

The Adventures of Jimmy Chicklets

Book 2: Mitch McGee
the Manchurian Classmate

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For Theo

Mitch McGee
the Manchurian Classmate

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Chapter 1: Saturday, Clean Your Platter Day

Jimmy Chicklets sat on his sleeping bag, playing Monster Slaughter on his tablet and listening for the sound of rain. It was quiet, but cold. Criminey Toodle sat on the other sleeping bag playing the same game on the new tablet Mr. Bolger had bought for him. Ms. Chicklets had objected at first.

“What does a boy need with two tablets, Dennis?” she asked, thinking Mr. Bolger had purchased it for Jimmy.

“So he can play with his friends, dear,” Mr. Bolger replied, “like Tamara.”

Ms. Chicklets was very fond of Tamara “Tammy” Mugwort – Jimmy’s best friend – so this mollified her. And she hadn’t seemed to have noticed that Tammy never used it. Only Criminey ever used it, and only to play Monster Slaughter, in multi-player mode, with Jimmy. But, of course, Ms. Chicklets couldn’t see Criminey. Only Jimmy – and, as they had recently discovered, Mr. Bolger – could see him. This was because Criminey was a sprite – “a creature of great power from the Faerie realm” Mr. Bolger had said.

“Whatever that means,” Jimmy said out loud without intending to.

“Whatever what means?” Criminey asked, turning towards Jimmy.

The moment he looked away from his tablet, however, Criminey’s hands de-solidified causing it to fall suddenly to the ground. Jimmy took the opportunity to kill Criminey’s avatar.

“That’s not fair,” Criminey complained, “you distracted me.”

“I can’t help it if you get distracted so easily,” Jimmy replied, grinning.

Criminey picked up his tablet – his arms apparently solid again – with a sour expression on his face. He immediately kicked Jimmy’s hand, causing him to drop his own tablet.

“Gotcha,” Criminey said, as he quickly killed Jimmy’s avatar.

“Hey!” Jimmy yelled angrily. “That’s not fair.”

Before things could escalate any further, the tent flap unzipped and Mr. Bolger stuck his head inside.

“Anything wrong, boys?” he asked, looking at Jimmy, then Criminey, and then back at Jimmy again.

“Criminey chea” he started, paused, and then continued, “no, Dad, there’s nothing wrong.”

“Good to hear, good to hear,” Mr. Bolger said. “I am sorry to say, however, boys, that you’re going to have to pack up and head inside. Ms. Chicklets insists.”

“But that’s not fair, Dad!” Jimmy said angrily. “It’s not even raining.”

“Ms. Chicklets sent me to get you because of the cold,” he replied.

“But we have sleeping bags and sweaters!” Jimmy replied indignantly. “We won’t even notice the cold.”

“Nevertheless,” Mr. Bolger said, “ you need to start packing up. Ms. Chicklets will have her way.”

Jimmy reluctantly started putting his things into his backpack. Criminey tried to help but he seemed distracted, causing him to randomly de-solidify. Which, of course, makes packing a lot more difficult.

“Mr. Bolger,” he said nervously, “may I ask you a question?”

“Of course, Criminey, of course,” Mr. Bolger replied. “And I will answer if I can.”

“How were the sociologists able to track me,” he asked, “when I was in Mrs. Greenbottom’s classroom?”

“An easy one,” Mr. Bolger replied. “When you manifest ... I mean solidify – that’s what Jimmy’s calling it now ... when you solidify, you displace what was already there, causing ripples in the air. The SAU have devices which can detect those ripples.”

“My turn,” Jimmy interrupted, “how come there was a video of Criminey when he was invisible?”

“That’s a harder one,” Mr. Bolger began, “and a longer story. Pe ... ,”

“Den-nis!” a voice yelled from inside the house.

“Another time, boys, another time,” Mr. Bolger said, “Now let’s get you ready to go back inside before we’re all in trouble.”

And after a little more packing – and somewhat more grumbling – they headed in.

Chapter 2: Sunday, Overdone Day

Jimmy and Criminey sat at the table eating breakfast. Well Jimmy was eating. Criminey didn't eat, which, of course, raised a number of unsettling questions. Jimmy, however, was focused on much more settling question, like how soon – and for how long – he and Criminey could play the new Monster Slaughter expansion Mr. Bolger had downloaded for them the previous evening, after the whole camping fiasco.

“First, we'll search for the Vambie nest,” Jimmy said enthusiastically, “and then we'll get some silver tipped stakes to kill them with.”

Criminey nodded in agreement, a happy grin on his face. After a pause, Mr. Bolger lowered his newspaper and looked quizzically at the two boys – or, more precisely, one boy and one juvenile sprite.

“Vambies?” he asked.

“They’re a combination of vampires and zombies,” Jimmy replied. “They try to bite into your head and drink the blood from you brain.”

“And if they succeed, you become a Vambie too and attack the other players,” Criminey added, excitedly.

“They’re so cool,” Jimmy said.

Mr. Bolger looked about to make an ironic comment when the doorbell rang.

“Dennis,” Ms. Chicklets yelled from the next room, “go let Tammy in.”

“Tammy?” Jimmy asked suspiciously. “What’s she doing here?”

“Didn’t we tell you?” Mr. Bolger replied. “After hearing about Tammy’s exploits, Ms. Chicklets signed you up for soccer.”

A couple weeks before, Tammy had pretended to be suffering from a soccer injury in order to enable them to avoid walking into school and risk running into Mitch McGee and the Blinger brothers. But neither Tammy nor Jimmy were in the least inclined to really play.

“What?” Jimmy asked, incredulous. “But I hate soccer. And Criminey and I were ...”

“You are going to be playing soccer today,” said Ms. Chicklets – who had by then entered the kitchen, “and every week until it gets too cold. It will be good for you. And afterwards we are all going to Aunt Janice’s for tea.”

“But Mom,” Jimmy whined.

“Enough complaining. Your soccer stuff is laid out on your bed,” she said sharply, and then turning to Mr. Bolger. “And didn’t I tell you to get the door? Tammy is waiting.”

Mr. Bolger hopped to his feet and headed quickly towards the front entrance, while Jimmy trudged glumly towards his room. Criminey – who could change his clothes at will – was already decked out in a classic Manchester United soccer uniform.

Jimmy and Tammy sat on either side of the backseat of the car, with Criminey in between them. Criminey had proposed having Tammy – or Jimmy – sit in the middle so he could look out the window. But the others pointed out that, since Ms. Chicklets couldn’t see Criminey, it might make her suspicious. As always, Mr. Bolger sat in the front seat reading his newspaper while Ms. Chicklets did the driving.

“I thought you were only pretending when you said you played soccer,” Jimmy whispered.

“I was,” Tammy replied, “but when Ms. Chicklets called my mom about signing you up, I had to make it look real.”

“So you created a whole soccer league?” Jimmy asked, skeptically.

“Not the league; just the team,” Tammy replied. “Peter registered us in the league.”

“Poopy-pants?!” Jimmy exclaimed too loudly. “It figures.”

“Jimmy!” Ms. Chicklets snapped from the front seat. “What did I say about using that name?”

“Sorry, Mom,” Jimmy replied grudgingly.

Peter Burrows was a computer genius who been taunted by his classmates ever since the notorious “poopy-pants” incident, and whose behaviour had taken a definite change for the worse as a result.

“Anything else I should know?” Jimmy asked Tammy, quietly this time.

“Well, one thing,” Tammy began, “Mr. Underhill – Lucy’s dad – is the coach.”

“Lucy’s on the team?” Jimmy replied. “Oh great, everyone’s going to hear about it.”

Lucy Underhill was the class gossip and snitch, with whom Jimmy and Tammy had a complicated relationship. Sometimes she helped them out, sometimes she did the opposite.

“Anything else?” Jimmy asked.

Tammy paused before answering and had an uncomfortable look on her face.

“What?” Jimmy asked, suspiciously.

“Tommy’s on the team too,” Tammy said finally.

“No!” Jimmy groaned, too loudly once more.
“Who’s idea was that?”

Thomas “Tommy” Blinger was one of the bullies who had been picking on them recently, along with his brother Joe and the ringleader, Mitch McGee.

“It was my idea,” Ms. Chicklets said firmly from the front seat. “His mother feels he needs an activity to give him more more structure and I thought this was a perfect opportunity.”

Jimmy, Tammy, and Criminey sat quietly in the backseat for a few minutes, sour expressions on their faces.

“What is the team going to be called?” Criminey asked all of a sudden. “How about the Fighting Sprites?”

Jimmy and Criminey started laughing.

“What so funny?” Tammy asked.

“Criminey thinks we should be called the Fighting Sprites,” Jimmy chortled, “but I think we should be the Slurping Pepsis.”

The three of them burst into hysterics.

“Dennis,” Ms. Chicklets said sharply, “I told you to talk to Jimmy about this whole imaginary friend business.”

Like Tammy, Ms. Chicklets couldn’t see or hear Criminey; unlike Tammy she thought he was Jimmy’s imaginary friend rather than a sprite. Mr. Bolger lowered his newspaper slowly and looked over his shoulder into the back seat.

“Jimmy,” he began, “ you and Flapdoodle need to keep it down. You’re distracting Ms. Chicklets.”

“Dennis,” Ms. Chicklets said, a hint of resignation in her voice, “how many times do I have to tell you to stop encouraging him?”

“If I’m Flapdoodle then you’re Give me my Nickels,” Criminey said, grinning, “and she’s Clammy Bugbear.”

Jimmy repeated the comment for Tammy’s benefit, and the three of them laughed the rest of the way to soccer.

The kids clustered around Mr. Underhill – or “Coach Underhill” he had asked them to call him – on their end of the field. They had time for a thirty-minute practice before the game and they clearly needed it. They were all dressed differently: their only uniform consisted of lime green tank tops with upside down numbers on the back. Coach Underhill was wearing what looked to be a bathing suit, with black socks and dress shoes. And Peter Burrows was still in his pajamas.

“So, does anyone know how this game works?” Coach Underhill asked the team, and then half-muttered, “I still don’t remember volunteering for this.”

“We’re supposed to kick the ball into their net more times than they kick the ball into our net,” Tammy offered helpfully.

“Okay then,” Coach Underhill said, “everyone get a ball and practice kicking it into the net.”

After a few minute of chaos – balls flying everywhere – Tammy tapped the coach on the shoulder.

“Maybe we should form a line and shoot one at a time,” Tammy suggested. “And we should probably have a goalie.”

Coach Underhill nodded, a look of mild relief on his face.

“Line up, one at a time,” he said. “Any volunteers to be goalie?”

“The goalie doesn’t have to run around, right?”
Jimmy asked.

Coach Underhill looked over at Tammy, who nodded faintly.

“That’s right,” he said.

Jimmy stepped into the goalmouth, a look something between satisfaction and relief on his face.

The game itself was a fiasco. When the Vambies – Jimmy’s suggestion – had the ball, they all chased it in a pack until someone kicked it out of bounds, had it stolen by the other team, or just fell down. When their opponents – the Cougars – had the ball, they moved it up and down the field with precision passing. Coach Underhill just stood on the sidelines playing with his phone. He occasionally looked up, shook his head, and then looked back down again. Tammy was in charge of substitutions, which seemed to go more or less smoothly; although someone paying close attention might have noticed that she never substituted herself into the game. She never substituted Peter in either. He declared himself the team waterboy and just sat on the ground working on his laptop.

“But everybody brought their own water bottle,”
Lucy – the coach’s daughter – protested.

“Everybody drink,” Peter ordered, without looking up from his laptop.

He repeated this order at random intervals throughout the game. And his teammates randomly complied. Tommy got himself thrown out of the game when he pushed one of the Cougars in the back, knocking her to the ground, and then called the referee – an elderly woman who worked in the local grocery store – a name when she politely pointed out this was against the rules. Tommy's mother was so embarrassed she took him straight home. Jimmy cheered as they collected his gear, causing Tommy to glare at him angrily. The score was 15 – 0 by the time everyone stopped keeping track.

The only bright spot in the Vambies performance – if you could call it that – was Jimmy's goaltending. He played like two goalies, which, of course, he was: two mostly incompetent goalies, but two goalies nevertheless. They divided up the net more or less equally: Jimmy covering the right third; Criminey covering the remaining two-thirds on the left. Jimmy wasn't inclined to move very much, so when the Cougars shot at Jimmy's third of the net they usually scored, unless they shot it right at him. But since the rest of the net seemed open – the Cougars lacking Jimmy's sprite-seeing ability – they usually shot at Criminey's two-thirds. And unlike Jimmy, Criminey was highly motivated to defend the goal. Sometimes he couldn't reach the ball; other times he got there but it passed right through him – he still needed to practice moving and staying solid at the same time. But sometimes he was able to get in front of the ball and remain solid, resulting in some impressive or mysterious saves, depending on your point of view. The Cougars tried to pass them off as unlucky bounces – very unlucky bounces – but mostly they were just confused.

After about an hour, the referee mercifully blew the whistle ending the game. The Cougars gave the Vambies three cheers and then lined up to shake their hands. By this point, however, Coach Underhill had already hurried back to his car, Lucy in tow. And most of the rest of the Vambies had simply wandered away. Only Tammy came over to shake their hands. With a little encouragement, Jimmy joined her as well. Criminey came too which, as you might suspect, resulted in a certain amount of confusion among the Cougars.

After the game they went for the promised tea at Aunt Janice's. As always, Ms. Chicklets sat in the kitchen talking with her sister and Mr. Bolger read his newspaper while Jimmy – and this time Tammy as well – were relegated to his cousin's – Jessica and Elizabeth Cotton's – room. Criminey was there as well but Ms. Chicklets had made no directive to that effect. They were sitting around a little table having a tea party with several of Jessie and Bessie's dolls and stuffed animals. Tammy had managed to get some real tea for Jimmy and herself, but the girls and their dolls and stuffies were drinking pretend tea. And Criminey had to share a cup of pretend tea – and a little chair – with Winnie the Pooh. Although Tammy seemed to be having fun with the twins, Jimmy was extremely bored. Criminey was focused on balancing on the edge of a chair without knocking a certain stuffed bear onto the floor or falling onto the floor himself.

“Do you want to see a magic trick?” Jimmy asked all of a sudden, picking up a deck of cards out of a nearby toy bin.

“Yes, yes,” Jessie and Bessie replied eagerly.

Tammy frowned, but Criminey grinned knowingly and got up and stood behind the girls. Jimmy spread the cards out facedown on the table.

“Pick a card, each of you,” Jimmy said, “and don’t let me see.”

As the girls each picked up a card, Criminey made sure he got a good look. He scrunched his face for a second before telling Jimmy what cards they had.

“Jessie has a green elephant,” Criminey began, “and Bessie has a red giraffe.”

“What?” Jimmy said, before examining the cards more closely. “Oh, they're for Go Fish.”

Jimmy took a moment to compose himself, and then placed the fingers of both hands to either side of his head, as if he were thinking really hard.

“Okay, Jessie,” he said to one of the girls, “your card is a green elephant.”

“I’m Bessie,” the girl replied.

“But my card is a green elephant!” the other girl – Jessie – squealed.

“What’s mine? What’s mine?” Bessie asked enthusiastically.

“Your card,” Jimmy began, and then paused for effect, “is a red giraffe.”

“It is! It is! Do it again!” Bessie – the real Bessie – said clapping.

“No,” Jimmy said, nodding at Criminey and pointing at Winnie the Pooh. “This time I’m going to make one of your stuffies levitate?”

Tammy shook her head sharply but Jimmy ignored her.

“Up, up,” Jimmy said, waving his hands in the general direction of Criminey and the stuffed bear.

Criminey slowly lifted it up out of the chair until it was about eye level. The girls gasped. Tammy just rolled her eyes.

“Who’s the boy holding Winnie?” Jessie asked after a moment, a note of concern in her voice.

“Criminey, I can see you!” Tammy exclaimed. “You’re visible!”

In an instant, Criminey was no longer visible or solid. Winnie the Pooh fell through his now invisible hands to the ground.

“A ghost! A ghost!” the girls yelled in unison and fled the room.

Jimmy, Criminey, and Tammy looked at each other in astonishment. Except that Tammy couldn't see Criminey anymore. Almost immediately Ms. Chicklets stormed into the rooms

“Jimmy Chicklets!” she snapped. “How many times do I have to tell tell you not to tease your cousins! Now come get your jackets on, it's time to go.”

As they walked through the kitchen the girls were still crying, their arms wrapped around Aunt Janice. Mr. Bolger lowered his paper and gave them a quizzical look before following them towards the front door.

Chapter 3: Monday, Not Much Fun Day

Ms. Chicklets had been furious when they got back home from Aunt Janice's. She had probably been angry during the drive home too, but that was a quiet fury. Once they walked through the front door it wasn't quiet anymore.

"Why must you constantly antagonize your cousins?" she yelled. "Aunt Janice will probably never invite us back because of your brutish behaviour!"

Jimmy was about to defend himself but Mr. Bolger shook his head "no."

"And you," she snapped at Mr. Bolger, "you let him get away with it! Or even encourage it! Chimney Strudle, indeed! You think a joke is worth ruining my relationship with my sister!"

When she was done she stormed out of the room. Mr. Bolger just sat there with a sad expression on his face; and Jimmy walked glumly up to his room, Criminey at his heels.

By the time Jimmy and Criminey made it downstairs for breakfast the next morning Ms. Chicklets had already left for work.

“She had some errands to do on the way in,” Mr. Bolger explained.

“But Mom is always here for breakfast,” Jimmy complained.

“Mr. Bolger,” Criminey asked, after a brief silence, “is Ms. Chicklets still mad at us?”

Mr. Bolger nodded his head slowly. He then folded his newspaper and placed it on the table in front of him.

“But maybe we should take the opportunity to talk about what happened yesterday, boys,” Mr. Bolger said.

“You mean when everyone could see Criminey and then he disappeared?” Jimmy asked enthusiastically. “That was really cool.”

“Yes, that’s way I mean, Jimmy,” Mr. Bolger replied, “but, no, it’s not cool. It’s very dangerous.”

“Dangerous how, Mr. Bolger,” Criminey asked nervously.

“Any reports of appearing and disappearing boys are likely to get back to the SAU,” Mr. Bolger said, “and they would like nothing more to get their hands on a real live sprite.”

The SAU – or Sprite Acquisition Unit – was a secret government organization that, as the name suggested, was charged with trying to discover and capture sprites. They had recently infiltrated Jimmy’s school pretending to be engaged in anthropological research.

“But they’re gone, aren’t they?” Jimmy half-asked, half-stated.

“Temporarily. But with mysterious reports of flying bicycles and unexplained matter-displacement ripples, they haven’t gone far,” Mr. Bolger replied. “No, they haven’t gone far.”

“But what should we do, Mr. Bolger?” Criminey asked.

“Until you learn to control your visibility,” Mr. Bolger replied, “you should avoid solidifying at school.”

“But Dad,” Jimmy complained.

“No “buts” Jimmy. I’m afraid I’m going to have to insist,” Mr. Bolger said firmly, “It’s just too dangerous.”

Jimmy and Criminey nodded – the former more reluctantly than the latter – and then the two of them headed off to school.

Tammy was waiting for Jimmy and Criminey at the end of the block, and fell into step with them without saying anything. They walked together quietly for a few blocks before Criminey finally broke the silence.

“So Ms. Chicklets sure is mad,” he said.

After a moment, Jimmy repeated this to Tammy. Tammy looked at him sullenly without replying.

“Are you mad at me too?” Jimmy asked indignantly. “I haven’t done anything.”

“What do you mean you didn’t do anything, Jimmy Chicklets?” Tammy asked angrily. “That whole levitating bear trick was your idea!”

“I didn’t know Criminey would become visible,” Jimmy replied defensively. “It wasn’t my fault. Blame Criminey, not me.”

“It was your idea, not mine,” Criminey said in response. “I didn’t know I would be see-able either.”

“Don’t go blaming Criminey for your ideas,” Tammy said simultaneously. “He’s only a couple of weeks old; he doesn’t know any better.”

“I can’t hear either of you when you talk at the same time,” Jimmy said, exasperated.

They walked along quietly for another block. It was Jimmy who broke the silence this time.

“What are you so mad about anyhow?” Jimmy asked. “It’s me Ms. Chicklets is mad at, not you.”

“She called my mom last night and said I helped you scare your cousins,” Tammy replied, more calmly this time. “My mom said you were a bad influence, and they got into a big fight.”

“It was your idea,” Criminey said, decisively.

Jimmy ignored him and just stared straight ahead.

“After she got off the phone, my mom said I shouldn’t hang out with you anymore – that’s why I didn’t come to your door this morning,” Tammy continued. “And then she started calling her friends – Mrs. Underhill and Mrs. Burrows – and telling them you were a bad influence too.”

“What?” Jimmy asked. “Poopy-pants’ mom thinks I’m the bad influence? That’s just crazy.”

“Jimmy!” Tammy replied. “Saying stuff like that is what gets you into trouble.”

“What?” Jimmy asked, pretending to be mystified.

“Of course,” Criminey chimed in, “you can’t really be a bad influence if no one imitates you.”

“You be quiet,” Jimmy snapped.

“What did Criminey say?” Tammy asked. “You’re supposed to tell me what Criminey says.”

Jimmy ignored her. They walked quietly the rest of the way to school. No one broke the silence this time.

When they arrived at school, the Blinger brothers were waiting for them in front of Jimmy’s locker.

“What were you cheering about when I got kicked out of soccer?” Tommy asked aggressively.

“Were you making fun of my brother?” Joe added, equally aggressively.

Tammy stepped between Jimmy and the Blingers.

“Back off,” she said angrily.

“Ooh, who’s your girlfriend, Chicklets,” Tommy said mockingly.

“Is your girlfriend going to protect you?” Joe added, equally mockingly.

“You know perfectly well who I am, Tommy Blinger,” Tammy said firmly. “You’ve known me your whole life.”

“And I don’t need anyone to protect me!” Jimmy shouted, holding his hands out in front of him menacingly, two fingers on his right hand pointed upwards.

This was the signal for Criminey to pull down Tommy’s pants, which, of course, he would have to solidify to do.

“Are you sure that’s a good idea?” Criminey asked anxiously. “Mr. Bolger said ...”

“I don’t care what Mr. Bolger said,” Jimmy interrupted. “Just do it.”

As Criminey reached for Tommy’s belt, a faint outline of a hand began to appear.

“Criminey, no!” Tammy yelled.

Criminey froze, and the outline immediately faded. All of a sudden Tommy appeared to relax, and started laughing.

“Criminey, no,” he said mockingly, in a poor imitation of an English accent. “Criminey, no.”

“What?” Tammy asked confused.

“Someone thinks they’re the freakin’ Queen of England,” Tommy continued in the same tone. “Blimmy, yes and Criminey, no. Won’t somebody get me some tea and crunkits?”

The kids who had been standing around watching the altercation started laughing. Tammy turned beet red.

“What are crunkits?” Criminey asked.

But only Jimmy heard him, and he didn’t answer. In a moment the bell rang, and they all trudged sullenly to class.

Jimmy sat at his desk with his head in his hands. Criminey stood beside him wearing a British schoolboy uniform he had seen in a video the previous evening.

“I’m tired of standing,” Criminey complained.
“Why can’t I have my own desk?”

“Because only students on the teacher’s class list get desks,” Jimmy whispered too loudly.

“What was that, Jimmy Chicklets?” Mrs. Greenbottom said, a mix of anger and sarcasm in her voice. “Perhaps you could share your insights with the whole class.”

Jimmy reluctantly got to his feet – as was the rule in Mrs. Greenbottom’s class in circumstances like these.

“I said only students on your class list get desks, Mrs. Greenbottom,” Jimmy replied weakly.

Mrs. Greenbottom looked at Jimmy with a puzzled expression on her face.

“What a stra...,” she began, and she stopped. “Oh just sit down, Mr. Chicklets.”

Jimmy hesitated when he saw Criminey sitting at his desk, a victorious grin on his face.

“I said sit down, Chicklets,” Mrs. Greenbottom said sharply, “now!”

Jimmy quickly tried to sit on top of Criminey. Instead he passed right through him. Criminey immediately popped to his feet and glared at Jimmy.

“That was rude,” he said angrily, “I was there first.”

“Shh,” Jimmy whispered, quietly this time.

“As I was saying before being interrupted,” Mrs. Greenbottom announced, “this Thursday we will be competing in the Math-lympics. Last year we were the city champions.”

Mrs. Greenbottom paused to gesture at a trophy on her desk, which appeared to consist of a figure wearing school robes writing on a chalkboard.

“We are going to need five students to represent the class,” Mrs. Greenbottom continued. “The categories are fractions, word problems, long division, computing, and speed multiplication. Any volunteers?”

Tammy put her hand up immediately.

“Yes, Tammy,” Mrs. Greenbottom said.

“I’d like to do word problems, Mrs. Greenbottom,” Tammy replied.

“Thank you, Tammy,” Mrs. Greenbottom said.
“Anyone else?”

Lucy Underhill volunteered for long division, but no one else raised their hand.

“Can I put you down for computing, Peter?” Mrs. Greenbottom asked Peter Burrows.

Peter had his head resting on his desk, apparently asleep, and gave no sign of having heard her.

“Well, we can fill out our team roster tomorrow,” Mrs. Greenbottom said, in a worryingly pleasant voice. “But you should know that if we can’t put together a winning team, it’s a sure sign that the class as a whole is sorely lacking in mathematical knowledge. And this will require remedial classes – after school – to remedy.”

The class let out a collective groan. Almost immediately afterwards there was a knock on the door. Mrs. Greenbottom walked over and opened it, and after talking quietly in the hallway for a few moments, led a woman into classroom.

“Class,” Mrs. Greenbottom began, “please say hello to our new guidance counsellor, Ms. Jenkins. She will be meeting with each of you individually over the next few weeks.”

Jimmy nearly gasped with shock. He was sure that Ms. Jenkins was actually Dr. Drake, one of the fake anthropologists the SAU had sent into the school searching for Criminey a few weeks earlier. Her hair looked different, she wasn't wearing a lab coat anymore, and she had a different name; but Jimmy was sure it was her. He jumped to his feet.

"Mrs. Greenbottom!" he announced. "That's not Ms. Jenkins, that's ... that's ... Count Dracula!"

When the fake anthropologists had been introduced to the class, they had been greeted by the students with what at the time had seemed to be funny names. Unfortunately for Jimmy, these were the only names he could remember.

"Jimmy Chicklets!" Mrs. Greenbottom snapped, shocked.

"It's Crispy Bacon," Criminey offered helpfully.

"I mean, she's Crispy Bacon," Jimmy said, less confidently this time.

The class burst out laughing.

"Jimmy Chicklets," Mrs. Greenbottom said angrily, pointing at the door, "go the Principal's office right now!"

Jimmy walked slowly out of the room, his head hanging. Ms. Jenkins smiled at him sweetly.

Jimmy was sitting on the bench outside Principal Gardner's office. When he first arrived, an older kid was sitting there as well. He had nodded at Jimmy, and then offered him a cigarette. Jimmy was shocked – he had never been offered a cigarette before – so he took it, almost without thinking, and put it in his shirt pocket. Criminey held out his hand for one too, but the older kid didn't notice. Instead he got up and left without waiting to be called into the office. In a few minutes Principal Gardner came out holding a file folder.

“Frank Boffin?” he asked.

“No, sir,” Jimmy replied. “Jimmy Chicklets.”

“Jimmy Chicklets,” Principal Gardner repeated, “why are you here?”

“I told Mrs. Greenbottom that Ms. Jenkins was a sociologist,” Jimmy replied meekly.

“Ms. Jenkins, the new guidance counsellor, is a soc ...,” the Principal began. “What's wrong with being a sociologist? And why shouldn't a guidance counsellor be a sociologist?”

“But she's not really a sociologist,” Jimmy tried to explain.

“So Mrs. Greenbottom sent you to me for falsely accusing Ms. Jenkins of being a sociologist?” he said. “This doesn’t make a whole lot of sense. Wait here for a moment – what was it? – James Chicklets.”

“James? That’s funny,” Criminey quipped.

Jimmy didn’t crack a smile.

Principal Gardner went into his office and shortly returned with another file folder. This one had Jimmy’s name on it.

“Let’s see,” the Principal said, flipping through Jimmy’s file. “Ah, here it is: calling the guidance counsellor names. What do you have to say for yourself young man?”

“Nothing, sir,” Jimmy said, a note of futility in his voice.

Principal Gardner continued flipping through Jimmy’s file.

“And what have we here?” he said, squinting his eyes at another page in Jimmy’s file. “A complaint about you being a bad influence ... something about ghosts ... hmm.”

Jimmy just kept his head down to avoid eye contact. Principal Gardner looked him over carefully and then suddenly pulled the cigarette from Jimmy’s front pocket.

“And smoking too,” the Principal said slowly.
“This is a slippery slope you’ve started down, young man.
Your parents are going to hear about this. And you are
going to have two weeks of detention.”

Jimmy got up and slowly headed back to class. This was
the worst day ever.

Chapter 4: Tuesday, No Time to Lose Day

Ms. Chicklets was still at home when Jimmy and Criminey came downstairs for breakfast the next morning. But she was clearly still extremely unhappy. She sighed loudly as she put Jimmy's food in front of him, and avoided making eye contact. And she left without saying good-bye. By the time Jimmy had gotten home from school the previous day – after the first of his ten detentions – she and Mr. Bolger had each already received an email about his trip to the Principal's office.

“First, tormenting children, and then getting thrown out of class for being disrespectful,” Ms. Chicklets said, a mix of anger and despair in her voice. “And now smoking? Smoking!”

“I didn't smoke, Mom,” Jimmy said plaintively. “A kid just gave it to me.”

“And you took it?” Ms. Chicklets continued. “What kid? And what were you planning to do with it?”

“I don’t know, Mom,” Jimmy said in answer – not sure to which question – and then lowered his head and stared at the floor.

“And Connie Blinger complaining that you are a bad influence?” Ms. Chicklets said, incredulously. “Connie Blinger, of all people, with those two juvenile delinquents for sons? Maybe she’s right. Maybe she’s right.”

Mr. Bolger had tried to mollify her by making his special lasagne. Even he realized that special didn’t necessarily mean good, but he thought Ms. Chicklets might appreciate the gesture. She didn’t.

They drove into school that morning, even though it wasn’t raining. Tammy didn’t come with them; she had texted that her father was going to drive her in, which he almost never did.

“So what was this about the new guidance counsellor being a sociologist, Jimmy,” Mr. Bolger asked. “I must admit that was the part of the email I found the most puzzling.”

“She wasn’t a sociologist,” Jimmy replied. “She was an SAU agent pretending to be a sociologist. Only now she is pretending to be a guidance counsellor.”

“Jimmy called her Crispy Bacon,” Criminey chimed in, laughing.

Mr. Bolger raised an eyebrow and smiled faintly.

“That is disrespectful, I suppose,” he added.

“I couldn’t remember her name,” Jimmy said defensively. “And that’s what Criminey told me to call her.”

“What should we do, Mr. Bolger,” Criminey asked, serious now, “about her, about Crispy Bacon.”

“Yea,” Jimmy added, perhaps too enthusiastically, “should we investigate her, what she’s up too?”

“No,” Mr. Bolger said firmly, “you should definitely not investigate her, or do anything else to raise her suspicions for that matter. She’s very dangerous. And let me emphasize: the most important thing, Criminey, is that you do not solidify at school. Right boys?”

“Right, Mr. Bolger,” the boys said in unison, a note of disappointment in Jimmy’s voice, if not Criminey’s.

They sat silently for a few minutes before Jimmy leaned forward and tapped Mr. Bolger on the shoulder.

“Dad,” Jimmy asked, “is there anything I can do to make Mom happy, and stop her from being mad at me?”

“You need to make her proud,” Mr. Bolger answered, “and try to be a good influence on your friends.”

Jimmy spent the rest of the ride to school trying to think of the easiest way to do both of those things at once.

Jimmy and Criminey clustered around Tammy's desk, waiting for the bell to ring. That is, of course, if two people can count as a cluster. And strictly speaking, Criminey was on Tammy's desk rather than around it.

"So you think Ms. Jenkins is Dr. Drake?" Tammy asked.

"Who's Dr. Drake?" Jimmy replied, puzzled.

"The SAU agent who came to the class and told us about the study on imagination," Tammy answered.

Jimmy still looked confused.

"Crispy Bacon," Criminey added helpfully.

"Oh, Crispy Bacon," Jimmy said. "Why didn't you say so?"

Tammy was about to reply when the bell rang. Jimmy quickly returned to his desk and sat with his hands folded.

"Is it okay if I keep sitting here?" Criminey asked.

Jimmy repeated the question to Tammy.

"Of course, Criminey," Tammy said, looking him more or less in the face, "as long as you don't solidify."

The class had finally settled, and Mrs. Greenbottom had just begun to take roll, when there was light knock on the door.

“Enter,” Mrs. Greenbottom said, without getting up from her desk.

In walked Ms. Jenkins – the so-called guidance counsellor. And with her was Mitch McGee. Mitch was the school bully, who hadn’t been seen since he had fled the cafeteria after being implicated in a cheating scandal. The class let out a collective gasp.

“Hi Gang,” Ms. Jenkins said warmly. “As you probably know, your classmate Mitch has been ill for a couple of weeks. But he’s all better now. Please make him feel welcome.”

Tommy and Joe high-fived and “woohoo”-ed. Most of the other kids just lowered their eyes uncomfortably. On his way to his seat, Mitch looked over at Jimmy and waved, a strangely sweet smile on his face. Mrs. Greenbottom looked about to say something when Jimmy raised his arm.

“Yes, Mr. Chicklets,” the teacher said coldly. “No more of your name calling, I hope.”

“No Ma’am,” Jimmy said. “I just wanted to volunteer for the Math-lympics, Ma’am.”

“Why that’s excellent, Jimmy,” Mrs. Greenbottom replied, a lot more warmly this time. “Which category would you like to compete in?”

"What are my choices, Ma'am?" Jimmy asked.

"Let me see," she replied, looking at her ledger.
"Your choices are fractions, speed multiplication or com ...
fractions or speed multiplication."

"Can I do fractions, Ma'am?" Jimmy asked
politely.

"Of course, Jimmy, of course," Mrs. Greenbottom
replied happily. "Anyone else? Peter, can I put you down
for computing?"

Peter Burrows didn't move a muscle. But, all of a sudden,
Mitch raised his hand.

"Yes, Mr. McGee," Mrs. Greenbottom said
distractedly.

"I would like to volunteer too, Ma'am," Mitch said
in a voice that was strange in a hard to pinpoint way.
"Speed Multiplication."

"Are you sure, Mitch?" she asked.

Mitch nodded. Mrs. Greenbottom started writing in her
ledger, an unusual look of contentment on her face.

Tammy, Jimmy, and Criminey sat together at a table in the cafeteria during lunch break. Jimmy and Tammy were both eating lunches they had brought from home. Criminey wasn't eating anything at all, which still raised unsettling questions and which, once again, were overshadowed by other events. This time they were focused on Jimmy's decision to volunteer for the Mathlympics.

"Do you even know how to reduce fractions?" Tammy asked.

"I'm sure it couldn't be so hard," Jimmy replied confidently. "They teach it in school don't they?"

"Why don't we just get a shrink ray?" Criminey asked, laughing.

Jimmy started laughing as well. When he noticed Tammy glaring, he repeated Criminey's quip. Tammy cracked only the faintest of smiles and only for an instant.

"Don't be so serious," Jimmy said. "Didn't you see how happy it made her? No one's going to think I'm a bad influence anymore."

"Well, calling her Ma'am was a nice touch," Tammy said.

"I saw it on an old TV show last night," Criminey replied grinning.

"Yes, it was Criminey's idea," Jimmy said, without elaborating.

Tammy was about to explain how it might be a good idea if Jimmy learned how to reduce fractions prior to the Math-lympics, especially if he wanted to improve his reputation, when Mitch entered the cafeteria, Tommy and Joe Blinger on either side. The Blingers seemed to be engaged in a rather animated conversation, while Mitch, on the other hand, was largely ignoring them. He was scanning the room instead and, when he caught sight of Jimmy and Tammy, he headed purposefully in their direction.

“Hi Jimmy,” Mitch said, in a friendly tone. “I missed you when I was away.”

“I, er, missed you too, Mitch,” Jimmy replied cautiously.

“Yea, we missed you with our fists,” Joe interjected aggressively, “this time.”

Mitch grabbed Joe by the scruff of the neck.

“Careful, Joe,” Mitch said threateningly, “Jimmy is my friend.”

“Since when?” Tommy said, coming to his brother’s defence.

Mitch released Joe’s shirt and looked puzzled for a moment. Then he suddenly turned back towards Jimmy and smiled.

“So we’re both in that math thing,” Mitch said.
“Maybe we should study together.”

“I don’t know, Mitch,” Jimmy replied, awkwardly.
“Tammy’s the real math expert here. Maybe you should study with her.”

Tammy kicked Jimmy vigorously under the table.

“Little Miss Know-it-all!” Tommy replied angrily.
“You don’t want anything to do with her. She thinks she’s the freakin’ Queen of England!”

“Yea, crummy this and blummy that,” Joe added.
“Give me some beer and trumpets!”

Everyone looked puzzled for a moment this time, except for Joe, who had the look of someone who had just told a good one.

“Are you the Queen of England?” Mitch asked Tammy, a look of credulity in his eyes.

Tammy was about to reply – although she wasn’t quite sure how – when Mitch suddenly froze. At almost the same moment, Criminey clapped his hands over his ears.

“What’s that awful sound?” Criminey asked.
“Can’t you hear it?”

Jimmy gently shook his head “no.” And they all watched in astonishment as Mitch suddenly walked out of the cafeteria, as if in a trance.

Jimmy, Tammy, and Criminey carefully followed Mitch down the hallway, with Tommy and Joe following them, a little less carefully, a few steps behind. It had been Tammy's idea in a sense: she had pointed out Ms. Jenkins' role in Mitch's reappearance. Jimmy argued that this meant they needed to find out what the so-called guidance counsellor was up to.

"But we promised Mr. Bolger we wouldn't investigate her," Criminey had objected.

"We promised not to investigate Crispy Bacon," Jimmy replied. "We didn't say anything about Mitch McGee."

"I don't know ...," Criminey said uncertainly.

Tammy had argued, however, that even though Criminey was right about the whole promise business, they nevertheless needed to make sure that Mitch was okay.

"But you don't even like Mitch," Jimmy had objected, not realizing, at first, that Tammy was agreeing with him.

Tammy just shook her head dismissively and started off in the direction Mitch had gone. Jimmy and Criminey quickly started after her. When they got outside the cafeteria, Tommy and Joe were just standing there looking confused. Before they had gone too far, the Blingers decided to tag along.

Mitch walked down the main hallway, looking straight ahead the whole time, before turning in the direction of the guidance offices. Jimmy nodded knowingly at Tammy, who rolled her eyes back, before peeking around the corner. Much to Jimmy's consternation, however, Mitch walked right past the door to guidance suite and continued in the direction of the stairwell down to the basement level. Jimmy waved for the others to follow him and then hurried around the corner after him.

"Where do you think he's going?" Criminey asked nervously as they stared down the now empty stairwell.

"I don't know," Jimmy replied, "but I'm going to find out. I'm sure Crispy Bacon is involved."

"Who are you talking to?" Tommy – who had finally caught with them – asked. "And why are you talking about bacon?"

"It's just a joke, Tommy," Tammy said quickly. "Isn't it, Jimmy?"

Jimmy nodded and then headed briskly down the stairs. The others reluctantly followed.

The stairs led into a dimly lit hallway. About halfway along there was a partially open door from which they could hear the sounds of muffled voices.

"Let's go listen," Jimmy whispered, and then marched ahead without waiting for a reply.

Tammy looked about to object, but then shook her head and followed. Criminey changed into a Sherlock Holmes outfit, complete with hat and magnifying glass; but only Jimmy could see it, and he wasn't looking. Jimmy stopped just before the door and listened as carefully as he could.

"... made contact ... target ... trap ...," said a voice Jimmy was sure belonged to Ms. Jenkins.

"... compete ... multiplication ... study ...," replied a voice Jimmy was sure had to be Mitch.

Jimmy pointed at Criminey, then pointed at his own eyes, and then pointed at the door.

"You want me to pull your eyes out and throw them in the room?" Criminey asked, grinning. "Won't that hurt?"

Jimmy let out a snort before composing himself. All of a sudden the voices in the room went silent. And almost at the same instant, a door across the hallway popped open and out came Mrs. Grubb, the school caretaker, who also worked with Mr. Bolger in the Sprite Protection Agency – a super-secret division of the SPCA. She put a finger to her lips indicating they should be quiet.

"What are you kids doing down here?" she said firmly, winking at the same time. "Looking for a place to smoke, no doubt."

"No Ma'am," Jimmy said in a clearly faked voice. "We don't smoke."

“Well whatever you’re doing, you’re not supposed to be down here,” Mrs. Grubb replied, a more serious look on her face this time. “You need to go back the way you came. Quickly now.”

They rushed to the stairwell and started up the stairs. Before heading up Jimmy glanced back down the hallway. He saw a figure emerge from the room who looked to be saying something to Mrs. Grubb. But he couldn’t make out who it was.

Jimmy, Tammy, and Criminey had gone directly to class after their narrow escape from the basement. The Blinger brothers didn’t follow them, and remained out of sight, if not out of mind, for the rest of the day. Jimmy had wanted to talk about what they had heard during afternoon recess, but Tammy had arranged to do some tutoring. By the time the final bell rang, Jimmy could barely contain himself.

“So what do you think they’re planning?” Jimmy asked enthusiastically as they walked back to their lockers.

“What do I think who are planning?” Tammy asked, irritably.

“Mitch and Crispy Bacon, that’s who,” Jimmy replied. “I know it was them. And they’re planning something.”

“You didn’t even see them. You can’t be sure it was Dr. Drake you heard, or even Mitch, for that matter,” Tammy said. “What exactly did you hear, anyhow?”

“Something about targets and math and studying,” Jimmy said. “It sounded really suspicious.”

“Talking about studying math ... in a school?” Tammy replied. “Oh yea, really suspicious.”

“Shows what you know!” Jimmy replied angrily, as he jerked his jacket out of his locker.

But before he could put it on, he felt a tap on his shoulder. When he turned to look it was Principal Gardner.

“Going somewhere, Mr. Chicklets?” he asked sarcastically.

“No Sir,” Jimmy replied glumly.

He returned his jacket to his locker and then followed the Principal to his second of ten detentions.

Chapter 5: Wednesday, Keep Your Friends Day

Jimmy and Criminey got up early and came downstairs before even Ms. Chicklets was up. They had decided they would make breakfast for the family. Criminey suggested that they make eggs benedict, but Jimmy pointed out that not only did he not know how to make that dish, it almost certainly involved using the stove which he wasn't allowed to do on his own. They settled on something less ambitious – toast and microwaved oatmeal – and the results were no less “special” than Mr. Bolger's lasagne. But in this instance, the gesture was appreciated.

“Thank you, Jimmy, that was very nice of you,” Ms. Chicklets said as she picked at the burnt toast and lumpy oatmeal in front of her.

Mr. Bolger gave Jimmy an approving nod before picking up his newspaper and continuing to read, apparently oblivious of his own breakfast.

The previous evening Jimmy had made a point of doing his homework as soon as he got home. Ms. Chicklets had noticed and brought him some milk and a cookie to tide him over. After dinner, they had gone to Jimmy's room to practice visibility. Well, Criminey was practicing becoming visible and invisible again – Jimmy was just offering advice.

"Stop being so mean," Criminey complained, after being called hopeless for what seemed like the fiftieth time.

"It's called constructive criticism," Jimmy replied smugly.

"Seems more like destructive criticism to me," Criminey muttered, half under his breath.

The problem wasn't becoming invisible. All Criminey had to do was to de-solidify and he immediately became invisible; and, most of the time at least, Criminey was able to solidify and de-solidify at will. The problem was controlling when he became visible while solid and when he changed from visible to invisible again while remaining solid. At first, these changes appeared to be just random. But they kept at it – Criminey with his practicing and Jimmy with his advice – and by bedtime Criminey seemed to have gotten the hang of it. Sort of.

After breakfast, which had been unusually early that morning, they decided in a moment of overconfidence to see if Criminey could become visible whenever Ms. Chicklets left the room. And they neglected to tell Mr. Bolger of this plan in advance.

“Now!” Jimmy said, when Ms. Chicklets went to check on the laundry.

Criminey solidified and lifted a glass of milk off the table. Jimmy took a picture of him with his tablet.

“Did it work?” Criminey asked.

“Did what work?” Mr. Bolger asked, lowering his newspaper.

“Criminey’s practicing becoming visible,” Jimmy said matter of factly.

Mr. Bolger looked over at Criminey and noticed that he had a glass of milk in his hand.

“Put that down,” he hissed, “before Ms. Chicklets notices.”

“Before I notice what, Dennis?” Ms. Chicklets said, re-entering the room.

Criminey immediately de-solidified, and the glass dropped to the table, spilling milk everywhere. There was an uncomfortable silence as Mr. Bolger tried to think of something to say.

“Before you notice that, er, I spilled milk everywhere,” he replied finally.

“But you didn’t spill the milk until after ... ,” Ms. Chicklets began and then paused. “Oh just clean it up and get ready to go.”

“What do you mean Criminey’s practicing becoming visible?” Mr Bolger whispered once Ms. Chicklets left the kitchen. “And you can see him all the time, Jimmy. How can you even tell if he’s visible?”

Jimmy held up his tablet for Mr. Bolger to see.

“When Criminey’s visible, I can take his picture,” Jimmy replied.

“Of course,” Mr. Bolger said, “of course.”

Mr. Bolger then finished cleaning the kitchen – including the split milk – while Jimmy and Criminey got ready for school.

Mrs. Greenbottom started out class discussing the details of the Math-lympics. It was scheduled for Thursday afternoon, which meant that the participants wouldn’t have to go to class. But since the rest of the students got a study hall in the library with a substitute teacher, this wasn’t much of a benefit. Ronnie Goodbody – who the other kids nicknamed “Badbody” – had reluctantly volunteered to tackle the computing category. Peter Burrows hadn’t so much declined as refused to acknowledge that he’d ever been asked. Ronnie was arguably the second best computing student in the class, but that didn’t mean he was very good at it.

“If Badbody does computing, we’re sure to lose,” Jimmy complained.

“But if somebody doesn’t practice reducing fractions, we might be in trouble either way,” Tammy replied.

Jimmy ignored her.

“I think I’ll try to talk Poopypants into doing it during recess,” Jimmy announced. “If I can get him to do it, no one can call me a bad influence then.”

“How are you going to do that?” Tammy asked coldly. “Peter hates you.”

“Maybe you should come too, then,” Jimmy replied.

Tammy rolled her eyes, a look of resignation on her face.

The class had started to get unusually loud: Jimmy and Tammy weren’t the only ones talking. All of a sudden, Mrs. Greenbottom banged her yardstick sharply against her desk. Everybody froze.

“As I was saying,” she announced calmly, “the members of our Math-lympics team will meet after school for a practice session. Please convene in the library after your last class of the day.”

Jimmy quickly put his hand up.

“Yes, Jimmy,” Mrs. Greenbottom said.

“I have detention after school today, Ma’am,” Jimmy said, “for being disrespectful. So I won’t be able to go to the practice session.”

“Hmm,” Mrs. Greenbottom replied, “that is a conundrum. Maybe Principal Gardner could make an exception.”

All of a sudden Mitch raised his hand as well.

“Teacher,” he said, without waiting to be called on, “Jimmy is going to tutor me tonight.”

Mrs. Greenbottom looked shocked – and a little angry – at first, over Mitch’s double breach of protocol: Teacher, indeed! But after a moment, a contemplative expression appeared on her face.

“Yes Mitch,” she said, “that’s a good idea. Jimmy will have to miss our practice session. But the two of you can make it up later this evening.”

Mitch looked over at Jimmy and smiled warmly. Jimmy let out an audible groan.

“One more thing,” Mrs. Greenbottom announced. “Yesterday the Math-lympics trophy got mysteriously damaged.”

She looked in the direction of the Blinger brothers when she said this, who smiled knowingly at each other.

“It is being repaired, but it won’t be ready until after school,” she continued. “I need a volunteer to pick it up on the way home and bring it to school tomorrow.”

Jimmy put his hand up.

“I’ll do it, Ma’am,” Jimmy said.

“Are you sure, Jimmy?” Mrs. Greenbottom asked. “It’s a very big responsibility. If there was no trophy to give to the winning team, it would be very embarrassing for the school, and for me personally.”

“You can count on me, Ma’am,” Jimmy replied, thinking mostly of the potential impact on his reputation.

“Very good, Jimmy,” she said. “You can pick it up at Trophy Trophy Trophy, which is next door to Video Emporium. Do you know where that is?”

Jimmy nodded. Of course he knew where it was. Video Emporium was, after all, the third best arcade in town.

Jimmy, Tammy, and Criminey entered the library and scanned the room. They had a study hall period just after afternoon recess on Wednesdays, but really it was a goof around in the library period. It was Criminey who first spotted Peter sitting alone at a table in the back corner; it was Jimmy who tried to take credit for spotting him. He was sitting with his head lying sideways on the table, looking at what appeared to a children's storybook. Jimmy came up from behind him and slapped him on the shoulder.

"How are you doing, P-Peter, buddy?" Jimmy said, enthusiastically.

Peter immediately sat up straight and slammed the storybook closed, but not before a calculus textbook slipped out from inside it onto his lap. He looked at Jimmy and then Tammy and then back at Jimmy again. And when he was done with his looking, he methodically placed the calculus textbook on the table, on top of the storybook.

"What do you want, Chicklets?" he asked coldly, and then a little more warmly, "Tammy?"

"Jimmy ... we were wondering if we could talk you into competing in the Math-lympics," Tammy said when Jimmy hesitated.

"Yea," Jimmy added, "if Badbody does computing, we're sure to lose."

Peter smiled faintly.

“Now why would I do that?” he asked.

“To help the class win, to help us avoid remedial math classes, and to make Mrs. Greenbottom happy,” Jimmmy replied, reciting the list of reasons Tammy had helped him prepare.

Peter smiled again and looked over at Tammy.

“Why should I care about any of that?” he asked. “And more to the point, why do you?”

“I’m trying to improve my reputation and make my mom proud,” Jimmy replied, a note of desperation in his voice.

“Good luck with that,” Peter said, laughing. “I heard that even Mrs. Blinger is calling you a bad influence – not that anyone is ever influenced by you in the first place.”

“That’s what I said,” Criminey quipped.

Jimmy looked over at Criminey and glared.

“What do you want, Peter?” Tammy asked calmly.

Peter looked roughly in the direction of Criminey and smiled.

“I want to meet him,” Peter replied. “I want to meet your invisible friend.”

“What?” Jimmy replied, shocked. “Er, what invisible friend?”

“Jimmy,” Tammy interjected, “he knows. Peter is the Prime Benefactor. Don't you get it? Prime Benefactor, P. B., Peter Burrows.”

A few weeks earlier, a video of Criminey – with Mitch’s face – stealing a quiz from Mrs. Greenbottom’s office had been created by someone calling himself the Prime Benefactor and played on the school’s video monitors.

“Huh?” Jimmy said.

“Peter made the video,” Tammy replied. “He knows about Criminey.”

Criminey grinned, Jimmy hung his head, and Peter nodded victoriously. Tammy just rolled her eyes.

Tammy, Jimmy, and Peter taped strips of tinfoil on the walls inside the caretaker’s closet in the basement.

“I hope Mrs. Grubb doesn’t mind,” Criminey said.

“Me too,” Jimmy replied, “or at least doesn’t catch us.”

They found the tinfoil, and the tape, on one of the shelves in the closet, as Peter had predicted. They were using it to block any displacement ripples that might be detected if Criminey solidified, which he would have to do if Peter was going to meet him.

“But if Criminey solidifies, those fake sociologists will be able to detect him,” Jimmy had tried to object, rather clumsily it might be said, “with their detectors.”

“You mean the anomalous magnetic waves those government agents were so interested in?” Peter had replied. “That was your friend – Criminey – manifesting? Cool.”

“Yes, but we call it solidifying,” Jimmy said, a little miffed that Peter knew as much as he did.

Peter had gone on to explain that he knew how to block the waves as well – using tinfoil – which miffed Jimmy even more. When they were done, Peter looked at Jimmy expectantly.

“So, can I meet Criminey now?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” Criminey said. “We promised Mr. Bolger.”

“That was because of the ripples,” Jimmy replied. “But we’ve got the tinfoil. And this is important.”

“Okay,” Criminey said hesitantly, and then solidified.

“Hi Criminey,” Tammy said, as he became visible.

Criminey bowed in Tammy’s direction and then waved at Peter.

“Cool,” Peter said. “Can he talk?”

“Of course I can talk,” Criminey replied, “but you can’t hear me.”

Jimmy was in the middle of repeating this comment when the door opened and in walked Mrs. Grubb, who was continuing her habit of unexpected appearances. The kids made their excuses and quickly exited the closet, leaving the caretaker to clean up their mess.

Tammy, Jimmy, and Criminey we’re waiting for Mitch in Jimmy’s room after dinner. Tammy had resisted coming at first – appealing to the need to complete her own homework, as well as the fact that she wanted nothing to do with this particular mess. But she gave in when Jimmy pointed out that he shouldn’t be tutoring anyone in math and, in addition, when he promised to let Tammy tutor him in fractions as well, time permitting of course. Jimmy had picked up the trophy on the way home, and it was sitting on his desk for safekeeping. Criminey solidified, picked the trophy up, and made himself invisible to see if he could make it seem to disappear. He couldn’t.

“Careful!” Jimmy snapped. “I’m responsible for that. Use something else.”

Just as Criminey put it down, there was knock at the door and Ms. Chicklets popped her head through the doorway.

“Jimmy, Mitch is here to see you – Mitch McGee,” she half-asked, half-said.

“Yes, Mom,” Jimmy replied. “We’re all on the class Math-lympics team, and Tammy and I are tutoring Mitch.”

“Well, Mrs. Mugwort told me you were on the Math-lympics team,” she said, gesturing at Tammy with a look of contentment on her face. “But tutoring too? I’m very proud.”

She opened the door wider and Mitch walked though. He sat on the edge of Jimmy’s bed and smiled.

“So Mitch,” Jimmy began cautiously, “do you know how speed multiplication works?”

Mitch shook his head. Jimmy looked over at Tammy, who glared briefly back and then turned towards Mitch.

“It’s quite simple,” Tammy began. “They simply ask you twenty questions from the multiplication tables and the person who answers them all fastest wins. Do you understand?”

Mitch nodded, still smiling.

“So how well do you know the multiplication tables?” Tammy continued.

Mitch shrugged.

“Okay,” Tammy said, with forced patience, “let’s start from the beginning. $2 \times 2 = 4$, okay? $3 \times 2 = 6$, okay? ...”

Tammy continued in this vein until she reached 12×12 .

“So, did you get all that,” she asked hopelessly.

Mitch nodded, still smiling.

“Okay,” Jimmy suggested, “let’s give you a test. What’s 9×7 ?”

“63,” Mitch said immediately.

“What about 9×4 ?” Jimmy tried again.

“36,” Mitch replied, equally quickly.

Jimmy and Tammy locked eyes for a moment, surprise on their faces.

“How about 7×12 ?” Tammy asked this time.

“84,” Mitch replied.

They tried a bunch more questions and Mitch answered them all correctly just as quickly.

“Wow Mitch,” Tammy said, “that was really impressive. I don’t think you need any more tutoring.”

Mitch nodded, but didn't get up from where he was sitting.

"So that was amazing when my bike flew over the fence," Mitch said all of a sudden. "What do you think happened?"

"Er, I don't know, Mitch," Jimmy replied slowly. "It was, um, your bike; maybe you should tell me."

Mitch's eyes glazed over for a second and he looked confused. Then he suddenly focused again.

"Do you believe in faeries, Jimmy?" Mitch asked. "Have you ever seen one?"

"There's no such thing as faeries, Mitch," Jimmy replied.

Mitch looked confused again for a moment. Tammy took the opportunity to grab Jimmy by the arm and pull him out the door. Criminey, of course, followed them out.

"Back in one sec, Mitch," Tammy said as she pulled the bedroom door closed behind them.

"What?" Jimmy asked.

"Don't you get it?" Tammy asked. "You were right about Ms. Jenkins. Mitch is like the Manchurian Candidate. Ms. Jenkins or Dr. Drake or whoever she is hypnotized Mitch to spy on us and find out about Criminey."

“The mansion what?” Jimmy asked.

Just as Tammy started to explain an old movie she had once seen, the bedroom door suddenly popped open and out walked Mitch.

“I have to go,” he said in a monotone voice, and then quickly trotted down the stairs.

They re-entered the room and sat down.

“Well that was stra ...,” Jimmy began, and then stopped abruptly and pointed at his desk. “Oh, no.”

The trophy was gone.

Chapter 6: Thursday, Amateurs Day

Jimmy, Tammy, and Criminey walked quickly into school. They were so focused on what they should do about the trophy that they didn't even notice when the Blinger brothers approached them.

“What wrong with Mitch?” Tommy asked angrily from a safe distance. “What did you do to him?”

Jimmy just ignored them and kept on walking. Criminey waved; but since he didn't solidify first, they couldn't see him. The previous evening, not only had Mitch stolen the Math-lympics trophy – which Jimmy had promised he would deliver intact to Mrs. Greenbottom – he had also left a note. It had read,

If you want your trophy back, meet me in the basement after lunch. You know where. And bring your friend. MM.

It had slipped onto the floor, so none of them saw it at first. And when Jimmy finally did read it, the immediate result was a certain amount of confusion.

“Why does he want me to bring you?” he asked Tammy. “He can talk to you anytime.”

“He’s not talking about me,” Tammy had replied. “He wants you to bring Criminey.”

“How does everybody know about Criminey when they’ve never seen him?” Jimmy asked in frustration.

“What can I say?” Criminey said, bowing. “I’m a star.”

This, of course, hadn’t put Jimmy in any better spirits.

When they reached Mrs. Greenbottom’s house, Jimmy stopped suddenly. He looked into her driveway to see if her car was still there, if she was home sick. It wasn’t and she wasn’t.

“If we told Mrs. Greenbottom what happened, maybe she’d understand,” Tammy suggested unconvincingly, as they starting walking again.

“It’d be Mitch’s word against mine,” Jimmy replied. “And no one would believe a bad influence like me.”

“But Mitch has worst reputation in school,” Tammy said.

“Had,” Jimmy replied, “had. But now he’s been cured. And Crispy Bacon will back him up.”

They walked quietly for a couple of blocks, when Tammy suddenly grabbed Jimmy's arm and stopped him.

"Okay, so what's the plan?" she asked.

"You're in?" Jimmy asked, surprised.

Tammy nodded seriously.

"I'll go to the meeting with Mitch," Jimmy said.

"And?" Tammy asked, and when Jimmy didn't answer continued, "You know it's a trap, don't you?"

"So what's your big idea, smarty pants?" Jimmy replied angrily.

Tammy rolled her eyes once again before answering.

"You're getting good at that," Criminey chimed in. "Tell her she's getting good at that Jimmy."

Jimmy made a poor effort at rolling his own eyes before passing on Criminey's message.

"Thank you, Criminey. I've been getting lots of practice recently," Tammy began. "So here's the plan. I'll go see Dr. Drake for some "guidance," while you're meeting Mitch, to make sure she can't help with the trap. Once you find out where the trophy is, you distract Mitch while Criminey puts it into a bag and leaves it by the door. Then you find a reason to leave and pick the bag up on the way out. Any questions?"

Jimmy looked at her skeptically for a moment before responding.

“You’ve got it all worked out, don’t you?” he began. “So, how am I supposed to distract Mitch?”

“Why don’t you try some speed multiplication questions?” Tammy replied. “They seem to catch his attention, at least since he’s been hypnotized.”

“But what if they have one of those ripple detectors?” Criminey asked, worried. “Won’t I get caught?”

Jimmy passed on the question to Tammy.

“I think I have an idea,” Tammy replied. “When you are de-solidified you can change into whatever clothes you like? And you will be wearing those same clothes when you solidify, right?”

Jimmy passed on Criminey’s affirmation.

“So before you solidify and grab the trophy, change into a tinfoil suit,” Tammy said. “That way you will be covered in tinfoil when you solidify, so they can’t detect you. And remember, when you solidify, stay invisible. And carry the bag low to the floor so Mitch won’t notice it moving.”

Jimmy and Criminey looked at each other and grinned. This was the perfect plan. Nothing could go wrong.

Something went wrong, very wrong. The plan had started out well. Ms. Jenkins had answered when Tammy knocked on her door right after lunch.

“Ms. Jenkins,” