

Chapter One

Various Matthews Introduced ~ A Disagreement about Babysitters ~ The Fight with Boredom ~
The Difference Between Fiction and History ~ The Problem with English Food ~ A Mysterious
Phone Call ~ Major Disaster

On their first day in London, Ben Matthews and his sister Amy had a terrific time. They arrived together with their parents, all of them jet-lagged and travel-weary, and checked into the hotel. They ventured into the multicolored London night, ate dinner at an ultra-modern Chinese restaurant, and stayed up all night watching wacky and disturbing things on British television.

On their second day, the Matthews toured the lab where their parents would be working for the next few weeks, and even saw the machine that everyone was so excited about. The scientists never called it a machine, though. They called it "the apparatus." With their clipped and precise accents, it sounded like "ap-pa-RAY-tis." After the tour, the Matthews ate lunch with a few of the stuffy and proper British scientists, at a stuffy and proper British restaurant that served boiled beef and potatoes, and looked out upon a busy, disheveled street. The rest of that day, Ben and Amy stayed in the hotel room. Bored already by the TV, they paced the two-room

suite until their parents came home from the lab.

On the third day — that was when the trouble began.

In the morning, Ben occupied himself with his Nintendo DS, lounging in a chair near the opening between the two rooms of their suite. His mother sat at the vanity, putting on makeup, and his father wandered through the other room, buttoning his shirt cuffs and fiddling with his watch. Amy lay on the bed, near their mother, and sighed heavily.

"Mom, can we *please* do something else today? Go out, or rent some DVDs? I don't want to be stuck here all day, with nothing to do."

"I'm sorry dear, it's just temporary," Mom answered. She leaned in to check the shadows under her eyes, and attacked them with a fat tube of makeup. "In a few more days, it'll be better."

"A few more days! I can't stand it." Amy rolled onto her front, watching her mother. "This place is a horrid tomb."

Ben had to agree. From the outside, the hotel seemed decent enough, a clean and freshly painted row house stacked between so many other row houses. But the inside was drab. Pale wood flooring and paneling on the walls, orange bedspreads and thick curtains, and stark, angular furniture were the primary decorations. Even with the blinds wide open, not enough light filtered in, and everything seemed dim and gloomy. There were two TVs, one in each room, that were small flat-screens mounted on the wall. They were the brightest things around, brighter than the lamps and overhead lights combined.

The Matthews were supposed to be in an apartment, one provided by the lab, but it wouldn't be ready until next week. They were supposed to have rooms of their own, and a living room with a bigger TV, and a kitchen where they could make their own meals, instead of always ordering out. Ben hoped the apartment was worth the wait.

Dad walked by Ben into the room with the women. It was obvious his Dad had been thinking of something else, because he started talking as if he were already in the middle of a conversation: "Strange though, isn't it, Sheryl?"

Mom was used to such openings, and she said, "What, dear?"

"I mean, why bring that huge stone arch into the experiment? They could have used any sort of door, or opening. Even a big wire loop, but why an arch from Egypt?"

Mom didn't look away from her mirror as she said, "Weren't you listening to the director? The arch is supposed to link the past to the present. He even called it a 'marriage', if you can believe that. 'A marriage of the past and the present, to give birth to the future.' I think he meant it to be a metaphor, of some sort." She looked over at Dad and smiled. "Who says scientists can't be poetic when they want to be?"

"I just couldn't imagine them dragging all those blocks of stone into the lab, and assembling that monstrosity, just so they can have their metaphor. Sounds silly to me."

"Elliot, you know as well as I do, that sometimes — no matter how brilliant these theoretical physicists are — scientists make no sense." She turned back to her mirror. "For all we know, they may have gotten funding from some quack who insisted they use the thing."

Dad grunted, and turned toward Ben. "Bennett, can you do your magic and fix this strap for me? I can't get it to close again." Ben set down his DS and took the watch. It had been a gift from Ben's grandfather to his father, and although it was an older watch — with hands and dials for half-a-dozen different things — the band was a newfangled metal contrivance that didn't want to stay shut. Ben dug around in his coat pockets for just the right tool.

Amy dove into the conversation once more, certain her complaints were more important than whatever their parents were discussing. "Mom. Dad. Can you *please* wait until you get to

the lab to talk about work? I need help here. If we don't figure something out, I'll just *die*."

Mom sighed, and Ben understood her perfectly. He felt the same way about Amy too, sometimes. Amy had a knack for rubbing her family the wrong way. Ben hoped it was a phase, one she would grow out of soon.

"What now, sweetheart?" Mom said, innocently.

"Can't we do anything else? Go shopping, or see a museum or something? I'm sure there's stuff to do around here, near the hotel, I mean."

"Amethyst..." Mom always used her full name, even though Amy preferred her nickname.

"We won't get into any trouble, I swear."

"No, absolutely not. I would not let a 15-year-old and a 13-year-old wander the streets of a large city, any more than ... I don't know ... any more than I would stick my finger in that socket for a little excitement. It just isn't going to happen. So forget about exploring London on your own."

