No problem. Happy to have them join us."

With that settled the boys excused themselves, took their plates to the sink and raced up the stairs as if the survival of

the universe somehow depended on it. With only a little hip shoving and elbowing they managed to get their teeth brushed at the sink in their bathroom. Then, with backpacks in place they were soon downstairs and out the door toward school.

"So, where do we start?" Matt asked.

"Let's stop by and see what Angie knows."

Angie owned a small, neighborhood, weekly, newspaper. The twins delivered for her every Friday after school. That was partly to earn spending money and partly just because they really liked the old lady. She had a nose for news. If anybody knew something, Angie knew it. Michael enjoyed picking her brain. Matt preferred playing with the printing equipment.

"Hey, Ang! What's cookin'?" Michael called out as they flung their backpacks onto the counter.

Not waiting for an invitation, they pushed aside the tattered, green, curtain, which hung across the door between the reception area out front and the back room where she did most of her work.

"The Imp, you mean?" she asked from where she was seated at her huge, always cluttered, roll top, desk.

"Imp?" Matt asked.

Michael turned to Matt and explained as if there were no one else present.

"An *imp* is a playful little devil-like being that delights in teasing and tempting us humans. They are generally harmless and often amusing."

"Thank you, Mr. Dictionary Guy."

"You're welcome, Mr. Depend-on-your-brother-instead-of-learning-it-for-yourself Guy."

"Glad you understand our arrangement," Matt said with a single nod.

They reared back and performed their patented twiddley finger thing, smiling.

Just then the rear, outside door slammed shut. It was in

the side room that Angie used as her living quarters. The three of them hurried to investigate. Matt flicked on the light.

"If I were a guessing gal, I'd say it must have been the imp," Angie said. "Somebody took a handful of cookies from the plate there."

"*And,*" Michael added, pointing, "He left three stones in return."

Matt, typically the braver of the two, opened the back door and Michael followed him outside.

"There!" Matt said pointing. "Something's moving through the shadow of the building toward the street."

They gave chase. Whatever it was appeared to be about the boy's height, but remained a dark, human-like, blur. It moved fast, easily jumping a stump and quickly turning the corner out of sight ahead of them.

By the time the twins rounded the front of the building into the morning sun the Imp was nowhere to be seen. Michael moved close behind his brother and put his hands on Matt's shoulders speaking softly into his ear.

"It looks like we've just had our first encounter with *The Shadow Imp!*"

"Yeah!" Matt said. "Seems to stand at: *Imp one. Twins zero!*"

CHAPTER TWO: A Mystery from the Past!

Back inside Angie's office, the boys examined the small stones left behind by the Imp.

"Rounded edges," Matt noted.

"Means they probably came from a creek and not crushed from a gravel pit," Michael explained. "Rolling around in the water for years and years smoothes them up like that."

"Look here," Matt said, nodding that he understood, yet mounting a frown. "Are these bits of concrete stuck to them?"

"Looks like it to me," Michael said as he handed them on to Angie for her inspection."

She put on her glasses – they were half lenses in gold, wire frames and when not in use hung from a chain around her neck.

"I'd agree, boys."

She scratched at the hard, light grey, material.

"Something odd about it though. Why don't you see what Mel over at *Mel's Cement Company* thinks about it?"

"May we take them, then?" Michael asked.

"Certainly. What I *don't* need around here is rocks adding to this clutter."

"We can stop by Mel's after school on our way to Mrs. Stephens' place," Matt suggested.

"How's she doing?" Angie asked. "Last time I saw her she was all crippled up with arthritis."

"Not much better, really," Michael said.

"We take her trash out to the curb for her Wednesday afternoons," Matt added, explaining the purpose of their visit and supporting the state of her limited physical abilities.

"Gotta run, Ang," Michael said. "Matt still has homework to get done before third period."

Angie shook her head and smiled. She had known the twins since the day they were born so it came as no surprise to her that Matt was pushing the deadline like that. She and Matt were a lot alike in that respect; each week the newspaper got out on time, but seldom with more than a few minutes to spare.

The boys each planted a kiss on her cheek and trotted on their way out the door and down the sidewalk toward school. Such trots seldom became races. That was partly because whenever they were together they seemed to have important things they wanted to talk about. It was also partly because races never really proved anything – another part of that identical twin thing.

Four periods later they were sitting in the cafeteria eating with Emily, their best friend since forever. Matt was smugly proud that not only had he turned in his assignment on time, but had received a B on it. Michael was never happy with less than A's, but he put no pressure on Matt to improve his grades. Matt was Matt and Michael was Michael. They had long ago learned to respect and live with that.

Michael did spend time wondering how two boys who were so identical in all physical ways could be so different in other ways. Matt, on the other hand, seldom thought about it and *never* consumed his precious time *wondering* about it.

"Did you hear about the robber, Em" – the Shadow Imp?" Matt asked.

"A little. What did you call him?"

"The Shadow Imp. Michael sort of named him this morning. We saw him in action at Angie's, but lost him outside in the shadows."

"Someday you two are going to get hurt running after dangerous things like that," she said, sounding more like a girl than usual.

"Who says he's dangerous?" Matt asked and then pointed out, "As far as anybody seems to know he's never tried to hurt anyone."

"Even so, you guys need to be careful. Can I help?"

The twins glanced at each other and grinned looking at their watches.

"You win," Matt said.

"What do you mean?" Emily asked, confused.

Michael explained.

"We had a bet about how long it would take you to say you wanted in on our investigation. I said under a minute. Matt said about two. The stopwatch function on my watch clocked you at 42 seconds."

He offered his wrist as proof while he continued.

"Of course, you can help. You always help. You even help when we forbid you to help! We need to know exactly where the Imp has struck so we can plot it on a city map. Then we'll know his home territory and have a place to begin."

"I can do that. I have library next period. Where can I get a map?"

"Go surfing to the Springfield Home Page. I'm sure you'll find a street map there that you can print off," Michael suggested.

They agreed to meet out front after school and examine her findings. As usual the afternoon dragged on for Matt who

would have rather been *anywhere* else.

"I vote on cutting out two periods of school every day," Matt went on as they approached Emily who was sitting on the low, rock wall that encircled the flag pole.

"Then you'd end up being a quarter dumber than you already are," Michael pointed out with his wonderful grin, well, *they're* wonderful grin.

He knew it was coming, but still hadn't moved aside in time.

Matt had delivered a stinging fist to his brother's shoulder. Michael would not let on how much it hurt. It was another thing Michael wondered about – how that kind of hurt from his brother almost always felt like love.

"Here's the map," Emily said, taking it from her backpack. "I called the *Daily Times* office and they were very helpful. As far as they have been able to determine, the Imp has struck 37 times – always in a different location. It began nearly two months ago, but it didn't start becoming public until after folks began comparing notes. I guess each time it seemed like such a little thing that nobody bothered to report it. I have every spot marked on the map. I wrote the dates and address beside each entry."

"Good work, Em!" Michael said, accepting the sheet of paper and patting her on her back.

Matt immediately snatched it away to study.

"Which one was first?" Michael asked preferring not to have to search through the dates himself.

"The one at the bus station, on April first," Emily said, pointing.

"April Fool's Day," Michael noted, nodding as if it might be of some significance, but without a clue as to what that could be.

"We gotta be on our way," he explained; "Lots to do this afternoon."

"In the morning, then," Emily said. "Call me if you – we –

need more research done. I have a light homework load tonight.”

With that, Emily thought she had firmly and cleverly established herself as part of the team.

As was their usual practice when leaving her, the boys reared back and aimed the twiddle of their fingers in her direction. It was the twin’s thing so she never returned it, but did feel good about being included that way. Sometimes she wished that at least one of them would recognize that she was a girl – *an attractive, smart, witty, girl* to be specific. Neither one ever seemed to, however.

The boys decided to take care of Mrs. Stephens first. She told them (in much greater detail than the twins would have preferred) that she had begun a new treatment for her arthritis and was feeling much better. That made the boys happy although there *was* a down side to it. She had felt well enough to fill *four* extra trash bags, which they had to tote out to the street. They figured it was well worth it, however, to know she was feeling that much better.

With that finished, she offered them a sack of brownies clearly large enough to fend off hunger until supper. They munched as they walked on to Mel’s.

"Mel! How's it going?" Matt said, addressing the man in coveralls up on the back of the truck. He was hosing out the inside of the huge, slowly turning, drum.

"Solid as concrete!" he said chuckling.

He always said that and the boys always smiled and chuckled along with him. Their response was not so much because the remark really seemed all that clever anymore, but because Mel was their friend and they always enjoyed doing whatever they could to make other folks feel good.

"Got a question for you," Michael said lifting his palm full of little stones up into the man’s line of vision.

Immediately interested, Mel climbed down and began examining them. He turned each one over and over. He sniffed at them. He licked at the cement that clung to them.

"So, what's the question?" he asked at last.

"Angie thought there was something odd about the cement. What do you say?"

"Well, I'd say she's wrong – unless there is something *odd* about the fact that this cement is at least a hundred years old."

CHAPTER THREE: Thump in the Night

“So, what we got so far?” Matt said more than asked as they got ready for bed that night. He went on to offer a partial answer. “The Imp thing seems to have a human-like shape. It’s dark like the shadows and runs and jumps like an athlete.”

“A *short* athlete,” Michael added sharpening the concept. “And, he pays for the things he takes with stones, and never hurts anybody.”

“Pays for them?”

“Well, I don’t know how else to put it. It’s like a trade – three stones for three cookies at Angie’s this morning. It’s like he or it doesn’t realize the disparity in value.”

“Dis-*what*-ity?” Matt asked displaying a rare desire to make sure he understood his brother’s big words.

“Disparity: the difference between two things. The inequality.”

Matt nodded, quietly self-satisfied that it meant exactly what he had thought it meant.

“So, you’re saying the Imp thing has some smarts?”

“Yeah! I guess that’s what I’m saying – smarts and a sense of social responsibility.”

“Now you lost me, Bro.”

Michael explained.

“Don’t you ever pay attention in class?”

“I pay attention, just not to the teachers.”

Michael gave him a look and proceeded to explain.

“Socially responsible folks help each other and pay for what they get – they don’t just take it – steal it. It’s like a fairness thing silently agreed upon among people. Without it society falls apart and life gets really bad for everybody.”

“Gottcha! So, how does any of this help us get closer to him, it? What shall we call the Imp – a him or a it?”

“I vote for *him*. What we saw was clearly human-like. And, you should have said ‘an it’ not ‘a it’. *An* comes before a vowel; *A* before consonants. You do know the difference between vowels and consonants, right?”

“Doesn’t your school-head *ever* shut off?” Matt asked shoving a pillow at Michael across the narrow aisle between their beds.

“Unlike you, Matt, I only have *one* head.”

The exchange had been a way of demonstrating that, twins or not, they each had some unique traits. They treasured the fact that they were identical as twins, but looked for ways to prove they were also individuals.

Michael threw the pillow back, putting lots more muscle behind it. Matt, who had been sitting on the edge of his bed, was toppled backwards by its force. Michael jumped up onto his own bed and with a single, studied, bounce, powered himself into a flying leap toward his brother. Matt was still lying there across his bed on his back, arms outstretched, fully unprotected.

Thud! Michael had Matt pinned.

Giggles!

“No fair. You caught me off guard!”

Giggles!

They rolled onto the floor beyond Matt’s bed.

Thump! Crash! Thud!

Giggles!

“Boys!” Came their father’s calm steady voice up the stairs. “Don’t totally destroy the place, please.”

“Okay.”

“Okay.”

Giggles!

After two rolls to the north and then two back to the south they had both had enough. In the end, Matt was on top but he rolled off onto his back.

Through it all, neither one had been able to find much strength. A case of the giggles always did that to them. They lay there, side by side catching their breath and smiling, their heads turned toward each other. Matt spoke.

“Did you see the new girl first period?”

“Yeah I did! Really pretty! Amanda; I think that’s her name.”

“*Gorgeous* is more like it,” Matt said pulling out a big word of his own.

“Did you see her wink at me?” Michael asked.

“That was at *me*, loser?”

“Was not!”

“Was too!”

“Was not!”

“Was too!”

They broke into laughter at the same moment. For all either one of them knew she had probably been winking at Kyle who sat just in front of them and was generally considered the most handsome boy in their grade. Still, each of them would eventually drift off to sleep enjoying visions of walking hand in hand with Amanda to some secluded spot – all at *her* suggestion, of course.

“You still like, Tanya?” Matt asked as they got into their beds and pulled up the sheets.

Matt reached out and turned off the light on the nightstand sending the room into darkness. Usually, moonlight bathed the room, but that night a rising bank of heavy clouds allowed only an eerie blackness.

“I guess I still like her. I’m not even sure why I say she’s my girlfriend. We never really do anything together. It’s more because everybody in our grade seems to think they have to be paired up or something’s wrong with them. What do you think?”