Ben didn't think Amy was really interested in exploring — she would much rather read — but she must think that getting out was better than being stuck inside with Ben all day long. If it were up to him, he'd be outside in an instant and having an adventure. In fact, that was the only thing he was looking forward to on this trip. The lab and the "apparatus" were dull stuff to him, but he couldn't wait to get out on the streets and see new sights. But, the way this conversation was going, that didn't seem likely.

"Look, Amethyst, the folks at the lab promised to send someone to watch you — "

Amy jerked her head up. "We don't need a babysitter."

"And I'm not a baby," Ben put in loudly. He finally found a small screwdriver from his

coat pocket, and started tinkering with the links of the watchstrap.

"Don't yell from the other room, Ben. And I didn't say you were," Mom said. "This wouldn't be a babysitter, more like a chaperone, and a guide. They can show you around the city, take you to the museums and monuments, while we're working at the lab. London is a large place, and dangerous in many spots. Without a guide, heaven knows what sort of trouble you might get into."

"Trouble?" Ben said. "Don't you mean adventure? Excitement?"

"Knock it off, Ben," said Dad.

"I just hope I get to ride the Tube." He continued tweaking the strap.

Amy tried a new tactic. "Can you at least leave your laptop? I haven't updated my page in days, and my friends probably think I'm dead by now, and I haven't been able to use my cell phone either, not even for texting! I feel so out of it!"

"No, I need my laptop at the lab. And you knew your cell phone wouldn't work here, I kept telling you that, so why did you even bring it?" Mom picked up a hair dryer. "Are we done here? I have to finish."

"Oh, Mom!" Amy buried her head under a pillow. Even muffled like that, Ben clearly heard her say, "It's not fair!"

"Finished with that, Ben?" his father asked.

Ben tightened another tiny screw, then handed over the watch. Everything back in working order.

"Thanks. Now, Amy, there will be no more arguing, whining or complaining. We've heard enough." This was rare — usually Dad stayed on the outskirts of any argument. "You are not going anywhere today. You can order room service again for lunch, and we'll all go out for

dinner. You can stretch your legs then, okay? Look, it's already Thursday, and it's just today and tomorrow that Mom and I will be working at the lab. After that, we'll spend the whole weekend together." He put the watch on, and checked the time. "We *could* let you call your friends, if you want."

"Can I really?" Amy pulled her head out from under the pillow.

"Yes. Use the hotel phone, and ask to make a 'trunk' call. That's what they call long distance here. Fair enough, then?"

Amy sighed. "All right. It'll have to do."

Ben snorted at her antics — the Drama Queen strikes again — then he covered up the noise with a few extra coughs when Amy looked his way. It wouldn't be wise to have his sister mad at him again. He picked up his DS, and resumed his game, all innocence again.

"Oh, and make sure Ben stays out of trouble, would you?" Mom added. Nothing got by her.

Amy rolled her eyes, "Oh, *please*. I'm not going to baby-sit *him*."

"Still not a baby," Ben said, but his comment was lost in the noise when Mom started the hair dryer.

Ten minutes later, Mom had finished her hair, found her laptop and all its parts, and she and Dad headed for the door. Both were dressed casually, Dad in khaki pants and a cream-colored shirt, and Mom in a dark skirt and print blouse. The weather was pleasant, but Mom still carried a coat, just in case.

"All right, we're leaving now," Mom said. "Remember, get along with each other, and for heaven's sake, cheer up, Amy. Things will get better, really they will."

Dad offered his own advice: "Remember, it's always darkest before the dawn."

Amy quirked an eyebrow. "What is that supposed to mean?"

Mom shook her head, and pulled Dad out the door. "It means cheer up," she said.

"Goodbye, goodbye." Then they were gone.

Ben and Amy settled in for a long day indoors. Amy walked over to one of the windows. Ben tried to concentrate on his game, but was distracted by the quiet buzzing of the florescent bulbs. Noises from the avenue below drifted through the window, reminding Ben of the wider and more exciting world waiting out there. After a short time, perhaps five minutes, Ben put down his DS and said to Amy:

"Right, then. Shall we go?" He headed for the door, and had even unlatched the bolt before his sister spoke up.

"Ben," she said. "Don't you dare. Mom and Dad said we were to stay in the room, and that's what we are going to do."

"Aw, come on! They wouldn't know any different, would they, if we just walked down the street? Or ... look at this," — he pulled a folded map from his coat pocket — "I've got a Tube map, you know, for the underground trains? We can go almost anywhere and back in a few hours!"

"No." Amy picked up a book and plopped herself into one of the hard chairs.

"Can we at least take a walk?"

"No."

"Can we order something else for lunch? Like Chinese? I hate the room service food."

"No."

Ben snorted again, not hiding his frustration this time. "You never want to *do* anything. You just want to complain about it all."

He fell back into his chair and started a new game on his DS. But he wasn't concentrating very hard on the game; he was thinking about how else he could drive his sister nuts. He looked over at her.

She was reading a fat book. Big surprise. Ben suspected it was some sort of low fantasy, with elves and fairies and all that garbage. She liked that kind of book best. That, and science fiction — which was all right by him, but whenever she talked about what she read in those, she would mix up the facts. It was like she didn't know the difference between things she read and things in real life, between made-up history and real history. Basically ... she was crazy.

Ben played games for a few hours, beating his best score in several. Next, he watched TV for a few more hours, flipping between ridiculous how-tos, violent talk shows and campy dramas — or were they meant to be comedies? He finally got hungry enough to walk over and kick Amy on the shin.

"Order us some lunch, would you?"

"Knock it off. And what am I, your maid? I'm not going to wait on you."

"If you don't ... I'm calling for Chinese."

Amy slammed her book down, and picked up the phone. Ben didn't pay attention to what she ordered, but she must have picked the worst things off the menu, just to punish him. When it came, it was some sort of boiled green stuff, topped with a lumpy ball of meat, and what may have been mashed potatoes, if not for the vegetables mixed in. Ben would have preferred plain tofu to this, and he wasn't even a fan of tofu.

Even though he loved being here in England, there were two things he was having a difficult time adjusting to: the inscrutable British accents, and the British food. But he ate all his lunch, and didn't complain. Complaining was Amy's department.

When they were done, they set the dishes outside the door. Amy wiped her hands together, then announced, "Well, that's that. I'm going to call my friends now."

Ben checked the time on the digital by the bed. "California is eight hours behind. Your friends are still sleeping."

"Oh ... I forgot it was that much."

"You'll have to wait until 2 or 3 o'clock before they'll even be awake."

Another sigh from his sister, and another crash onto the bed. "Oh, will this day ever end? Please God, make something interesting happen."

Ben had to laugh at that. "I didn't think you believed in God."

"I'm at my wits end," was her reply, then she put the pillow over her face.

Another hour passed. Ben was sick of his games already, even the new one, and he couldn't find anything good on TV. Amy had fallen asleep, the pillow still in place. Ben crept over and picked up one of Amy's books — just to see, not to read it. The cover showed elves, fairies, and what looked like animals dressed in plate armor. He might read it, though, if it was interesting enough. He might read it anyway, because he had nothing else to do. He shifted deeper into the uncomfortable chair, tucked his feet under him, and he opened the book.

Then the phone rang. Saved from the fairies. Ben shut the book and set it on the floor before he sister could see.

Amy must not have been sleeping after all, because she leapt off the bed and grabbed the phone before Ben could struggle out of the chair. As a result, Ben was stuck across the room when she answered.

"Hello?"

Ben couldn't hear the response, but he watched his sister carefully, trying to guess who it

might be. He freed one of his feet from the chair, but the other one wouldn't budge.

"Yes. Yes. I know."

There was a long pause, during which Ben could see Amy tensing up. His stuck foot was starting to tingle.

"They what?" she whispered.

This was driving Ben nuts. What was happening? Who was she talking to? He finally pulled his foot out and stood. The lower half of his leg buzzed and tingled like mad.

"I see. Yes, that's right. Okay. Okay." Now she closed her eyes. Ben wanted to rush over, grab the phone from her, and find out for himself what was going on. Before he could do that, Amy set the phone back in its cradle.

"Well?" he almost yelled at her.

She stood there for a long moment, her head down, her dark hair covering her eyes, her body rocking like a boat just before a storm. Ben got shivers just from the anticipation. She mumbled, "That's it, then," and she went into the other room and closed the door.

Ben was thunderstruck. What was *this*? he thought. More drama? Or was something really wrong? More shivers shot down his spine, and then he attacked the door, trying the knob and banging on the wood with his hand. The door was locked.

"What? What is it?" he shouted. "Who was on the phone?"

No answer. Ben paced the cramped corner by the door, his mind racing. Was it one of her friends? Had they spread some vicious rumor, or maybe stole her boyfriend? No, that couldn't be it. Amy had no boyfriend, and only a couple of friends, because they had moved around so much. Was it the police? Were Mom and Dad in jail? He couldn't imagine why. Was it someone else from America? Had a relative died, and the caller wanted Amy to tell their parents? The

more he thought, the more agitated it made him. He pounded on the door some more.

The door swung open, and Amy stepped out. Two minutes ago, she had been wearing one of her typical outfits — Capri-length jeans, and several layers of t-shirts, all scrunched up at the waist. Now she wore a black dress, with long sleeves and pale lace around the collar. She had gone shopping with Mom a few weeks ago to buy the dress, and she was supposed to save it for fancy nights out in London, to the theater or the opera or whatever. He wondered what possessed her to put it on now.

She raised her head, looked right at Ben, and announced:

"Our parents are dead. And it's all my fault."

Chapter Two

The Inquisition ~ Hatching a Plan ~ Pre-emptive Action ~ Standing, Sitting, and Minding the Gap ~ The Inquisition, Part II ~ Disadvantages of Waiting ~ A Much-Needed Escape

Amy Matthews was struggling to hold back the tears. Even though she was fifteen, and almost a grown woman, her greatest desire was for stability, and security. She didn't like things to change. Perhaps because the family had moved so frequently, following Dr. Matthews and his work, Amy found that stability in her parents. Now that they were gone, she felt a wave of emotions approach like a raging hurricane. If only she could control that storm.

Her brother, on the other hand, wasn't one for deep thinking or for hiding his feelings. He wanted action. His first words following her pronouncement echoed the shock and disbelief written on his face.

"What? How is that possible?" He paced the room at random, nearly colliding with every piece of furniture in the place. His spiked hair, which Amy always thought made him look ridiculous, bounced in rhythm. His arms flapped and his hands waved in complex patterns, as he repeated himself. "How is that possible?"

Suddenly, every part of him stopped and he turned to faced her. "Who was on the phone," he snapped.

"The lab."

"Who, exactly, from the lab."

"That lab director guy, Mr. Abrams. You know, the bald guy we had lunch with the other day."

"What did he say happened to Mom and Dad? And why is it all your fault?"

Amy took a breath, and blew the hair out of her face. "Let me see. He said Mom and Dad were starting work on the machine — sorry, the appaRAYtis — and then something strange happened."

"What? What happened?" She could see Ben shaking at the effort to keep still.

"The director called it an accident of some sort. Mom and Dad were near the apparatus, near the arch thing ..." Amy felt her throat closing.

"And then?"

"And then they vanished," she managed to get out. "There was ... another scientist in the room, and he saw a light ... all around, and then they were gone. He doesn't know why, or what might have gone wrong. Besides, the apparatus was malfunctioning, right? Wasn't that why they hired Dad? To fix it?" She felt a growing pressure in her head, and tears gathering.

Ben blew out a breath. "So they're not dead, just gone."

"What makes you say that? And I don't see what difference it makes. They are nowhere to be found. For all we know, they were ... disintegrated by the apparatus. Zapped out of existence." Amy swiped at her eyes, rubbing away her tears before they could start flowing. If she let her emotions go, she didn't think she'd ever get them back under control. So, she held

them back, and said, "The director has also called Aunt Sylvia. We're to stay put until she comes to take us back to California."

Ben muttered, "We'll see about that." Louder, he said. "Tell me again why it's all your fault?"

Amy dropped her head. "I prayed that something would happen. Something interesting."

"I don't think God answers stupid prayers like that. It can't be your fault." He rubbed his head with a hand, as though massaging his brain, getting it to work. Then he noticed her outfit, paused, and asked, "What in the world are you wearing?"

Amy glanced down at her dress, which she had only put on once at the store, and said, "It's all I had. Black. You know, for mourning." Seeing him shake his head, she concluded with, "It makes perfect sense to me."

Ben resumed his head rubbing. "Well, I don't think we have another choice. We've got to get down there."

"What? Where?"

"To the lab, of course. Where they disappeared."

Amy snorted. "What are we going to do? Look around for Mom and Dad? See if the scientists have kidnapped them and hidden them in a closet? Or ... or maybe you were thinking you would fix the machine, and put Mom and Dad back together from the zillions of particles they were blown into? The apparatus is not a watch, Ben, and it's not something you can fix."

Amy felt the entire situation was beyond their means to fix, although she desperately wanted to. She was sure Ben felt the same way, and that was why he wanted to do something, go somewhere. But in the end, it wouldn't do any good.

She said, "Look, the scientists had to bring Dad all the way from America to help them.

There's nothing either of us can do. Let's just stay here and wait for them to get to the bottom of this. When Aunt Sylvia comes, she can help us decide what to do next."

Ben shook his head violently. "No way. We can't let someone else worry about our parents. We need to help — we need to go to the lab, and at least find out what really happened there."

"But we can't even get there," Amy said, knowing her objections were getting weaker by the minute. She hated feeling so powerless, so useless, but she didn't want to take any risks.

"Yes we can. Look," Ben reached into his coat pockets, where (Amy was sure) there was an entire room-full of junk that her brother wanted to hang on to. "We can't take a cab — they're much too expensive. But I've got the Tube map, and even a few pounds we can use to buy passes — "

"Where did you get the money?"

"Mom gave them to me as souvenirs." Ben gave her a pleading look. "Come on, Amy, please. We can do this. I couldn't stand just waiting around here, not knowing if Mom and Dad are alive, or missing, or what."

Amy wrestled with her thoughts, feeling pulled in many directions. She worried about her parents, whether they were gone or truly dead. She wanted to know one way or another. But she also worried about jumping into the unknown, and doing what she wasn't supposed to do. They were told to stay in the room, both by the director and by their parents. Sometimes she envied Ben, who had no qualms about doing whatever popped into his head. Yes, he was rash, but was he always wrong? Maybe they could help, somehow. Maybe being at the lab would prompt the scientists to work harder at finding out what happened to Mom and Dad. Maybe —

She looked up, and saw that her brother was gone, and the door left wide open. Ben must

have gotten impatient, deciding that the time for thinking was over, and now it was time for action. Amy raced out the door, and caught him marching down the hall to the stairs.

"Wait!" She pulled the door closed and caught up with him. "Come back." She grabbed his wrist and tried to pull him back to the room. He jerked his arm away, and turned his back to her.

"I'm going," he said, his voice flat.

"Ben ..."

"I don't care whether you are or not."

Ben stood there for a minute, not moving, while Amy fought back the tremor that grew inside of her. She finally couldn't stand it any longer. If she went back and waited for Aunt Sylvia, as instructed, she would wind up a mess. Her aunt would come in the room and find nothing but a quivering blob of jelly.

"All right," she said. "All right, then. Show me that Tube map. I want to know where we're going."

Ben turned, and spoke in a rush, the disagreement forgotten. "It's easy. Look here, the closest Tube station is Bayswater, but that's not the one we need. We want Queensway. So here we are, on Newton Avenue, then we walk to Queensway to the station, take a train to Oxford Circus, change to a train to Euston, here, then to Angel station, which is the closest one to the lab. I remember seeing Angel station on our way back from the tour, just around the corner."

"I don't know ... that seems overly complicated. Isn't there a more direct route? Just one train, maybe?"

"That's not the way it works. You just can't get from here to there. You have to work within the system. Besides, I think the British *like* to make things complicated — maybe it makes

them feel superior."

Amy frowned, and was having second thoughts about the whole idea. Ben must have read her look, because he immediately said, "One step at a time, Amy. Don't worry, we'll get there."

"Okay," Amy said. "Okay, we can do this."

"Did you want to change out of those clothes?"

She smoothed the front of the dress, and looked back down the hall to their room. Just then it seemed like such a long way. "No, I'm fine." If she went back to the room, she was sure she would lose heart and wouldn't be able to leave again. "No, let's get going."

Ben nodded once, and their journey began.

Because her mind was elsewhere — worrying about her parents, about themselves, and about almost everything else under the sun — Amy later recalled only bits and pieces of their trip to the lab, much like a handful of snapshots from a week-long vacation. She remembered the hallway where they began, with its faded and ugly wallpaper above a dark wood wainscoting, and random-sized pipes that chased along the ceiling and plunged down the walls to the basement, as if the plumbing here was an afterthought.

Then they were outside, crossing the landing over the well of the basement area, and to the street. The hotel was tucked in between other remodeled relics, on a quiet avenue lined with tall trees and parked cars, the city noises distant, the sky bright.

Down a block, over a block, and then they were on Queensway. Here was a coffee shop, stacked at the bottom of a six story building, and a homeless man out front holding a fresh cup with two hands. Amy wondered where he got the money for his drink. Ben pointed out a Chinese restaurant: "There it is!" She also saw Indian, Italian, Thai, Russian, and other eateries from foreign lands lining the way. A gang of punks, with spiked green and purple hair, was browsing

through the souvenir shop on the corner, sneering and making rude gestures to the store assistant. Music boomed and rattled along the street, but she couldn't tell where it came from, whether a parked car, or an apartment over one of the shops.

Amy didn't like the smell, or the noise, or the gray haze in the sky, which she could only just glimpse between the tall buildings. She imagined large cities would be more fun, vibrant and full of life, but being out on the streets made her insides quiver even more.

Then they plunged underground, and the scenery was all the same: Tube stations bricked in white, low and arched terminals buried deep. Now things became a blur of catching trains, changing stations, standing up, sitting down, "minding the gap," Ben tracking their progress the whole time on his map.

They arrived at Angel station, rode up a really long escalator, and emerged out of the dim tunnels into the light. Amy stopped to settle her stomach, and take in the surroundings. This part of London seemed no different than the part they had left. There were a few more buildings decked out with glass and steel, and there was a faint odor of brackish water nearby, but otherwise ...

"It looks the same," Amy said, coming out of her haze. "Pretty much."

Ben checked his map again. "We're not really in London anymore. This is Islington."

"Where do we go from here?"

"We can head down toward the river, and see if any of the buildings look familiar."

"You mean, we don't know which one is the right one?" Her voice nearly squeaked.

"Well, it's on the river, and ... it's made out of brick. And I thought it was around the corner somewhere." Ben shrugged. "I know the name of the lab, if that helps."

Amy frowned. Half the buildings around here were made of brick. Only a few had signs

identifying what business took place there; the rest must have been warehouses, or apartments. No help there. She looked to her left, and spotted a phone booth. It was a modern one made of glass, with posters advertising lipstick pasted on every surface.

"Let's see what we can find in there."

There was no phone book, but the phone itself was a blocky computerized terminal. Ben stepped forward, punched a few keys, and found a directory service. "Now we're good."

"What's the name again?"

"Theoretical Physics Labs of London. I remember that because of the initials. 'TP Labs.' Get it? TP?"

Amy shook her head. "Yes, I get it." The humor of 13-year-old boys left much to be desired.

Meanwhile, Ben pulled up the address, and found some rudimentary directions. They left the booth and walked down a long hill, crossed over a few streets, and generally navigated toward the water. In short order, they were standing at the lab entrance.

The building, a large rectangular block, stretched five stories high, and reached toward a wide canal in the back. It was made entirely of brick, an unpainted and dark sort of brick, with tumbled edges. The windows along the front and sides, had arched tops and were divided into many small squares. As they went up the building, the windows grew smaller and smaller, losing stature. On one side, iron fire escapes scaled the building like ivy, twining up to the top floors.

Amy felt the fear rising again. The lab building loomed over them, bleak and menacing. The place hadn't seemed scary yesterday, but things had changed. Her parents had disappeared here. She felt a shudder course through her, and didn't know what to do next.

"What's the matter?" Ben asked her.

"I don't know. I just have a bad feeling about this."

"Don't be a baby." Ben grabbed her hand again, and pulled her inside.

The reception area was a stark white, the brick hidden by plastered and finished walls, but it was empty of furniture, magazines, or any other creature comforts she might expect if they had to wait. It was cold, and smelled faintly of bleach. Amy figured they really didn't want visitors. Behind the reception counter sat a woman in her thirties, her hair a black wedge, and her eyes dark and deep. "Yes?" was all she gave them.

Amy cleared her throat. "Our parents are the Matthews."

The receptionist's eyes widened, but she showed no other emotion. "Just a moment. Let me call for the director." Her accent was prim and proper. Amy wondered if the woman would next offer them tea or something like that, but she didn't. Instead, she left Amy and Ben standing in the uncomfortable reception area.

Mr. Abrams, the director of the lab, emerged from a door near the desk. He was a tall man, with fish lips and rounded cheeks. What hair he hadn't already lost, he had shaved close. With a glare, he sized them up and pronounced:

"You are not supposed to be here. Your aunt will arrive tomorrow morning, and she expects to find you in the hotel room. If you cannot manage for yourselves, I can phone for a caregiver — "

"Not a baby," Ben said. "Don't need a sitter." Amy grabbed his arm tight, reining him in.

"We've come to find out what happened to our parents," Amy said. "You didn't exactly explain it on the phone."

"Right now, we have no news. The technicians are examining the equipment, of course, to determine if the apparatus had any part in their disappearance."

"So you think they've disappeared now?" Ben snapped. "Haven't they been vaporized?" Amy squeezed his arm more.

"When I say 'disappeared,' I mean we don't know where they are. I seriously doubt your parents climbed out a window and took a holiday, not without telling you. As I said before, we will determine if this accident is linked to the apparatus. It was not, as you suggest, designed for ... vaporizing things." He spread his hands wide. "Look, there's really nothing you can do here. Please return to your hotel."

"We want to see it — the apparatus," Ben said. "We want to see where this *accident* happened."

"Please, sir," Amy said, putting her best whine into it. "We can't just sit in the hotel room waiting for news. At least let us watch the technicians work on the problem."

"No, I can't be responsible for you here. You are both underage, and no longer have a legal guardian with you." He puffed out a breath, then said to the receptionist, "I knew I should have called for a constable." The woman nodded.

"Constable?" Ben asked.

"To take charge of you until your aunt shows."

"We're not going with a constable," Amy said. But she couldn't be sure. She didn't know how such things worked in England. What were their rights? What could they do, or not do? Plus, they were Americans. Should they have called, or gotten help from the American embassy? Or would the British authorities send them back to America, like unwanted mail — 'Return to Sender'? She suspected they had few options at this point.

Mr. Abrams must have been considering his options as well, because after a moment, he said, "Follow me, children."

Amy thought he might have decided to show them the apparatus after all, but instead the director led them down a short hallway and into a conference room. It was another white room, with plastered and painted walls, and hung with several clean whiteboards. A cheap wooden table filled the center of the space. And in here, at least, there were chairs.

"Have a seat. I will return directly." And with that, Mr. Abrams left.

Amy sat down, as instructed, but Ben hung out by the door for a minute, then checked the handle. "It's unlocked," he said.

"Where are you going?"

"We're not waiting here."

"Ben, why not? They're trying to help us."

"No, they're not." He gave her the *duh* look. "He's calling for the constable right now."

"But, we'll get into more trouble — worse trouble — if we run off again."

Ben grabbed her hand and pulled her to her feet. "I don't plan on leaving the building," he said. He opened the door, and after glancing up and down the hallway, he darted around a corner, going deeper into the lab. Amy wondered where they were heading, and she started to ask, but Ben shushed her. She heard footsteps approaching, but Ben was already opening another door and pulling her in.

It was a dark office, cluttered with papers and books. More whiteboards plastered the walls, these filled with layers and layers of colored marks. Ben kept them near the door, and they listened.

Someone passed by, and Amy heard voices mumbling. Then, as clear as if he were in the same room, they heard the director's voice. "Zelma, did those children pass by you?" A pause, as Zelma — no doubt the receptionist — answered.

Then the director spoke again: "They must be in the building somewhere. Call the staff together and start searching! The constable is on his way, and I just told him they would be here. I want those children found!"

Chapter Three

Strategies and Maneuvers ~ Fun With Windows ~ Advantages of Large Pockets ~ The Arch and the Apparatus ~ A Reference to Science Fiction ~ Pushing Buttons ~ Unwanted Callers at the Door ~ Another Disappearance

Ben stood still, but his brain was racing in high gear. He knew the scientists were not bad people, they just didn't want to deal with him and his sister, and they wanted to get the two of them away from the action. He also knew they were not military geniuses. He figured they would start with a quick check of all the rooms, before conducting a more thorough search. Therefore ... it was time to hide, for now.

"Come on," he whispered to Amy. He lead her back behind the desk, where they tucked themselves into the leg hole, and settled in, hidden from view.

"This isn't a good idea," Amy started with. "We're trapped in here. Shouldn't we be making a run for it?"

"No, just wait a minute. You'll see."

"But — "

"Shh!"

It wasn't long before the office door opened, the lights snapped on, and the door closed almost immediately after that. As he suspected, whoever had opened the door had only stuck his head through and glanced in. Ben nodded to Amy, then said, "Okay. Now it's time. The hardest part, of course, will be the stairs."

"What *are* you talking about?"

"The apparatus room. It's on the second floor, if I remember right, and I don't think we can sneak up the stairs if they're watching for us."

"You still want to see it?"

"Of course I do. We can help ... or something. That is, if we can get there."

Amy was silent for a moment, thinking. "What if we used the fire escapes?"

"Great idea. Then we'd only have to get to the windows. Let's go."

Ben eased out the door, and crept down the hallway, Amy close behind. At the end of the hall, an awning window sat below one of the iron fire escapes. Ben pushed and tugged at the window, but couldn't open it. He found the catch, but it had been completely painted over. After a moment of fishing in his coat pockets, Ben produced a small folding knife, then dug the tip of it into the gap. He broke the point off, but the catch was now loose. A quick twist and a push, then they were outside, on the far side of the lab.

None of the fire escape ladders were down, and the ends of them dangled out of reach. Ben spotted several garbage bins nearby, and pushed one over to a ladder. He clamored on top of the lid, stretched up and pulled the ladder down far enough to climb. Soon, he was standing on the second floor platform. Amy followed, but shook her head the whole time, either in admiration or disgust, he didn't know which.

He didn't care. He was enjoying himself. It was an adventure, just like he always wanted. Never mind that Dad and Mom were missing, it was this sort of movement and action that gave him comfort, and provided a remedy against the same worries that made Amy freeze up. As long as he was doing something, things would turn out okay.

But, this exploit wasn't without challenges — the second floor window was closed and locked. He couldn't use his knife here. While he stood and considered another way through the window, short of breaking it, Amy was studying the rest of the building.

She finally said, "The window upstairs is open."

Ben looked. "That could work. We'll have to sneak down the inside stairs to get to the second floor."

"Weren't we avoiding the inside stairs?"

"Yeah, but they won't be expecting us to come *down* them."

Amy helped him pull the window open wide enough for them to crawl in. They found themselves in another hallway with closed doors, and no one about. Ben couldn't remember how many scientists worked at the lab, or how many they saw the first time they were here, but he thought it strange that the place seemed almost empty.

They hurried along the hall, and down the stairs to the second floor. They encountered no people on the way, but they continued skulking through the halls, heading toward the back of the building. That was where Ben thought the room with the apparatus was. He tried several doors at random, until they found the right one.

"This is it," he said.

"Whoa."

There was no one in the apparatus room. All the equipment was off, or looked that way.

Amy said, "Where is everyone? Are they all down looking for us?"

"Or doing something else," Ben replied. He turned back and examined the door. It was metal, and had both a deadbolt and a push-button lock on the handle.

"But where are the scientists? The technicians? They were supposed to be finding out what went wrong. And what happened to Mom and Dad."

"Maybe the director lied. Maybe they all snuck out the window and took a holiday."

He plunged his hand into his coat pocket, and pulled out a paperclip. He set the lock on the door handle, and then jammed the paperclip into the keyhole on the other side. A few short wiggles, and the metal clip broke off and blocked the hole. Satisfied that he had bought them a little time to look around, he closed the door and joined Amy, who was staring at the apparatus.

The largest part of it was the Egyptian arch, which seemed completely out of place here, amid the wires and boxes of modern equipment, centered in the large warehouse space of an old building. The arch itself was a stack of thick stones, topped by a massive flat crosspiece. The opening didn't look like a simple doorway or passageway. It was more like something you might fit an elephant through. Inscribed in the stones were hieroglyphics and carvings of that nature. A handful of unusual black stones clung inside smooth depressions along the face of the columns. Inside of the arch, a series of wires looped up and around, then gathered into a coil that plugged into the rest of the apparatus. The other parts looked like nothing more than a jumble of gray metal boxes.

Ben moved away from the apparatus, and studied the rest of room. Even though it was on the second floor, the room took up a large space, both tall and wide. The ceiling, which stretched all the way to the top of the building, had a mechanized crane hidden among the huge iron support beams, some fifty feet up. Windows, dotted the walls at regular intervals, but most of

them were covered by canvas, and let in very little light. To compensate, someone had strung flood lights around the perimeter of the room, all pointed toward the apparatus. This made the center of the room very bright, but the edges remained in shadow.

As he continued his stroll around the room, Amy joined him. "Not much of a place to hide," she said. "If they were hiding ... for some reason ... but that just seems lame, doesn't it? They can't be hiding." She turned to Ben. "What are you looking for?"

"I don't really know. Evidence? Scorch marks, or maybe melted circuits?" Or the charred remains of their parents? He didn't say the last to his sister. But he saw nothing. The room was clean and bare, except for the apparatus, and he knew *that* was the beast they would have to deal with. He and Amy returned their attention to it.

"What is it supposed to do?"

Ben chewed his lip. "I don't remember. I wasn't paying attention, really. When Dad started talking about 'proton pairs' and 'field enhancers,' and I thought for sure he was going to launch into a lecture about 'the wave-particle duality — "'

"Of light," Amy finished. "Again."

"Yeah, again. So I zoned out." He shrugged.

"But why the arch? Why would they need a doorway like this? Unless you are supposed to walk through the opening, and ... go somewhere?" Amy paused, the wheels obviously turning. "Maybe it's like a teleporting machine, or transporter. You know, like Star Trek?"

"Hmph," Ben said. "I just hope it's not like the 'Honey I Shrunk the Whatever' movies." But it made him wonder. He went over to the gray boxes, and started flipping switches. No response.

"What are you doing?" Amy hissed.

"Finding out stuff." Ben came across a computer attached to the equipment. Hoping to find some clue to what the apparatus did, or to where their parents went (if they did go somewhere), he turned it on. If the apparatus was some sort of teleporting device, wouldn't the computer have a location, or a description of where it was sending you? And if their parents went through the arch, and were teleported somewhere, wouldn't it tell him where they went? That's what Ben was counting on.

But when the screen came alive, all that showed were rows and rows of paired numbers, followed by a '?' prompt.

Amy was taking a closer look at the gray boxes. "'Photon Pair Splitter,'" she read. "'Field Amplifier.' 'Directional Analyser.' Check it out — Crazy British spelling strikes again."

Ben pressed "enter" on the keyboard, and the whole apparatus started to hum.

"Ben ..." Amy warned him.

"What? All I did was push a button." The computer beeped, and ran through all kinds of errors on the screen. It concluded with the same matrix of numbers as before, and the same prompt. "Are all those boxes on?" he asked.

Ben heard the door rattle, and someone cursing on the other side.

"Uh-oh," he said. "Now what?"

"Turn that thing off."

"I don't know how."

Amy frowned at him, then looked around. "Maybe we can hide, and they'll think the room is empty."

"No, I spiked the lock. They know we're here." Ben felt their options disappearing.

Someone was now kicking at the door; the hollow thumping echoed throughout the room.

Amy dashed over to one of the windows, and ripped the canvas back. She covered her eyes to block the sudden light. After a moment, she called back, "It's a long way down. There's a loading ramp, and then the canal. No good." She lowered the canvas. "Maybe I can find a fire escape in one of these other windows."

"Forget that," Ben said. "There's no time." He rushed over to the gray boxes, checked the switches, and ran back to the computer. A quick tap on the keyboard, and the apparatus really got humming. Even the building started to vibrate along with it.

The pounding at the door ceased for a moment, then resumed with more frantic blows, and more shouting. Ben might have heard someone say, "Police, open up!", but the words were drowned out by the noise.

"What have you done?" Amy yelled at him, backing away. "What have you done?"

Ben ignored her, even though her hysterics seemed real enough this time. This was the only way he could see to solve their problems, both getting away from the scientists, and finding their parents.

The apparatus appeared to be working. Inside the arch, the opening grew darker and darker, and seemed to pull all the light in the room toward it. Like the bright corona around a black hole, as the space inside the arch got darker, the light around the edges shone more brilliantly. It was a strange and unearthly sight.

Ben raced over to Amy, who was staring dumbstruck at the arch, and shoved her toward the arch.

"No! No!" she screamed, pushing back. "What are you doing?"

Ben paused. "Do you want to go where Mom and Dad went? Do you want to find out where the arch goes?" He pointed to the door, where the scientists were still banging away.

"*They* don't know where our parents went. But I bet Mom and Dad took the teleporter, or fell into it by accident. This is the only way we can find them! And help them!"

The sounds at the door were louder now — a booming caused by something more massive than a man's foot, something like a battering ram. The steel door began to bend inward.

Ben tried once more. "We don't have time to debate it!"

Amy swallowed, and nodded. They stepped forward, approaching the opening slowly, but as they entered the arch, the darkness there sucked them in. At that moment, the door to the room burst open, and the police constables and scientists rushed in. Ben heard one of them say, "No, don't — ", then all the light and all the sound was gone.