They often asked each other for their opinions. It didn’t mean they’d change their mind because of what they heard, but they trusted each other’s judgment and would consider it.

“You like girls, right?” Matt began.

“Oh, yes. I like girls! I mean I *really* like girls.”

“So, why are you trying to prove *that* to everybody by saying that you’re going with Tanya?”

“Is that what I’m doing you think?”

“Seems like it. The other kids are going to think whatever they want to think. No way to change that so no reason to try.”

“How about you and Jennifer?” Michael asked.

“Hey. Everybody knows I’m all man. I got *nothing* to prove. I’m with her because I like to be with her.”

“All man? I’ve never seen so much as one hair on your chest yet and those six under your arms really don’t qualify you as a man.”

“You been peaking at my armpits?”

“Noooo. But every time you sprout a new hair anywhere, you dance around the bathroom announcing it to the World!”

“If I wasn’t already in bed I’d come over there and pound on you, you know,” Matt said smiling into the darkness.

“Glad you’re in bed, then. Doubt if I have another scrap in me tonight.”

“Good night, Michael; love you.”

“Good night, Matt; love you.”

Then together at the top of their lungs;

“Good night Mom and Dad. Love you!”

They were soon asleep.

* * *

Although their house was old, it had been remodeled into a very comfortable place to live. Still, old is old when it comes to wooden structures and it often stretched itself during the night crying out with creaks and squeaks and raspy groans. As little boys those sounds had regularly sent Michael into Matt’s bed where they waited out the scary goings on together, heads beneath the covers and flashlight laying lit between them.

That night the sounds were somewhat different. Michael sat up, his arms resting on his upraised knees. He cocked his head one way and then another to get a sense of where they were coming from.

“Matt!” He whispered loudly.

“Matt! Wake up. Noises.”

“Thought you stopped being scared of them years ago,” Matt whispered back, also sitting up and sliding back against his headboard. “What? And why are we whispering?”

“Shhhh! Listen!”

It happened again – the squeaky, creaky, raspy, groan.

“Light?” Matt asked.

“No. Let’s try to find out what it is, first.”

Quietly, Michael pulled back the sheet and turned to sit on the edge of his bed facing away from Matt. The sounds seemed to be coming from somewhere between him and the south wall – the one with the big windows that overlooked the porch roof.

He stood and slowly moved in that direction. Matt joined him, his hand on his brother’s shoulder from behind. It was unusual for Michael to be leading the way in such a situation.

The noise came again and the boys stopped in their tracks to look and listen. The wind had picked up in advance of an approaching Spring storm; lightning had begun to flash in the distance; the shadows of the swaying tree branches caused by the bursts of light played across the windows, creeping inside to decorate the walls, darting here and there as irregular, alternating streaks of light and dark.

Matt's fingers dug into his brother's shoulder. Michael smiled quickly to himself taking that as an indication that brave, manly, Matt just might not be so brave and manly after all. They moved on to the windows. They were built with small windows top and bottom that could be opened to allow ventilation in warm weather.

Matt leaned down to pull an open window closed. It happened as he reached outside to take hold of the latch. Something grabbed his wrist. A flash of lightning gave them their answer. It was the Imp crouching in the shadows on the roof. He suddenly had a full-out death grip on Matt, pulling him closer and closer and closer.

CHAPTER FOUR: The Creeping Crud?

The Imp, still in the shadows, turned its featureless face toward the window. He was dark with long, stringy, black, hair. What little light there was reflected off his eyes. He squinted as if made uncomfortable by even such a small amount of illumination.

Michael ran to their door at the top of the stairs and flipped the switch to the ceiling lights. In an instant the Imp let go of Matt to shield its eyes. It scrambled to the edge of the roof and without hesitation leaped to the ground below.

The boys watched as it ran from shadow to shadow, zigzagging its way back toward the city. From time to time it would stop and look back toward the house.

“You hurt?” Michael asked reaching out to examine Matt’s wrist.

“Not really hurt, but look at the greasy, black, slime his hand left on my skin.”

He shivered at the sight.

“I better go wash it off.”

“No!” Michael said. “I mean not yet. Let’s wipe what we can of it onto a paper towel. In the morning, we can take it over to Zeke and see if he can analyze it for us. Sometimes it

pays to have that nutty old scientist living next door.”

“Okay. Great idea. But THEN I’m going to scrub the rest of it off before it dissolves my skin or gives me the creeping crud.”

“Strange, don’t you think?” Michael said as he carefully eyed the black slime there on his brother.

“What’s strange?”

“See! It makes a solid ring around your wrist here where he had hold of you but look on the back of your hand. More of it, but in streaks. What do you make of it?”

“Now that you mention it, I remember something about that. While he held me with one hand it was like he was stroking me with his other one. The grip was firm – it hurt, even – but the stroking was gentle.”

“What time is it?” Michael asked.

He *never* wore his watch to bed.

“Eleven thirty.”

Matt *never* removed his watch – ever. Michael was certain there were colonies of bacteria growing under his watch band that were very likely still unknown to modern science.

“So, we need to go back to bed, then,” Michael said.

While Matt saved the gunk to a paper towel and then scrubbed up, Michael stood at the window. He watched the moon losing a game of hide-and-seek with the churning, dark clouds. The sudden, driving rain plunked at the roof and washed down the glass. He hoped the Imp had a safe place where it could stay dry and warm from the storm. He grinned thinking it certainly appeared that a little rain-delivered bath couldn’t hurt it.

On a scale from *Enjoyable to Terrifying*, Michael rated the experience on the high side, just past *creepy* heading toward *scary*. It intrigued him that, even though he knew they were safe and all was well, he was still left with a deep sense of uneasiness. He wondered if grownups had such lingering

feelings. He would ask his father at breakfast. The man had never failed to answer – or at least try to answer – any question the boys had put to him. They felt comfortable talking with him about anything.

A few minutes later they met back at the beds. Matt was into *his* bed first. Michael stood between them in silence. Matt understood.

“The heebie jeebies got to me, too. We’re twins. We’ll never be too old to sleep in the same bed. Get in here.”

He pulled back the sheet.

Sometimes Michael wanted to flush his brother’s head down the toilet. But then, there were times like those, when that special brotherly bond made life with him seem safe and wonderful.

They were soon asleep.

* * *

“Some storm last night, huh?” their father said as the family gathered for breakfast.

Michael saw his opening.

“Sure was. Brought back some of those old feelings from when I was a little kid – well, just for a moment or two, you understand.”

“Interesting how that happens,” his father said.

It had not been a clear answer so Michael pressed on.

“Happens for you, too, you mean?”

“Chills up the spine? Crawling flesh? Certainly, it happens to me – *well, just for a moment or two, you understand,*” he added kidding his son.

It was worth broad smiles all around the table. The rest of the meal was spent in small talk about cleaning up the yard after the storm and the menu for the upcoming picnic.

“Gotta leave early. Need to stop by Zeke’s for a minute or two,” Matt said.

Their mother nodded. It was her way of giving permission for something that probably really didn't require it.

They were soon on their way down the path leading away from the city to the grove of great smelling pine trees where the old inventor lived and had his workshop. Actually, he was only in his fifties, but to thirteen year olds that seemed all quite ancient. They rang the clapper-bell beside the door of the old, unpainted, garage where Zeke invented things and did his scientific research. The bell rang back at them – Zeke's signal for them to enter.

“Hey Zeke! What's cookin’,” Matt said.

“Coffee in the beaker and toast making on the screen over the Bunsen burner. Help yourselves.”

Zeke tended to take things quite literally.

“Just ate, actually,” Matt said eyeing the rapidly blackening toast.

“We got a mystery, here,” Michael went on knowing the word *mystery* always focused their fickle friend's attention.

He took the paper towel from the plastic zip bag and handed it over.

“Need to know what the blackish gunk is.”

Zeke turned it over and over.

“It certainly does look like genuine *gunk*,” he said at last, smiling at the boys, looking from one to the other through his always smudged, thick lensed glasses.

He sniffed at it and then nodded his head. He stuck out his tongue as if to taste it but then thought better of it. He examined it through his huge magnifying glass.

“Any best guess?” Matt asked always preferring to cut out the actual work phase and get right to the answers.

“My first impression is sewage. I can tell you more in a few hours.”

“Sewage! OOOOOOO!” the twins said as one, their faces screwing into that familiar, *how-positively-yucky* look.

Zeke raised his eyebrows and again, nodded.

“We’ll leave it with you then,” Michael said. “Oh, and here are some stones with concrete on them. Mel says it’s hundred-year-old concrete. Can you take a look at them, too?”

“Glad to. Anything else?”

“Whatcha inventing this week?” Matt asked.

“Layered shoe polish!” Zeke announced, proudly pulling his undernourished frame up to its full six foot, four inches.

The boys looked at each other and shrugged.

“Explanation?” Michael asked.

“It works this way. Once it is applied to the shoe, it dries only on the outside. As that layer wears off you just polish up what’s left underneath and you’ve got yourself a brand new hard shine. Enough in one application to last a year.”

“Sounds great!” Matt said, genuinely enthusiastic.

“Yeah, great, but does anybody actually ever use shoe polish anymore?” Michael asked.

“Don’t rightly know. Don’t rightly care. It’s the idea that counts you know. It is the process of creation that gives life purpose. Don’t ever sell your creative juices to the dollar mongers.”

Matt looked at Michael with a frown and a shrug.

“To *big business*,” Michael explained in a low voice behind his hand.

Matt nodded.

“Have you ever really sold any of your inventions?” Matt asked.

Michael frowned thinking it had been a rude question.

Zeke folded his arms and wrinkled his brow. He ran his open fingers back through his never combed, graying, black, hair. He put an index finger to his cheek. He closed his eyes and tilted his head back. Eventually he looked down at the boys.

“That is a *very* interesting question, Mack.”

“It’s Matt.”

“Matt. Oh. Yes. I cannot recall if I have ever sold one; can you imagine that? Perhaps if we would look in my record book – oh, that’s right; I don’t keep a record book. Sorry, I guess I can’t answer your question. You might start asking folks you meet if they ever bought one from me. That would probably tell you – if it’s really important.”

“Good idea,” Michael said trying to politely bring that fully bizarre and unimportant part of the conversation to an end. “We got to get on to school, now. Just one day left ‘til summer vacation. Then we’ll be free to help you paint this place like we said on our Christmas card.”

“Really? Did you say that? How very nice. What color did I want?”

“You didn’t say. We were thinking bright red to match your great passion for inventing.”

“Red it will be, then. I’ll get right to work making some paint.”

“We had planned on buying it for you,” Michael said. “We’ve saved up plenty to get it – and brushes.”

“Nonsense. Paint’s as easy to make as pie. Just don’t ever confuse the two. Paint gives one awful gas, I’m here to tell you from experience.”

He patted his stomach with the end of his fist and shook his head slowly from side to side, working up a sizeable burp in support of his contention.

The twins turned to each other and nodded, impressed, giving it a 7 on their locally famous 10-point *Burp Scale*.

“See you after school, Zeke,” Matt said.

“Yeah. See you then,” Michael added. “Don’t forget to work on the sewer gunk and the stones.”

“What?” he said looking around as if confused by the directive? “Oh, yes. Got them right here. Sewer gunk and stones. After school, then.”

“Think he’ll really remember to analyze our clues?” Matt asked once outside, sounding not at all convinced.

“If he doesn’t confuse the sewer gunk for *pie*,” Michael said smiling.

Matt grinned, adding:

“And he thought *paint* gave him bad gas!”

They shivered at the thought and then chuckled their way on down the path toward town.

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CHAPTER FIVE: To Tame an Imp.

"I did some checking into things that took place on April first," Em said as the three met in front of the school.

"Anything interesting?" Michael asked.

"Lot's. Can't see any connection to the Imp, though. I made a list."

She handed it to Michael and spoke to Matt.

"You better get started on your homework while Michael and I look over this stuff."

"You always assume I don't have my homework done! Geez. You'd think I never did it!"

Eyebrows raised, the other two looked at each other and then at Matt.

"Okay, so maybe this *is* a rare occasion, but I got it done."

He grinned sheepishly.

"Get on with the list?"

"The *April Showers Festival* got rained out – that seems ironic," Michael said. "Wilson Creek flooded – highest level in

twenty some years. Several boats got washed away. That was also the day the police car ran into the fire truck. The all-city cross country meet was cancelled."

"Like you said, Em, hard to see a connection between any of that stuff and the Imp," Matt agreed.

"Any connection between the area the Imp's been seen in and sewage?" Michael asked, pulling out the map.

"OOOOO," Emily said doing the yuck-face thing. "Whatever made you ask that?"

Matt related his encounter with the Imp the night before and then explained further.

"Zeke thinks the black gunk the Imp left on my wrist and hand is something from the sewer."

They turned their attention back to the map.

"Wilson Creek runs through the Imp's area," Matt pointed out.

The others nodded.

Silence.

"This seems to be getting us nowhere fast," Em said.

"You're right," agreed Michael. "After school, we can ask Angie if she can make any connections between any of this stuff and the Imp."

It was agreed as the first bell rang. They entered together and immediately went their separate ways.

* * *

"So, Ang, we got some questions for you," Michael said as they entered her back room after school.

"They're about the Imp," Matt added thinking it would be helpful if she knew the topic ahead of time.

"Shoot!" she said removing her glasses and leaning back as the boys took seats on the old wooden chairs near her desk.

"We've traced the Imp's activities back as far as April first and we hit a dead end. Anything come to mind about that time?"

"The two days of heavy rain."

"Thought of that," Matt said.

"The fire truck accident."

"Thought of that."

"The flood and I know, you thought of that, too."

The boys grinned and nodded

"Something about the sewer," Michael suggested, intending it to be a question.

"Got nothing, I'm afraid," she said. "There was that man's body found up stream between here and Lancaster about that time. Let's see when that was."

She paged through the diary she kept about local events.

"Here it is. The night of March 31st – that was after the first day of that heavy rain. He was never identified. Had no wallet. Probably homeless from the poor state of his clothing. Coroner fixed his age in the early to mid-thirties."

"That's our parents' age," Michael said.

"So?" Matt asked thinking it was a dumb connection to be making.

Michael shrugged, unwilling to take the time necessary to try to justify his remark.

Matt told Angie about the Imp's visit to their house. Each time he told the story the encounter became longer and the struggle between them more intense. Michael smiled. At that rate, by the weekend Matt would have the two of them rolling around the porch roof in mortal combat, hands at each other's throats and gasping for breath.

"Well, thanks, Ang," Michael said. "Zeke's analyzing the black gunk the Imp left behind and the cement from those stones. Did we tell you Mel thinks it's at least a hundred years old?"

"I had my suspicions," Angie said. "Concrete just looked different when I was a little girl."

"You're a hundred years old?" Matt asked all quite seriously.

"Feel like it some days, but no, not quite."

"That's the second rude question you've asked today."

"Is not!"

"Is too."

They stopped at that, kissed Angie, and went outside. Matt immediately slipped out of his T-shirt, pulled it through his belt, and they began the trot toward Zeke's. With a short detour to drop off their backpacks on their front porch, they were soon at the old garage. The door was open so they entered.

"Jack. Michael. Good to see you."

"It's Matt, not Jack," Matt said.

"Yes. Matt. So, it is."

"Did you find out anything about the gunk or the stones?" Michael asked.

"Sure did. Odd, really."

"Odd? Matt said a question in his tone.

"Lots of diesel fuel in it. Mostly untreated sewage, but lots of diesel fuel."

"What do you make of it?" Michael asked.

"It comes from someplace where sewage was in contact with diesel."

"We could have figured that out," Matt said showing his always present, but usually better controlled impatient side. "Nothing else?"

"Cookie crumbs and orange juice – both relatively fresh I'd say. Add something resembling Spam to the mix and that's it."

"How about the stones?" Michael asked.

"The cement is the mixture of ingredients used many, many, years ago. Probably only found in the foundations and concrete work of turn of the century structures."

"That would be turn of the 20th Century, you mean as in the early 1900s?"

"Yes. That's right."

Matt tried to put it all together.

"So, we're looking for the basement of an old building where the sewer overflows into it sometimes."

"That's *one* possibility, at least," Michael said.

Matt tended to be satisfied with the first idea that came to mind. Michael was not. He kept searching for additional possibilities – he referred to them as *options*. He believed the more possible options he could find the better chance he had of finding the best or true answer.

"Thanks, Zeke," Matt said. "Got stuff, you know."

Michael turned to Zeke.

"*Things to do*," he explained thinking their aging friend might need the translation into old folks' language.

Zeke nodded and waved them on their way.

Once home, they changed into shorts and went about cleaning up the yard. They made fireplace wood of the small branches that had been blown from the trees, then raked and bagged the leaves that remained from fall.

After supper was homework time. The teachers seemed as ready for school to be over as the kids did, so that last week had been fairly free of assignment – probably the reason Matt had finished his the night before.

The evening homework session – well, *Michael's* homework session at least – was always followed by their mini-workout as they called it. They did one hundred sit-ups, one hundred pushups, and fifty squat-thrusts. It was Michael's theory that if they both did the identical exercises every day their bodies would continue to grow alike – one way of maintaining their twinning over time.

They showered and then lay back on their beds to talk.

"So, I guess we have to locate the oldest building in the Imps home territory," Matt said.

Michael nodded.

"Probably buildings. Doesn't seem like finding them should be hard. Just walk up and down the streets and see where they are. It's going to be getting inside them that may be difficult."

"Let's get up early and give that area a once over before school in the morning," Matt suggested.

"Take the lad's temperature, folks. He must be delirious to actually be asking to get up early!" Michael said kidding his brother who was known for sleeping in until the last possible second.

"I'm serious, here," Matt said.

"So am I . . . here," Michael said breaking into laughter.

Matt crossed his arms and looked straight ahead knowing he'd just have to wait out his brother's bout of chuckles, belly laughs, snickers, and full out laughter. He'd learned to be patient about it. The problem was, if it went on for more than a minute it always infected Matt and once both of them were involved they had been known to laugh on together for a half hour.

That evening five minutes seemed to get it out of their systems.

"Think the Imp will pay us another visit tonight?" Michael asked turning on his bed to face the south windows.

"Think we should feed it?" Matt asked.

"Hadn't thought about that. Maybe. You know what happens when you feed a stray cat."

Matt nodded though his brother couldn't see it.

"What do you think he'd like – *if we did* feed him, I mean?" Matt asked trying to make the idea sound hypothetical.

"Zeke found cookie crumbs, Spam, and Orange juice in the gunk he left on you," Michael said. "I suppose that says he likes those things."

Michael rolled back over and looked at Matt. As if they had shared the same thought – and some say twins can do that – they stood and headed down the stairs for the kitchen.

Five minutes later they were back at the window with a paper plate on which they had arranged a peeled orange and a ham sandwich – no mayo or mustard, thinking plain might be the best way to go.

Matt reached it out onto the porch roof through the same low window involved in the earlier encounter with the Imp. Michael then closed the window and they went back to bed.

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CHAPTER SIX: A Trap is Set!

As usual, Michael awakened first. He immediately faced a dilemma: Should he go see if the Imp had taken the food or should he wait for Matt to wake up so they could go together? He decided there was an even better, third, option.

He sat up on the edge of his bed, facing Matt's and began pummeling him with his pillow. The dilemma immediately evaporated.

"Cut it out! There's bound to be a few more minutes until . . . Oh!"

As his sleeping brain came back to life he sat up facing his brother.

"Did he take the grub?"

"Don't know. Figured we should really both go to find out at the same time."

Matt looked Michael in face and nodded. It meant, 'very nice, bro! Thanks!'

They moved to the window. The plate was still there. It was empty except for three stones. The boys were overjoyed. Matt opened the window and brought the plate inside trying to

avoid the liberal smattering of black gunk around the edges.

"Why *three* stones?" Matt asked, wondering out loud. "We only left him *two* things. Suppose he's into tipping?"

Michael smiled and then frowned for just a moment as he thought it through.

"Well, actually there *were* three things on the plate – the orange, the ham, and the bread around it."

"That probably explains it. Look here. Are those fingerprints?"

Michael took the plate and held it close to his face.

"Sure looks that way to me – and very human-like wouldn't you say. Let's get these over to Zeke first thing."

They hurried through breakfast making arrangements to meet their parents for the school picnic at noon.

"What's your hurry this morning?" their mother asked.

"Gotta see Zeke this morning," Michael answered.

"What's going on with you guys and Zeke these days?" their father asked. It had been a friendly inquiry not an inquisition.

"Well," Matt said all quite uncharacteristically beginning to answer. (It was uncharacteristic because when the truth needed to be fixed up a bit Matt usually deferred to his brother who was better with words.) "Remember back at Christmas we gave him a paint job as his gift?"

"You're going to paint *Zeke*?" their father asked kidding him.

The boys smiled. Michael let his brother continue although he had to struggle against his urge to take over the conversation.

"The garage, Dad. We're going to paint Zeke's garage. We need to firm up the arrangements now that school's finally out."

"That's a nice thing you're doing for him," their mother said.

Michael had held his tongue as long as he could.

"What do you get a crazy scientist who has everything? A bright red paint job."

More smiles.

By 7:30 they were on their way out the door. There was no telling if Zeke would be awake or asleep. He slept when he was tired. Night and day had nothing to do with it. That morning, he was awake.

"Morning, Zeke," Michael said. "Got something else for you to look at.

He opened the top of the brown paper sack which contained the paper plate. Matt carefully took it out and handed it to their friend.

"What do you think?"

"Lots more paper and glue in that plate than is really necessary. See the shiny finish? Way more glue than necessary."

Michael tried to focus the man.

"Not the plate, itself. The prints around the edge. What do you make of them?"

"Look a lot like fingerprints, I'd say, Micky."

"Human?" Michael asked. "And I'm *Michael*."

"Oh, yes! Well, I'm not an expert on such things, of course. I'd vote yes, however. Not sure any other species actually has fingerprints – maybe apes – hmmm. I can capture them on clear, cellophane, tape. Give me a minute. Then ask Angie at the paper about her sources at the police department. Maybe you can get them run and identified."

"You think like a detective," Michael said. "We have a few minutes if that's all it will take for you to do the prints."

While Zeke worked, Michael made small talk about the upcoming paint job – his way of fixing the *truth* part of Matt's earlier comment to their mother.

Ten minutes later they were calling hello to Angie as they

entered the back room at the newspaper office.

Again, it was Matt who began speaking. Michael grinned, silently deciding that the *Alpha-Bits* his brother had for breakfast must have been arranging themselves into words at an unbelievably rapid rate inside his head that morning.

"Got some prints off the Imp and need to get the cops to run them."

Angie turned to Michael, hoping for a more complete explanation.

"We left food out for the Imp last night and he left his oily, gunky, fingerprints behind on the paper plate. Zeke transferred them to tape and we have them here. We were wondering if any of your contacts at the police department might be able to help us identify them."

"Isn't that what I just said?" Matt offered, throwing up his arms and walked in a circle.

The other two went on without comment.

"I'm sure the police will be happy to help – it's all part of an open case. Leave them with me and I'll call. They'll have a squad car come by for them."

"That's great", Matt said.

It called for the twiddlely finger celebration.

"You say you fed the Imp?" Angie asked removing her glasses and hoping to hear more.

"Zeke found orange juice and Spam in the gunk from where he held onto Matt the other night so we figured he'd like that kind of stuff. I guess we were right because this morning it was all gone."

Angie nodded. Knowing all the facts cleared up several questions.

"One thing I can't figure out, though," Matt said. "How did he know where we lived?"

"You think he came there intentionally – that it wasn't just a random visit?" Angie asked.

Matt looked at Michael who answered.

"Seems odd that soon after we chase him here at your office, he showed up at our place. It's like he followed us to find out where we lived or something."

"Followed us all day long – to school and then home?"
Matt asked thinking it was a pretty farfetched idea.

"Got better?" Michael asked.

"Not really, I guess. But if what you say is true, you know what might *also* be true?"

Michael's face brightened.

"That he might be outside following us right now?"

Matt nodded.

"I declare," Angie said. "Sometimes I think the two of you share a single brain. Lock that back door for me before you leave, will you please? Last thing I need prancing around in here is a *third* Imp."

She smiled and waited for a reaction.

"You're saying Matt and I are the *other* two Imps?"

"Something like that. Yes!"

The boys grinned. The request to lock the door gave Matt an idea.

"You let me out the back door and then lock it. Then, you go out the front and we'll come at the shadow on the west side of the building at the same time. If he's waiting he'll probably be in the shadow there, right? Every time we've seen him he's stayed in the shadows."

"Good thinking brother-with-my-face," Michael said.

"Technically, *you're* the brother-with-my-face since I'm fifteen minutes older."

"Technicalities? Is that the best you have?" Michael said kidding, trying to avoid the 'little brother' thing. "Let's do it!"

"You boys be careful now! Remember how violently wild creatures can react when they are cornered."

"We're always careful; you know that, Ang," Matt said giving Michael a private wink.

Angie raised her eyebrows. They kissed her cheeks and put the plan into action.

Outside, Matt peeked around the rear of the building. Michael did the same from the front. The shadows were deep and the unmown grass was almost waist high. Matt showed himself first and began carefully, slowly, making his way along the side of the building.

Michael was not feeling that brave so convinced himself one of them needed to just stand their ground ready to act in case the Imp actually appeared.

There would be no '*in case*' to it. Half way down the building a figure stood up from where it had been crouching. It might have been giggling. It might have been babbling. It might have been expressing its fear in animal-like sounds. Regardless, its voice grew louder and louder. It turned to look at Matt. It turned to look at Michael. It raised its hands above its head and charged in Matt's direction.

CHAPTER SEVEN: Cold, Clammy, Concrete, Basements

“Watch out, Matt!” Michael screamed. “I’m coming to help!”

As it turned out neither had Matt needed to watch out nor had Michael needed to go to his brother’s assistance. The Imp ran past Matt and headed for the tall grass and underbrush behind the office. By the time the boys collected their senses he was long gone.

“Several good things happened, just now, you know,” Michael said arriving at Matt’s side. Matt had taken to the ground, sitting with his back against the foundation of the old building.

“I didn’t wet my pants,” Matt said. “You can add that to your *good-things-list* in case it isn’t already there.”

“It isn’t, but I’d say that is definitely a *good* thing. First, he didn’t attack us. Second, he learned that we are not going to attack him.”

“I suppose you’re right.”

“Boys! You okay?” came Angie’s voice from behind the building.

She appeared around the corner.

“Everything’s cool,” Michael reported. “The Imp was here just like Matt thought he might be. He got scared when he saw us and ran back into the brush.”

“I heard a scream,” she said, still clearly concerned.

“That was my brother warning me the Imp was heading my way – as if I couldn’t see that for myself.”

“Did you get a good look at him?” Michael asked.

“It all happened too fast. I think he was a kid, but his hair was all bushy and hanging down to his shoulders – back, sides, and across the front, too.”

“From the rear, it looked like he was only wearing a man’s extra-long dress shirt – came down to his knees,” Michael added. “Long sleeves.”

“Yes. That’s right,” Matt said getting to his feet. “And he was barefoot. And something else. He smelled like diesel fuel.”

Angie sighed.

“Well, I don’t know if that description will really help find him,” she said, then explained. “If such a being were seen roaming the streets I’m sure he’d already have been called to the attention of the police.”

The boys agreed that if he’d been seen he surely would have been reported.

“You okay, Ang?” Michael asked.

“Me? Oh yes. I’m fine. Takes more than a half-naked, diesel powered, beast and a screaming twin to get me down.”

“You get back inside then,” Matt said. “We still have a half hour left to look for ancient cement basements. We figure he may live in one that gets flooded when the sewer overflows.”

“An interesting theory. You know, when the sewers get flooded sometimes the waste water sewage overflows into the storm sewer. It happened in April. Just F.Y.I. I guess. Be careful. You got cell phones in case you run into trouble?”

“Cell phones aren’t allowed in school, so no,” Michael said.

“Cell phones aren’t allowed in school, so of course my brother doesn’t have one. Mine insists on staying in my backpack. I keep telling it to stay home, but it won’t. I never use it at school so can’t see how it hurts anything. Besides, it’s just there for emergencies.”

“It’s breaking a rule, that’s how it hurts, *amoral* brother.”

“Amoral?”

“Later, on that. If everybody picked and chose the laws they wanted to follow and not follow, society would fall apart. If it’s a rule, follow it or get it changed. That’s how good citizens work.”

Matt turned to Angie.

“He has this thing about society falling apart if I so much as walk pigeon-toed.”

“Hey! I’m on Michael’s side,” she came back. “Don’t look to me for support. Do promise to be careful, though.”

“We’re always careful. Don’t worry.”

Angie did her famous raised eyebrow thing.

They picked up their backpacks from the front room and trotted two blocks north and then four east according to plan.

“Okay. We’re now inside the Imps territory,” Michael said. “The creek is just a block north of us.”

They stopped and looked around. The street was already filled with vehicles taking people to work. Michael noted that few of them looked happy. (The people, not the vehicles!) Matt was more interested in the difference between the cars men and women drove – men’s big, tough, gas-guzzlers; women’s smaller, fewer cylinders, and easier to handle. They both noticed that all the parking spaces that bordered the sidewalk were already taken.

“There’s the oldest looking building in the area,” Matt said pointing just ahead of them.

They approached it. Between it and the building, just

beyond, was a two-foot wide corridor that ran between the walls to the alley in the rear. They made their way toward the back. Half way there they came upon a ground level window. A quick examination suggested that it opened into the basement. Not only that, but with very little force, Matt had it open. They bellied down and peered inside.

There was a small room poorly lit by faint light bulbs hanging here and there from the ceiling. The floor was dry and although not really clean showed no signs of sewer overflow.

“Let’s go in,” Matt said.

“Probably not a good idea,” Michael cautioned.

“I thought we came to examine old basements. Can’t do that from out here.”

Matt turned onto his stomach and let himself in through in the window – feet first. Reluctantly, his brother followed. It was an eight foot drop to the floor.

“We should have brought a flashlight,” Michael said pointing out the obvious.

“Got one in my backpack – zipper pocket on the left side.”

“Good thinking, Matt.”

“Think I’d let my little brother down?”

“You seldom have, actually.”

Michael soon had the light in hand and they moved across the room to a large, heavy looking wooden door. Matt turned the knob. It opened – it *creaked* open setting an eerie tone to the adventure. They entered. It was pitch-dark. Michael searched the wall beside the door for a light switch. There was none. He flashed the light around the area. It was a huge open expanse with the floor marked off in long smudged white lines as if it were or once had been an underground parking area. Thick cement pillars held the building in place above the floor.

They crossed the area to the far side. As hoped, the

walls were made of the old-fashioned type of concrete. They examined several gaping cracks and Matt managed to break off small samples of the concrete and put them in his pocket. Nothing they saw pointed to the Imp.

“Searching all the basements in this area of the city could take us all summer,” Matt said not untypically focusing on the work rather than the possible outcome.

“There’s another door,” Michael said steadying the beam on an even larger door just ahead. “What time is it?”

“We got time,” Matt said. “Usually Michael would have insisted on pinning down the time to the minute, but things were getting too interesting so he let it pass.”

Again, it was Matt who opened the door. The knob turned easily, but it took his shoulder and several thrusts of his body to move it. Together they managed an opening large enough for them to slip through.

It was a stairwell. One flight led up and the other led down.

“Seems there is a basement under this basement,” Matt said.

“A sub-basement,” Michael said. “It’s called a sub-basement. Some of the newer buildings have three or four. Usually for parking.”

“Up or down?”

It had been Matt’s question and his brother knew that meant his bravery was wavering a bit.

“I’d vote for going down, but very cautiously. We know there isn’t a basement above this level and as you pointed out it *is* basements that we’re interested in?”

It was an open stairway, made of cracked, flaking, concrete. There were no railings. It smelled damp and musty like the hollow of a rotting stump. At the bottom, there was another door. Matt turned the knob and together they pushed. It opened just enough to let them pass through.

They immediately searched the floor looking for signs of

the black, sewer, gunk they were after. None. Again, the area was by no means clean, but like the other areas it was more or less dry with no indication of having being flooded with sewer overflow.

“I think we struck out on this one,” Michael said.

Matt nodded. As one, they turned and began the return trip back through the door and up the stairs, then through the other door and into the large open darkness of the second room in the first basement.

It was colder than they had remembered. They were in the huge room without ceiling lights. They hurried toward the other side where they found *two* doors instead of the one they were expecting. Which was the one they had used? It should have been open. They were both closed.

The flashlight dimmed.

The knob on the first door would not turn.

The flashlight flickered.

The knob on the second door would not turn.

The flashlight went out.

CHAPTER EIGHT: Unfriendly Boots

“If we were the kind of kids who got scared, this would probably be one of those times,” Matt said, his voice quivering just a bit out of the darkness.

“It’s always been interesting to me how dark makes things scary when they wouldn’t be in the light,” Michael said, removing his backpack. “I’m just pretending my eyes are closed and it’s really light all around me.”

“You have a weird brain, you know that, little brother?”

“Thank you. Never wanted to be just like everybody else – well except for you of course, mostly that is, but not entirely you understand.”

Matt shook his head as his brother with the weird brain continued to feel inside his own backpack.

“Here they are.”

“Here they are, *what?*” Matt asked.

“Batteries for your flashlight.”

“You bring batteries, but no flashlight? That makes no sense.”

“Does having them here with us *now*, make sense?”

“I suppose it does. Okay, so you’re saying it makes sense at this second, but for all the other seconds in the week it hasn’t.” That’s what being prepared is all about. Being ready for that one time in a thousand.”

Having to feel his way, Matt unscrewed the end of his flashlight and removed the spent batteries. They were soon replaced and the light glowed back to life.

“Nice going, actually, now that I think about it, Michael. But, we’re still stuck in this cement fortress ten feet underground.”

“Pick up the old batteries; then, we’ll figure things out.”

With that done, Michael spoke.

“Reconstruct how we got over to that door to the stairwell. Now that I’m thinking about it I don’t think we walked straight across the big room, did we?”

“Probably not. In the dark you lose your sense of direction. Let’s see. I think we walked at an angle off to our left. So, these doors that are straight across from the stairs are the wrong ones. The right one should be somewhere up there to our right as we face away from these doors.”

“My thinking as well. Let’s head right, which magically becomes straight ahead, of course, once we turn.”

“Like I said, you have a weird brain, Michael.”

They broke into a slow trot and were soon at the door they had used to enter the area. It was still open. They reentered the first room and moments later were standing below the window through which they had gained entrance.

“It’s eight feet up from the floor,” Matt said describing what Michael thought could have remained an obvious unspoken fact.

The ceiling lights – dim as they were – still allowed them to scan the room for something to stand on.

“A wooden crate!” Matt said pointing to one corner.

They had soon pushed it to the spot under the window.

“You go first,” Matt said, “You being the youngest. I’ll

guard our rear.”

“Cut the *oldest-youngest* thing. So, you got to get your butt slapped first by the doctor. I got to stay inside mom longer and grow that much smarter and stronger before I was born. I think those things cancel each other out.”

Regardless of his words, Michael *did* crawl up onto the crate first and pull himself out the window *first*. Matt was right behind. They closed the window and headed back toward the street.

“Time is 8:20,” Michael said. “We’ll have to really push it to get to school on time.”

Their usual trot immediately shifted into a full-out, tear down the street, jump the hydrants, run for their life, dash. They collapsed into their homeroom seats, puffing, just as the final bell rang. Matt figured they had arrived in time so everything was cool. Michael replayed the possibility of being late seeing nothing cool about it at all.

Being the last day of school, all classes were only half as long as usual. The picnic at lunch was great. Josh and Kyle ate with them as planned. Afterwards the principle gave a short speech about what a wonderful school year it had been and wished everybody a good summer. She reminded the kids to read every day.

Some would.

Some wouldn’t.

Michael would.

Matt wouldn’t.

They arranged to check in with Emily several times each day. She had become interested in the man who had been found drowned during the April First flood and had some ideas for additional research, stating it all like a mystery to keep the twin’s interest.

The weather continued to be warm – shorts and shoes at last after the long, cold, winter. Back home, the twins changed clothes, ready to continue their investigation of the old buildings. Half way down the stairs Michael spoke to his

brother.

“You forgot a T-shirt.”

“Why would I want a T-shirt on a great day like this?”

Michael pointed to his, which hung from his belt.

“So, if we need to go in somewhere that requires a shirt you’ll have it.”

“What’s the chance of that?”

“What was the chance your flashlight would go dead?”

“You make a good argument. I’ll tell you one thing. This always thinking about being prepared stuff stinks.”

Michael smiled as Matt raced back up the stairs to find a shirt. Thirty seconds later he was back and they were on their way toward Imp Territory.

“I got close enough to Amanda to smell her, today,” Matt said as they trotted along, side by side. “She smelled great.”

That sparked something in Michael’s head.

“*That’s it! That’s* what we need to do,” Michael said excited.

“We need to go over to Amanda’s and smell her?” Matt asked, puzzled. “I doubt if her mom would agree to that.”

“Dufus! Of course, not, although that would really be nice wouldn’t it. We could sit on her couch with her between us. You could smell one side and I could smell the other.”

“Now who’s the Dufus?” Matt said smacking Michael on the back of his head.

It had been a gentle, brotherly, smack, but still Michael doubted if it had worked to make his brain any smarter.

“Thank you for that, Matt. Thinking of girls as good smelling and gorgeous really complicates a boy’s life.”

“Focus, brother. Focus. What were you about to say before your head galloped off on that mental sniffing spree?”

“The diesel fuel smell. If the Imp picks up that odor from where he lives, and if he lives underground – like in a

basement – then we just need to find a basement that has reason to smell like the fuel.”

“I think that weird brain of yours just might have something, there. I’m still not sure how we go about finding it.”

“Me either.”

“Truck stops!” Matt suggested. “They have diesel.”

“A truck stop here in the middle of a City?” Michael asked.

“How about a warehouse that has trucks and its own fuel supply?” Matt asked.

“Now you’re cookin’! Any ideas about a place like that?”

“Maybe the bakery down on 27th Street. They have trucks swarming in and out of there all hours of the day carrying bread and goodies all over the state.”

“I wonder if they’ve started putting *phosphatidyl serene* in your Alpha-Bits cereal?” Michael said mostly just to torment his brother with big words.

“Phospha whats?” Matt asked shaking his head.

“It’s a chemical that helps brain cells develop. You’ve been thinking really well since we got that new box of cereal. I was just wondering.”

“You’re not serious, right?”

“I’m *not* serious, right! Well, you’re thinking *has* been jacked up a notch or two here recently.”

“That happens when we’re on a case; hadn’t you noticed?”

“What I’ve noticed is that whenever you choose to use that brain of yours it seems to work very well – more Michael-like, I’d say.”

“Ouch!” Michael said grasping his shoulder. “That was a compliment. It didn’t call for a fist shot.”

“Sometimes my odd *Michael-like brain* tells my fist to do odd things.”

It was worth a grin between them.

Ten minutes later they were at the loading dock behind the bakery. Michael was still rubbing his shoulder.

“We’re smack dab in the middle of Imp-land,” Michael noted. “Wilson Creek makes a horseshoe curve through this part of the city and we’re right in the middle of that – almost like being on an island.”

“There are the fuel tanks,” Matt said, pointing. “Let’s go take a look.”

Michael wanted to correct what his brother had said to: “Let’s go take a sniff,” but decided one fist to a shoulder would be enough for a while. He did speak, however.

“The sign says, *‘Positively No Unauthorized Personnel Beyond This Point’*,” Michael said pointing.

“Our mission authorizes us,” Matt said. “Saving that poor Imp from sniffing deadly fumes, remember.”

It would only be a good justification to them, but Michael would not argue the point.

Matt led the way. They kept to the edge of the parking lot to stay out of the truck’s way and to keep from being noticed.

“Two gasoline pumps and one diesel,” Matt said after looking them over for just a few seconds.

He was more into vehicular things than Michael.

“Which is diesel?”

“The one on the far end.”

They moved in close to examine it.

“Stinks like diesel, for sure,” Michael said.

“That blows a wonderful image,” Matt added.

“What image.”

“You and me and Amanda with her smelling like this stuff. My head must have got too close to yours in bed the other night. I’m saying stuff that usually only comes out of your mouth.”

Michael resisted throwing his own fist. He knelt down to examine the area around the base of the pump. He ran his finger along the asphalt and sniffed it.

“Look there!” he said

Michael got down on his hands and knees. He nodded then pointed.

“A tiny leak in the bottom of the pump. That could be dangerous. One spark and KABOOM!!!”

“We better tell somebody,” Matt said.

“Tell somebody *what?*” came the gruff, raspy, voice from a huge man who towered there above them. A cigarette hung from one corner of his mouth. He didn’t look friendly. He didn’t sound friendly. Even his size 20 boots there on the blacktop in front of them didn’t seem friendly. What had they gotten themselves into that time?”

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CHAPTER NINE: Generosity Made Them Feel Good

Michael spoke first.

“If I were you, Sir, I’d be very careful with that cigarette. There’s a diesel fuel leak down here. No telling how long it’s been seeping through this crack in the pavement and into the ground underneath. One lit ash down here and this whole place could explode.”

The man removed his cigarette from his mouth and – holding it behind his back – bent over to take a look. Matt pointed to the spot on the pump and traced it down to the crack in the asphalt that cradled the leaked fuel.

“You’re right. Let’s move back, boys. I’ll call . . . I don’t know who to call.”

“A pump installation company, maybe?” Michael suggested. “A plumber. Anybody prepared to stop the leak.”

“Yes. We’ll start with our plumber. You guys skedaddle, now. We don’t like kids snooping around. Always trouble.”

“Trouble? Like *now* when we just saved the whole city block from being blown to Kingdom Come?” Matt said clearly upset at the man’s lack of appreciation. “I have a mind to call the EPA.”

Michael pulled on Matt's belt to get him to leave. Half way across the parking lot Michael just couldn't keep from asking:

"How do you know about the EPA? You barely know the ABC's."

"Heard it used as a threat on a TV show once."

"So, you have no idea what it means?"

"Let's see. E-P-A. *Extra-Pretty-Amanda*, maybe."

That night their shoulders would wear twin bruises.

"*Environmental Protection Agency*. It's a watchdog group that works to keep the land, air, and water free from dangerous pollutants."

"I like the Amanda thing better," Matt said.

They got back to the sidewalk out front along the street.

"This is the first real break we've had," Michael said. "We have to find out if there's a basement that runs back under the parking area. Come on. Around front and put your shirt on."

Matt had learned long ago that when his brother had an idea there was really no reason to question it or try and stop it from running its course. He just had to wait it out.

"Just follow my lead," Michael said as he pushed the front door open and entered the reception area of the baking company.

Matt followed trying to unroll the back of his T-shirt down toward his belt. They approached the woman who was standing behind a counter.

"Good afternoon. I'm Michael and my look-alike sidekick here is Matt. We're doing research for a school project. It's about basements here in the city. Does this building have one?"

"No. It doesn't. Isn't school out for the summer?"

"Yes, it is, but as you can see we're eager students and are already getting prepared for next year. You're sure there is no basement under the building or the parking lot out back?"

“Yes. I’m quite sure. It’s the main north-to-south utility lane. That’s the underground channel through which the water lines, electrical trunk lines and sewer culverts run. For a hundred years, it’s been used in that way. No place for a basement down there, you see.”

“Okay then. Thank you for your time. By the way, your bread smells really great.”

“So, does your perfume,” Matt added. “May I ask what it is? I think my girlfriend would like it.”

“Are you sure you’re really not two, very short, thirty-year-old men in disguise?” she said, smiling. “The perfume is *Misty Midnight* and I’m glad you approve of our bread’s aroma. Here’s a voucher. Take it to that window right over there and the man will give you a bag of sample products.”

“Thank you,” Matt said. “You are the kindest bakery reception person we’ve ever met.”

They turned and walked toward the window.

“*Kindest bakery reception person we’ve ever met?*” Michael repeated. “How lame can you get?”

“Hey. It got us a bag of goodies. Don’t underestimate this old man’s crippled English, here, Bro.”

Michael smiled and nodded, effectively conceding that what ‘the old man’ had said seemed to have worked.

“So, what’s next?” Matt asked once they were back out on the sidewalk.

“Junk food! Open the bag!”

Much to their disappointment it contained only loaves of White, Rye, and Whole Wheat bread. Their mother would be pleased, but that would mean they’d have to explain how they got them and that would lead to lots of questions they didn’t want to answer. They weren’t into lying about regular things so began looking for an alternative.

An older couple was walking toward them hand in hand apparently also enjoying the beautiful Spring day. The boys had another one of those twin thoughts.

“Good afternoon, folks,” Matt said as they stopped to greet them.

“Beautiful day, isn’t it,” Michael added.

They smiled their wonderful twin smiles up into the couple’s faces.

“*The Hometown Bakery*, there, has allowed us to select a lucky couple to receive three sample loaves of their famous breads,” Matt said. “We choose you. Congratulations.”

Matt presented the sack to the woman.

“Have a wonderful day!” he added as he and Michael headed on down the street.

“Thank you, boys. Thank you very much,” the man called after them.

The boys turned just long enough to offer a wave and another smile.

“I feel good about that,” Michael said. “How about you?”

“I feel hungry,” Matt said.

“I know you just say things like that to pull my chain. You feel good, too. Admit it.”

“Maybe just a little.”

Matt grinned as Michael began to climb an old, metal, fire escape ladder fastened to the side of a building.

“What are you doing?” Matt asked, following his brother without a clue.

“We should be able to get a good view of things up here on the roof. Maybe it will help us figure stuff.”

As old roofs went, that one wasn’t half bad. The twins had explored many of them in their thirteen years – well, for at least the last eight of them. They did very little exploring back in their diaper days.

The roof sloped gently from front to back and had a series of pyramid shaped skylights running down the center. The surface was chat spread over thick tar. In the summer, it would be a sticky mess, but it was still solid and mostly dry

from the cold of the winter. There were open cans of tar near the front, which Michael thought were probably used for repairs. Why they remained open he couldn't figure.

They looked north from the front.

"There's the creek," Matt said. "It runs this way, right!"

Michael nodded and turned to walk to the back of the building.

"There it is again," Matt said.

Michael had been more into thinking than talking.

"It bends around this area like a horseshoe, remember?"

Matt nodded.

Michael continued.

"There are two kinds of sewers, you know," Michael said, at last beginning to think out loud.

Matt shrugged his shoulders admitting he had never thought about it.

"One section – the storm sewer – is for the water that comes as rain and melted snow," Michael explained. "It runs through huge ducts from the streets, underground, right into the creek back there. The section that carries the waste from homes and business has to go through the waste treatment plants before it can be released into the creek – needs to be treated to kill the bacteria and so on. Angie mentioned the two may have got mixed during the flood"

"Interesting. Perhaps the social studies teacher will let you lecture on it next year," Matt said, throwing up his hands, puzzled at his brother's line of thinking.

Michael ignored the comment and continued.

"If that diesel fuel is leaking into the storm sewer that runs under this area, then it should show up in the water that comes out down there at the creek beyond the parking lot."

Oh! I see. Interesting. Good thinking, even," Matt managed at last, as he, too, began to make the connection. "We used to play down there where it spills into the creek –

until the city built that fifteen-foot-high wire mesh fence around it.”

“That’s the spot. Let’s go take a look.”

It was interesting to Michael that it seemed harder to climb *down* the long ladder than it had to been to climb *up*. Even more interesting was the idea that if they were going down, it really shouldn’t be called climbing at all. Hmmm!

Ten minutes later they were walking east along the bank of the creek toward the spillway where the water left the storm sewer. It was running out at a slow trickle.

They came to the new fence that surrounded it.

“The wire only goes down to the surface of the water,” Matt said. “If I was in the water I could just duck under it and I’d be inside.”

He sat down on the ground and began removing his shoes and sox.

“Maybe not such a good idea,” Michael said.

“Why not? We got to get in there to see if the fuel is coming through. It could be a really dangerous situation if we don’t find out.”

“They’ve narrowed and deepened the creek channel here. The water flows along at a pretty fast pace. I’m just not sure it’s safe to be in there anymore. The undertow could be even stronger than the current we can see on the surface.”

“You worry too much. I’ll be okay. I’m a strong swimmer, right?”

“Right.”

“So why you concerned?”

“Partly just common sense – something that seems to leave *you* at times like this. Partly because that sign says; *No Swimming. Strong Undertow and Dangerous, Jagged Rocks on the Bottom.* And partly because they erected a fifteen-foot fence around it to keep doofusses like you out.”

“That’s just meant for amateurs. I’ll be fine. Here, keep my cell phone and wallet and belt for me.”

He slid down the bank and into the chilly water. He stayed close to shore and moved cautiously. The fence bulged out into the creek. Matt took hold of the wire mesh and moved along it looking for a spot that was deep enough for him to submerge and slip underneath.

“Here’s a good spot,” he called. “Be inside in a sec.”

He took a big breath and ducked beneath the surface. That also meant he had to let go of the wire.

He didn’t come up inside. He didn’t come up outside. Thirty seconds went by. A minute. Michael started panicking. He began climbing the bank, hoping to go up and over the opening of the storm sewer so he could make his way further downstream beyond the fence and look for his brother.

The climb took way too long. Several minutes had elapsed by the time he was up and over and back at the creek on the downstream side. He searched the water with his eyes. There was no sign of Matt.

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CHAPTER TEN: More Black Gunk!

Michael continued making his way along the stream looking for his brother. Tears began to flow. His heart pounded wildly! He called out: "Matt! Matt!"

He rounded a bend. Two separate things caught his attention. The first was a dark figure scurrying up the bank and out of sight. It could have been a large dog. The second was Matt stretched out there on the bank, his back, oddly, propped up against a stump.

Michael ran to him.

"Matt! Matt! You okay?"

He knelt down beside him. Matt's eyes were closed. He didn't respond to Michael's voice. His chest moved in and out slowly indicating he was breathing even if only shallowly. He groaned. His legs and arms were cut – not deeply, but enough to allow the blood to flow. He turned his head and squinted his eyes open. He felt the top of his head and groaned again.

"It's okay, Matt. I'm here. You're alright."

"What happened?"

“The undertow must have grabbed you.”

Matt wasn't thinking clearly yet.

“*Who* grabbed my toes?”

Michael looked at the spot on his brother's head where he had put his hand.

“A goose egg up here the size of a lemon. You must have hit your head on some of those rocks the sign warned about.”

“Rocks? I don't understand. I'm all wet. What's going on?”

He tried to get up, but fell back.

“Just stay put. You've been in an accident in the water. But now you're okay.”

Matt looked up into Michael's face.

“You're crying.”

“Am not!”

“Are too!”

“Am not!”

Matt didn't have the strength or inclination to continue the bickering.

“You were in the water at the storm sewer, remember?”

“Sort of. No. Not really.”

“You were going to swim under the fence and go examine the sewer culvert.”

Clearly Matt didn't remember.

“The diesel fuel leak at the bakery, remember?”

“Maybe.”

“EPA?”

“Ah! Yes! Extra Pretty Amanda?”

“The boy forgets having his brains mangled on the rocks at the bottom of the creek as he struggles to reach the surface for a breath, but he remembers a girl's pretty face.”

“I think you may finally understand me, Bro.”

“You must have taken a serious blow to the head and it’s given you some short-term amnesia. May only last a few minutes or may last a week.”

“How’d I get here on dry ground?”

“Not sure. I assume you managed to swim to shore and crawled out.”

“I want to try to stand up.”

“Not a good idea.”

“Since when did I wait for good ideas to do things?”

“That’s my brother. Let me give you a hand, then.”

He stood with Michael’s help and after a few wobbly moments managed to stand there without any support.

“A small mystery here, Matt.”

“What?”

“The front of you – legs, shorts, chest – are clean. The back of you is muddy.”

“And?”

“And, that means you didn’t crawl out or you’d be filthy on your front, especially your knees.”

“You’re saying I scooted out on my butt?”

“That wouldn’t account for your muddy back. And, it wouldn’t account for this!”

He pointed to Matt’s wrists.

“Look familiar?”

Matt held up his hands and looked to see what Michael was talking about.

“My gosh, Michael! That black gunk around my wrists again.”

“You know what that means.”

“That it was the Imp that pulled me out of the water, belly up.”

“Now I know what I saw hurrying away when I rounded the corner back there,” Michael said. “I thought it was a big dog, but my attention was immediately drawn to you lying on the bank so my first impression must have been wrong. It had to be the Imp!”

“You’re saying the Imp saved my life?”

“That, plus we’ve finally focused in on where he stays, I’ll bet.”

Matt shook his head.

“Yeah. It’s beginning to come back. I was in the water and I had just submerged to move under the fence. I let go to begin pulling myself through the water with my arms when the current caught my legs and sucked me away, feet first. Then I don’t really remember anything more.”

“Probably because you were being slammed around against the rocks and knocked unconscious.”

“I suppose there’s a slim chance that might account for it. Where were you while all this was going on?” Matt asked, moving back down to a sitting position against the stump.

When you didn’t surface, I climbed the bank above the cement spillway and then slid down this side so I could come and look for you in the water. It was steep and rocky and took a long time.”

“So, while you were climbing, the Imp spotted me and pulled me out.”

“That’s the way I see it,” Michael said.

“You think he’d been following us?”

“Either that or, like I said, our good detective work had led us close to where he hangs out.”

“Are we good or what?” Matt said offering a feeble high-five.

“We’re good. You’re damaged. How are we going to handle this with everybody?”

“Call Em! She wanted in. Have her bring a washrag and towel and some antiseptic for my cuts.”

It was obvious that Matt's thinking was clearing up.

The call was made. She lived nearly a mile away, but she was a good runner and arrived within fifteen minutes.

"I brought some bottles of water, too, to wash out the cuts Michael described. And a variety of Band-Aids. You poor dear. Does it hurt awful?"

"Not really. Let's just get this clean up over with."

Emily and Michael soon had Matt cleaned up.

Interesting to Matt, it had felt much nicer having Emily washing him off than Michael.

"Almost presentable," She said joking. "It seems those cuts aren't as bad as they looked; still bleeding a little bit, though. How you going to explain this to your folks?"

"Who's going to explain it? We'll just not tell them."

"Yeah. Right. Their son comes in with bleeding cuts and bruises all over his body and you think they aren't going to be at least a little interested?"

"Oh. Yeah. Humm," Michael said. "Well for starters he can wear his T-shirt to cover his chest and back."

"I got it!" Matt said.

"When we get home, I'll crawl up onto the porch roof and go into our room through the window. I'll put on some jeans and a long-sleeved shirt. They'll never know."

"I wouldn't count on it," she said stomping her foot. "I asked you guys to be careful."

"And we *were*, except for that one time when I got into the creek," Matt said turning to Michael trying to get a jump on the lecture he felt sure was coming his way. "I know. It's like being prepared for that one time in a thousand, you're going to say. To make sure I keep myself safe I don't dare *ever* take unnecessary chances. I don't like the idea, but I'll give it careful consideration – later. Now, help me get home."

* * *

Although Matt had made the climb up onto the porch roof hundreds of times before, it was exceptionally difficult that day. His body had taken a real beating in the swift current of Wilson Creek. His muscles ached. His strength had been sapped. Sudden movement of his head made him woozy.

Making matters even worse, it turned out the climb had been unnecessary. Both parents were still at work. Michael crossed the kitchen to the stairs.

"Think! Think! Think!" he said to himself pounding his forehead with the ball of his palm as if to emphasize how dumb it had been not to check on the location of their parents before starting Matt up the trellis.

He sped up the steps and arrived at the window well ahead of Matt, but not in time to save him the agony of the climb.

"Even though we cleaned you up, I'd suggest a warm soapy shower to make sure you're really clean," Michael said. "There's still blood oozing out of some of the cuts and infection would be hard to explain to our folks."

"Not to mention it just might do some damage to this fantastic specimen of a body," Matt said in a feeble attempt to make light of it all.

"To the shower then," Michael said. "Use the antiseptic soap in the green bottle."

"Probably a good idea. What shall I wear?"

"In the shower?" Michael teased.

"No, Duffus. After. After the shower."

"Like you said, jeans and a sweat shirt would probably come closest to looking legitimate to Mom and Dad."

Matt nodded his agreement as he entered the bathroom.

"Don't forget to shampoo your hair," Michael called after him. "It's still muddy in back. If you get to feeling faint, call me."

"Yes, mother!"

Michael smiled at his brother's humorous sarcasm. He

slipped out of his shoes and lay back on his bed to think. He was sure they had been very close to finding the Imp's . . . what!?. . . Home? Den? Lair? His *place*, at any rate.

The bigger question suddenly came to him and he sat up, saying it out loud.

"What do we do when we find it?"

That led to thinking about their options. They could provide food and clothes so the Imp didn't have to take things. The food bank at their church would surely help with that. But what about the Imp himself? He seemed to be alone or maybe there was a Mrs. Imp or a Brother or Sister Imp living with him. Probably not a Mrs. He just seemed too young – a kid Imp. Maybe there was a mother or father Imp.

Michael realized that he had no answers and knew there would be none until they could actually sit down with the Imp and figure it all out. That meant they needed to go back to trying to tame it or whatever the process might be. The fact that it was following them should make that easier.

Their grandfather had told them about going squirrel hunting when he was a boy – something neither of the twins would have the heart to do. He said that to find a squirrel you had to stop walking and looking and just sit still. Squirrels were inquisitive and would always come and show themselves to you.

That's what they needed to do. Just go sit among the trees along the creek close to the spillway. Suddenly he had an even better idea!

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CHAPTER ELEVEN: Like Hunting a Squirrel

Matt emerged from the bathroom toweling down his hair.

"I got a way to kill two birds with one stone, handsome twin brother of mine," Michael said enthusiastically.

"Two things about that," Matt said taking a seat on the edge of his bed. "First, you only ever say *I'm* handsome because, being your identical twin, that make *you* handsome, also. Second, you hate that saying about killing poor little defenseless birds. What's really up?"

"Okay you got me on the first one and I have no idea what made me say that terrible second one. We're going camping tonight!"

"I don't think so. I'm not feeling so good."

"Fact one," Michael began. "Regardless of how well you cover up, Mom is bound to know something's wrong. I don't know how, but she *always* does. Fact two, by not being here we keep her from sniffing out the truth. Fact three, we need to go squirrel hunting for the Imp."

"I was following you right up to the squirrel thing."

"We need to get close to the Imp. We need to get him to

trust us, right?"

Matt nodded, gingerly scooting back to lie down, his head on his pillow.

"I say we camp out there in the trees along Wilson Creek.

Now we have very good reason to think that's his area – where he lives. If we are there on his home turf he should be braver about things. I'm betting if we're there he'll come to us."

"You never bet. This thing has really got to you, hasn't it?"

"You in or not?" Michael said ignoring his comment.

"How you gonna get Mom and Dad to let us go?"

"I've been thinking about that. We feel the need to celebrate the beginning of summer vacation and we never really did anything to celebrate our 13th birthday."

"Hit them with the old double-whammy, huh? Not so shabby. It may just work. I take it you'll do the talking without me present so they don't see me."

"Hadn't thought that far, but you have a really good point there. So, you up for it?"

"I guess. There will be no trotting, I can tell you that, but sure. It's really all for the good and wellbeing of the Imp and once it's all over our folks will be proud of us – you think?"

"They're always proud of us, so yes, I think?"

"We'll both start out in sweat shirts and jeans. If they ask we'll say we expect it to get chilly tonight – which, in fact, is true."

"Tent or just sleeping bags?" Matt asked.

"No rain in the forecast. I'd vote for just bags. Less threatening to the Imp than a tent I'd think."

"Easier to carry, too," Matt added. "I'm not going to be much help in that department."

"Dad's car's pulling in," Michael said, jumping up and going to the window to make sure. "That's good. He's always

the easiest touch when it comes to letting us do guy stuff on our own. I'll go talk to him. You get dressed and get our camping gear together."

Matt nodded as Michael double stepped his way down the stairs.

"Wonderful father who is loved so much by his mature, responsible, twin, sons," Michael began going for a humorous start to the request.

"No!" their father said, meeting joke with joke.

Michael ignored the 'N' word and went on to explain what they wanted to do, why they felt they deserved to do it and the precautions they would take.

"Fine," came his father's answer.

"Fine? No hassling? No safety lectures? No reminding us about the no girls in our sleeping bags rule."

"Nope. I think it's a great idea. Be careful. Have fun. Behave the way you know Mom and I expect you to behave. That's it. Be sure to take a phone."

Moderately stunned at how easy it had been he returned upstairs ready to take full credit for convincing his dad about it all. He backed off a bit.

"We can go. Let's get out of here before Mom gets home. No need to bother her about it all."

"No need to let her try and change Dad's mind is more like it," Matt said.

Michael changed clothes as Matt organized backpacks on the beds. They were soon down stairs and quickly out the door.

"Don't you want food?" their father called, holding up a large brown bag he had stuffed full of goodies."

"Thank you, thoughtful and beloved father," Michael joked, taking the bag with one hand and administering a quick hug to the man's waist with the other."

Their father just stood there shaking his head.

"That was relatively easy," Matt said once they were out of their father's hearing range.

"It won't be if we don't head for the tall grass. That's Mom's car heading home."

They crouched down in the grass and waited for her to pass. They loved their mother dearly and would never intentionally do anything to hurt her. The fact was, however, she had never been a 13 year old boy so couldn't really understand how it was and how they thought and what they needed. At least those were some of the reasons they gave themselves for avoiding her in such situations.

They, of course, had never been a mother so they couldn't understand *her* concerns and *her* needs either. *That*, however, had never entered their heads.

Michael carried his backpack and both sleeping bags to make the trek easier on Matt. Matt had his backpack and the sack of food. They stopped often for Matt to rest without ever referring to it in that way.

It was exactly five o'clock as they stopped on the sidewalk in front of the narrow corridor between the bakery and the jewelry store, which would give them access to the creek behind.

A patrol car pulled up and stopped. Matt thought of the police as an unpleasant necessity. Michael thought they were cool.

"Don't talk to him," Matt said in a low voice from behind his brother.

"It's Robert, Angie's son-in-law," Michael explained before going over to the car.

"Hey! Robert. What's cookin'?"

"Night shift this weekend. What you guys up to?"

"Going to camp back by the creek near the spillway. That's not a problem, is it?"

"No. I suppose not. I'd stay out of the water though. There's been a fuel leak reported in the area and it may have

got into the runoff water. There's also a dangerous current since they dredged it back in there."

"Thanks for the heads up. By the way is it okay if we build a small campfire?"

"If you'll keep it really small. Build it close to the water. Wet down the area and circle it with good sized stones. Make sure there aren't any branches right above it."

"Thanks, and good advice by the way."

"Have fun. I used to camp out back there myself as a boy. If you brought hot dogs, there may be some packages of buns in the dumpster behind the bakery. Week old but still wrapped and they were always good enough for me."

He pulled away and the twins made their way through the narrow space to the rear of the buildings. A few minutes later they had selected a grassy spot that was sheltered to the rear by trees and the little hill, and open in front across a grassy area out to the creek. There was still the faint smell of diesel fuel in the air.

They stowed their gear and Matt sat down to rest. Michael went about finding kindling and stones to make a fire circle. In no time, he had a small fire flickering within the safety of the rock, firewall.

They unrolled the sleeping bags to lounge on – softer than the ground by far.

"So, do we just sit here or do we put out some Imp Bait?" Matt asked.

"If by *Imp Bait* you mean setting out an offering of delicious tidbits to tempt him to come close to us, then, yes, I think we should."

The snack was prepared and placed at the edge of the circle of light spread by the campfire. By 6:15 they felt settled in and had munched their way well into the sack of treats their father had assembled for them. The top of the sun just barely showed above the buildings to the west and it would soon be nighttime dark. With the trees behind them and the empty, open, field beyond the creek, the area remained dark in the

absence of city lights.

"This is just how it should be, camping out," Michael said sitting cross-legged and poking at the fire with a stick. "The world all dark; a sky full of stars above; and a crackling fire lighting up our tiny little camp site. Life's good wouldn't you say?"

Matt nodded, adding, "And *no* homework!"

They usually enjoyed being alone together and were never at a loss for things to talk about. In terms of bravery, one Matt, plus one Michael, usually equaled at least three and often four guys worth of actual courage. When they were together they always felt safe – well, *almost* always!

There was a sudden noise in the bushes behind them. Twigs were being broken on the ground as something was approaching them. Neither one turned to look.

"The Imp, you think?" Matt asked in a whisper.

"Sounds *really* big," Michael answered, also softly, as he turned slowly to look behind them. "Maybe it's the Imp's father."

"Hadn't counted on *that*, for sure," Matt said, scooting closer to his brother. "Where's grandpa's squirrel gun when you need it?"

Whatever it was loomed above them in the darkness, standing over six feet tall, with broad shoulders and long arms. Its silhouette was indistinct against the bushes and tree limbs. It moved awkwardly pushing aside the brush. Michael's arm slipped around his brother's shoulders pulling them even closer together.

Feeling *safe* had instantly turned into being *terrified!*

CHAPTER TWELVE:

Imp Bait

"How's it going, campers?" came a deep voice out of the darkness.

Neither boy spoke – they *shivered*, but didn't speak.

The massive form came out into the open faintly lit by the fire.

"Robert! You scared us to death – well you know what I mean," Michael said.

"Sorry about that. Just thought I'd drop by to see how things were going."

"To check up on us, you really mean," Matt said speaking his true feelings.

"Me. Check up on you? Come now. I really came for a hot dog."

He handed them a package of buns from the dumpster.

"Got 'em," Michael said cheerfully. "Just haven't attacked them yet. Sounds good though. Got five minutes?"

"A man my size always has five minutes when there's a promise of food at the other end."

Robert took a seat in the grass, knees up to support his arms. Matt scooted back away from the other two. He intentionally made the move obvious.

Robert looked at him as Michael went about slipping the ends of the hot dogs onto the long sticks he had cut.

"Is it me as a person you hate, Matt, or is it cops in general?"

"I don't hate you. Cops just make me uneasy."

"I understand. *Teenagers* make *me* uneasy."

"Why? That makes no sense."

"Who commits the most armed robberies here in the city?" Robert asked.

"I don't know."

"Teenagers. Who kills the most people in car accidents here in the city?"

"I don't know."

"Teenagers – 400 per cent more than adults in general. What group vandalizes businesses and public property the most in this city?"

"My guess would be teenagers since that's the apparent topic."

"Right. Last year to the tune of nearly six million dollars' worth of needless damage."

"*Mindless* damage," Michael added thinking it clarified the motivation of most vandals. He continued.

"They just don't think beyond the end of their noses. They're selfish – only into life for the pleasures of the moment with no thoughts about the long-term consequences or how their actions really hurt others."

"I feel ganged up on here, guys," Matt said scooting even further away.

"Sorry," Robert said.

"But you cops are always watching us," Matt said. "It's

creepy."

"And *why* might we be watching young teenagers?"

"Oh! I get it. Because the few bad apples among us make us all suspects. That's not fair."

"It's how things are, unfortunately," Robert said. "When you belong to a group that is identified in the minds of others as being a threat, you will be treated as if you were just as bad as the worst of your group."

"So what do we do about that?"

"Live your lives like you boys do. Show the folks around you what a great guy *you* are. Then maybe they will begin thinking others like you are also great. Perhaps it will begin counterbalancing the bad image."

"As much as I hate to admit it, I guess you're an okay guy, Robert. I should have known Angie's kid would be a good guy. It's that 'a few bad apples' thing."

"I don't understand," Robert said.

"A few cops who seem to enjoy hassling us guys for no good reason – the bad apples – give all you cops a bad name."

"Interesting," Robert said. "I'd never thought about it in reverse like that. Thanks. I will need to think on it."

Matt wasn't quite finished.

"Dad and Mom are always saying I shouldn't judge other people until I take time to get to know them. I think I see what they mean. Just never thought it applied to me – like you said, in reverse – that way."

He moved closer to Robert and offered his hand for a shake.

"You want catsup or mustard on your hotdog?" Matt asked.

"He wants neither," Michael said. "We came off without either one."

Robert finished his treat and then left assuring the boys

that if he returned – and that he didn't plan to – he would call out so they wouldn't be . . . *startled*, a kind change from the word *scared* that first came into his mind.

Michael went about gathering a supply of wood - enough that he figured should last the night – and stacked it close to the fire. They talked together about things that were important to them: girls, painting Zeke's garage, girls, their eventual career choices, girls, what they were going to do if and when the Imp showed up, girls (well, the reader get's the idea).

Matt was lying back on his bedroll looking up at the stars through the tree branches. Michel was sitting up watching the flames. He looked at his watch and whispered to his brother.

"Don't move. It's 2:12 a.m. and I think we're about to make contact. He's crouching in the shadows just beyond the light straight ahead of me. I'm guessing it's best if we don't talk to him yet."

"Probably. Don't let him know you see him. I'm going to scoot up a bit so I can take a look, okay?"

"Okay. Just don't make a sudden move."

Presently, Matt had his head propped up against his inflatable pillow and had a good view.

"Should we continue talking to each other out loud like we were?" he asked.

"In low tones, should be okay – more natural, I'd think."

"I don't suppose we should be scared about all this, should we?" Matt asked, still in a whisper.

"He saved your life, for gosh sakes. I doubt if he came back to bludgeon you."

"To *what* me?"

"Beat you silly!"

"Now was *that* so hard – using words real people understand?"

Usually it would have been cause for chuckles between them. They settled for an exchange of quick grins.

"If he understands language, maybe we should say things between us to make him feel comfortable," Michael suggested.

"Can't hurt," Matt agreed.

"So," Michael began a bit louder than before, "I sure wish we could meet the guy who pulled you out of the water."

"Yeah! I'd like to say thank you to him and see if there's anything we can do for him."

They each privately thought it had been a very good start.

"He sure can run fast," Michael said.

"That is if he's the same guy we met at the newspaper office."

"You mean the old wooden building at the edge of the city?" Michael said thinking the Imp might not know a newspaper office from a fire station.

Matt understood and nodded.

"He seems like a nice guy," Matt continued.

"Yes, he does. I think he would make a good friend."

The Imp had been crawling closer to the food they had set on a paper napkin. The white of the paper made it show up easily in the flickering light of the fire – one of those unplanned good things that so often happened for the twins.

As the boys kept talking – and watching out of the corners of their eyes – the Imp knelt by the food and sat back on his legs. He picked up and sniffed the peanut butter sandwich. He licked it and made a pleasant sound. He took a bite and seemed to like it. He picked up the apple and for a time alternated between the two – a bite of sandwich; a bite of apple.

The Imp was still a puzzle to the twins. Oh, there in the light of the fire it was suddenly quite clear that the Imp was a boy – about their age probably – but he made sounds instead of using words. While he ate, he pushed his long hair away from the front of his face. Although it was filthy his face had

very pleasant features – more square than round – more flat than puffy.

Michael felt the time had come to stop the dilly dallying around. He turned his head slowly and spoke directly to the Imp.

"We're glad you came to see us tonight."

The Imp looked directly at Michael though didn't stop eating. Michael continued speaking.

"My name is Michael. My brother is Matt. As you can probably tell we are identical twins."

The Imp looked from Michael to Matt and then back to Michael. It appeared that he had understood.

Matt figured it was his turn to jump into the conversation.

"We'd like to know your name."

He didn't expect anything other than perhaps another grunt or strange noise or the flash of his dark eyes. Mostly he hoped a question wouldn't scare him off.

"My name's Jerry," the Imp said, spoken in English as plain as any English the boys had ever heard English spoken.

"Thanks for the food. I have to go, now."

He shook his hair back over the front of his face, turned, and disappeared into the darkness. The twins looked at each other, amazed and stunned.

That stunned-ness soon turned to elation. Michael stood.

"Yes! Yes! Yes!" he said doing that arm pulling and knee raising thing guys do.

"Should we follow him?" Matt asked sitting up.

"I'd vote no. We need to let him know we respect his decisions about us. But did you hear him talk? Of course, you heard him talk. Am I babbling? Yes, I guess I'm babbling. I do that when I'm nervous, but then you know that don't you? Your turn. I'll just shut up, now."

Michael sat back down.

"There was sadness in his tone I thought," Matt said.

For him to tune into such things – well for him to admit that he had tuned in to such things – was rare.

"Yes. Now that you mention it. There was a sadness. I wonder why?"

"Doh!" came Matt's immediate response. "Maybe because he's our age and living on his own in the filth of the sewers under this big, often unfriendly city."

"It just has to be the *Alpha-Bits*," Michael said grinning.

"What?"

"Your big words. Your sudden sensitivity. Your new-found compassion."

"Cut it out. I've just rubbed shoulders with you for too long. I've tried to resist, but you've ruined me, anyway."

They laughed – partly at the humor of the situation, but mostly it was just that nervous kind of release-laughing that comes after a long period of tension.

"Shall we call Em?" Matt asked at last.

"It would only wake her up in the middle of the night, make her mad until she saw who it was from, and then worry her until she found out why we were calling," Michael said. "Of course, we should call her!"

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN: Great Balls of Fire!

Emily seemed as happy as *they* were. She said that *she* had some news as well and would meet them at Angie's office at seven later that morning.

At 2:15 Matt pocketed the phone.

At 2:16 they crawled into their sleeping bags.

At 2:18 Michael was complaining that he was far too excited to be able to get to sleep.

At 2:20 they were both snoring.

* * *

It was 6:30 when Michael stretched himself awake. He poked Matt.

"It's late. We got to get packing to meet Em on time."

Without the usual hassle that he enjoyed giving his brother at that time of the day, Matt was quickly out of his bag and into his shoes. The fire had burned itself out but still they doused the area inside the fire circle and then stirred it with sticks to make sure no embers remained.

"I'm feeling pretty much back to normal," Matt offered as they hefted their back packs and started up the gentle slope toward the back of the bakery."

"Great!" Michael said. "Here, you can carry your own sleeping bag then."

"Ah! Brotherly love," Matt said. "What would I do without it?"

Actually, he felt better doing his part. As much as Matt complained about work, he took pride in always pulling his own weight on projects.

Emily was waiting outside Angie's office when the boys arrived at 7: 01. They sat on the old, concrete, steps, with Em between them.

"So, whatcha got?" Matt asked.

"Remember about the man's body that was found by the creek after the flood at the beginning of April?"

The boys nodded unsure about where she was going with it.

"Well, I got to wondering where he could have come from."

"Upstream from us, I'd guess," Michael said suggesting the obvious.

Em nodded.

"When I heard the rains were even harder and lasted longer up at Lafayette, north of here, I figured he might have come from there. Angie helped me go through the newspaper archives – missing persons to be specific. We didn't find anything. What we did find though was more than a little interesting."

"Give!" Matt said, impatient with the extended lead-in for which Em – well, girls in general – was famous.

"For several years, Lafayette has been having their own Imp problem. It was a little different. The Imp left change – pennies and nickels mostly. Never enough to cover the cost of what was taken, but always something."

"And?" Michael asked catching his brother's impatience. He twirled his finger so she would speed up the story.

"*And*, after the flood it all stopped. No more Imp snatchings in Lafayette."

"So, you think the dead guy was the Lafayette Imp?" Matt said jumping ahead. "But how does that connect to our Imp who is neither a man or dead?"

"*Nor* dead," Michael said correcting his brother out of habit. "Either-*or* and neither-*nor*. Remember?"

Matt shivered and shook his head. Em ignored the exchange and continued.

"The *connection* is that as soon as it stopped up there, it started down here."

"Like two Imps you mean," Michael said. "Both washed down stream. One was killed and one became *our* Imp."

"That's my best guess."

"Good work, Em!" Matt said.

Michael's face turned suddenly sad.

"You know what else all of this could mean?" he said. "It could mean that the dead man was our Imp's father."

"That might explain the sadness in his voice last night," Matt said his face also sobering.

"That poor kid," Emily said. "What can we do?"

"It's time for us to call on our ever-trustworthy superhero, *Super Angie*. She'll know."

They were immediately inside, crowded around her desk.

As usual, Michael was the spokesperson. He explained the situation and Angie responded.

"If it's true that the Imp is a juvenile – under eighteen – then the Social Service Department will need to be involved. They protect and care for kids who have no responsible adults in their lives."

"A foster home," you mean?" Matt said.

"Something like that. Let me make some calls. I'll keep it all hypothetical to find out how they proceed in cases like this. Give me an hour."

"Remember we really aren't even sure these are the facts," Michael pointed out.

"We need to get back there and talk it out with the Imp – well, with Jerry," Matt said. "The Imp now has a name."

"Better call Mom and tell her we're alright," Michael said.

"I agree," Matt said. "You better call Mom and tell her we're alright."

The call was made. They stowed their things at the office. With hands full of cookies from Angie's never-ending-cookie-plate, the three of them left, heading East.

Emily could trot with the best of them – something that had helped her be one of the guys when younger, but now didn't seem to be helping her image as a girl, wanting to attract the boys. Regardless, she trotted along between her two best friends.

"You smell great," Matt said.

"Well, thank you, Mattie" Michael said trying to be funny.

It broke the mood and Emily was more than a little put out at him. She wanted Matt to think she smelled good. She wanted both of them to think of her as a girl.

They made their way through the space between the buildings and walked back toward the creek. Matt pointed out the various points of interest to Emily – the bakery, the parking lot, the fuel pumps and then the storm sewer spillway.

He wasn't sure why he was doing it. She'd been there with them dozens of times. Finally, they were at the spillway looking down from the concrete slab across the top.

"Look there?" Matt said, pointing to the wire mesh where it attached to the closest wooden pole. "See how the mesh droops, alternating back and forth on both sides of the pole all the way down to the ground."

"Good going, Matt!" Michael said.

"I'm lost guys. Guess I'm too much of a *girl* to figure out what you're seeing."

Matt explained. "It's like a ladder where the weight of the person pushed the wire down into loops."

"And, it looks like it's been used a lot," Michael added.

"The Imp's ladder, you think?" Emily asked. "I'd bet on it," Michael said.

"There he goes *betting* again," Matt said. "This case has driven Michael batty. Earlier he was into killing off little birds and squirrels."

Emily looked puzzled.

"Long story that really doesn't fit what you've just been told. Later," Michael said. "The point is that this may be where the Imp – that is, Jerry – stays."

Matt was half way down the wire ladder by that time. Michael followed. Emily remained up top as lookout.

"The diesel smell is *really* bad down here," Matt said sniffing the air. "Worse than I remember it."

"Em," Michael called up to her. "Go check the base of the diesel pump and see if there's still a leak. It will be the one on your left."

"Or," Matt called up, "look for the one labeled diesel."

He chuckled at his little joke. The others got it. The others ignored it.

"I'm on it," Em said.

She was back almost immediately.

"Well, I don't know how much it was leaking before, but now it's running a regular stream – about the size of a pencil lead."

"That's *way* more than before. Call Angie. Have her call Robert the cop and let him handle it. We're going to walk back into the big cement storm sewer here and see what we can find. There's only a little water trickling down the center right now."

"When I get off my phone with Angie, I'll call you on yours so you can keep me informed," Emily said.

"Okay. Not sure phones will work from underground like this, but we can try."

The twins walked further and further into the very dark, gently, upward, sloping culvert. One of the first things Matt noticed was the old, concrete walls, with cracks here and there.

"Look there," he said. "Chunks of broken concrete, and look at the little stones in them."

They stopped and bent down picking up several samples.

"Just like the ones the Imp left at Angie's place," Michael said.

"That suggests we're probably on the right track, here," Matt added.

They continued. The duct was generally circular, ten feet top to bottom and side to side. They both had flashlights still hooked to their belt from earlier that morning.

The phone rang.

"Hey!" Michael said.

It was Emily, of course.

"Got hold of Angie. She'll handle the leak. Said for you guys to be very careful. The fumes could cause both unconsciousness and brain damage not to mention they could explode. I don't think it's a good idea for you to be in there."

"Your, *'not-a-good-idea-feeling'*, has been noted. We're in about fifty yards. Coming upon a T in the culvert going off to the left and right. Probably near the street in front of the bakery. The fumes are all behind us now so we've passed the place where the leak enters the sewer. I'm looking into the arm of the T going off to the right – only about six feet tall and up high. It comes in some four feet above the floor of this main duct. No water draining from it."

Although he had not mentioned it to Emily, there was a light coming from back inside the newly discovered culvert.

They peered in without using their flashlights. There, about ten feet inside, sat Jerry. He was not aware of their presence and continued working on something in his lap. The light came from a small torch just beyond him. It was cradled in the opening of a cement block apparently brought in for that purpose. The torch emitted black smoke as if burning from a tar base. Further inside, still, was an old mattress – apparently, his bed. There were other things.

"Probably from the tar cans on that roof we were on," Michael whispered.

Matt sneezed from the smoke. It startled – perhaps frightened – Jerry and he grabbed his torch and threw it in the boy's direction without really looking. They ducked and the torch landed in the water by their feet. Caught in the current, it moved rapidly down toward the spillway. Having a tar base, it remained lit even in water.

"Big potential problem, Em," Michael called into the phone. "Run as fast as your beautiful legs will take you back to the front sidewalk."

"Beautiful? Really?"

"Run. Now! We could have an explosion down here any second and it would blow you sky high up there."

"I'm running!"

"So sorry," came a voice from up above them.

It was Jerry kneeling at the entrance of his tunnel.

"Explosion?" he asked.

"When the torch floats down to where there is diesel fuel entering the water."

Suddenly a brilliant, orange, fireball, burst to life downstream from them. It headed right up the culvert toward the twins. The heat was immediately intense. The huge culvert was falling in down toward the creek.

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN: Achieving the IMPossible!

Emily was crying.

Robert was trying to console her.

They were both on the sidewalk in front of the bakery.

Firemen worked from trucks in the parking lot behind the building.

The worst of the fireball had followed the fuel trail in the water stream and spewed itself out the spillway opening, across the stream, setting ablaze the small empty field beyond. There had been no word from the boys since Michael reported the potential problem to Em on the phone. The fire continued in the crumbling storm sewer so rescuers had been unable to enter.

Fifteen minutes had passed from the moment of the explosion. From where they were standing, looking back down the long corridor between the buildings, Em and Robert could see very little other than billowing, black smoke.

There was a clank and scraping screech behind them. They turned looking out into the empty street. Traffic had been stopped. Again, the sound came. Robert pointed.

“Shall we take bets on whose heads are about to pop up out of the manhole covered by that vibrating lid?”

They ran to the center of the street. Robert knelt and pulled the heavy round manhole cover away from the opening.

“Hey, guys. What’s cookin’,” Matt said as his smiling, smudged face rose from the hole.

“*You’ll* be cooking – that’s what – when your folks find out what you’ve been up to,” Robert said helping him out onto the street. He reached back into the hole, thinking it would be Michael needing a hand up.

“I better do that,” Matt said. “The next face you see will be that of the Shadow Imp – known to us now as Jerry Miller. His filthy hands would ruin that uniform and then I’d have your wife on my case.”

Robert looked puzzled and stepped back.

Em moved closer to get a better look.

Matt reached into the manhole and pulled Jerry out onto the street. He shielded his eyes from the bright of day and stood close to Matt. He was shorter than the boys had reported. Michael was also soon up onto the street and the cover was replaced.

“I was so worried about you two – er three,” Em said. She administered a long, strong, hug to each of the twins. She hesitated a moment before offering her arms to Jerry – slimy, filthy, stinking, Jerry. He moved quickly behind the twins as if for protection from the *She Thing*.

“In a nutshell, here’s what we’ve learned from Jerry,” Michael began. “It’s actually a lot like your hypothesis, Em. He and his father, Gerald Miller, Senior, have lived for years up in Lafayette. They were homeless and made a place for themselves in the storm sewers up there. Jerry’s father worked when he could – he was a disabled veteran and was paralyzed on his left side. He’d pay something in change for everything they took. Not having change, Jerry started leaving stones, instead when he found himself down here alone.

“When the heavy rains came, the sewers flooded in a

hurry, catching them off guard and sweeping them through miles of ducts under the city and finally down here into Wilson Creek. They got separated. When Jerry couldn't find his dad, he made for the storm sewers here in Springfield because that's where he knew how to live. He thinks he's eleven – tall for his age. Mother died five or six years ago. That's when their life began falling apart. They lost their apartment and car and most everything.

"We've told Jerry that it is very likely his father is dead. Eventually, we will have to help him identify the man from pictures, I suppose, so he can know for sure one way or the other."

"I'll call Social Services," Robert said.

"I'm sure that's the very by-the-book, cop-like thing to do at a time like this, Sir," Matt said, "but how about easing up on that for just a few minutes here while you hear us out. Let's take care of first things first.

"My brother and I are the only people Jerry knows in the whole world. Let us take him home and do what we can to clean him up. We'll find clothes for him and get some of our Mom's good cookin' in him. Let him stay the night with us. Then in the morning we can meet with your Social Service Guys – at our comfortable house, not at their dingy, scary old offices down town."

"Like my brother said, Robert. Jerry's not a freak, but if this all gets out now and attaches to him, he'll never live it down. You can just imagine what the kids will have to say. And you know he'll fare better if he meets the authorities looking like a real kid instead of like the Shadow Imp."

"You boys make a strong case. I'll tell you what. I'll personally take Jerry into protective custody, as of this minute. I'll fix it with my Captain. I'll stay out at your house so the responsibility for his welfare will be with me, not you. You sure your parents will go for this?"

"Of course, they will," came the voice of the twin's father from behind them."

"Dad!" the twins said as one, turning.

“Imagine meeting you here,” Michael continued, not having had time to formulate a good story for him.

The boys looked at Em. She shrugged.

“Your parents had to be told,” she said. “We had no idea if you were alive or dead down there.”

Angie also hurried up to them, accompanied by a stern looking woman in a tailored suit. Robert ushered them back a few steps just out of ear shot of the others. In a few minutes, they returned.

“Angie, my dear mother-in-law, has apparently been working on this for hours. I think everyone will approve of the plan.”

* * *

Just exactly what that plan was had not been disclosed there on the street. The three boys walked to the twin’s home. That was partly because Jerry was skittish about entering a car and partly because once he’d ridden in one it would have had to have been burned. There was no polite way to say it – Jerry stunk! Black Bears smelled better than Jerry. A herd of disgruntled skunks smelled better than Jerry. One hundred dozen spoiled egg smelled better than Jerry!

Four tubs of hot water and a full bar of soap later, the twins pronounced Jerry fully scrubbed, shampooed, and presentable. Michael trimmed the front of the boy’s hair into eyebrow length bangs. It was black and hung to his shoulders. It had the hint of a wave and actually looked quite striking once combed. They fitted him out with some of their clothes from years past – jeans and a T-shirt, sox and shoes. He immediately removed the shoes that Matt had forced onto his feet complaining they were uncomfortable though he was willing to tolerate the soft, white, cotton, socks to which he actually took quite a fancy. He checked his toes through the fabric as if to make sure they were still in there.

“Our Mom and Dad are the two greatest people you’ll ever meet so don’t be afraid or anything,” Michael said preparing him as best he could to go down stairs and meet everybody.

Their father had thinned the crowd to just him and his wife, Em, Robert, Angie, and the lady in the suit from Social Services. Even so, the twins worried it would seem like too much of a crowd and frighten him.

“Ready to meet some really cool folks, Jerry?” Matt asked before they started down the stairs.

“Cool?” Jerry asked clearly puzzled at the use of the word.

“Kid talk meaning Great. Wonderful. Loving. Nice.”

“Cool’s a really . . . *cool* word, I guess,” he said smiling for the first time in the twins’ presence.

It was a wonderful smile that suddenly gave life to a handsome, if very pale, young face.

In the end, Jerry handled the crowd very well. The woman from Social Services made the important announcement. Happily, she talked far friendlier than she looked. She had been busy, as well.

“Jerry, all these nice people have put their heads together and have come up with what I think is a good plan. I’ve spoken with everyone who is involved and here is what we want to try.

“There is an older woman who lives close to the twins’ home – just two blocks into the city from here. She raised five boys of her own and has occasionally cared for foster children for our agency. I want you to meet her in the morning. If the two of you agree to it, you will be living with Mrs. Stephens.”

“Is she pretty?” Jerry asked.

Matt had the answer.

“Not bad for an elderly lady. Really! Not bad.”

A chuckle rippled through the group.

The others left. Michael, Matt and Jerry sat down to lunch with the twins’ parents.

“Well, I’d say things worked out pretty well,” Michael said hoping their parents would just skip over any disciplinary thoughts and enjoy the moment.”

Their mother responded.

“Yes, I’d say things have worked out very well. Your father and I are quite proud of you both.”

The twins relaxed.

Things seemed to be going in their favor.

Their mother was not quite finished.

“However, there is still the matter of which one of you was bleeding all over your shower yesterday and why?”

Michael looked at Matt and shrugged.

“I told you. Mothers *always* know!

The End (until the next time, Matt and Michael Snow Investigate!)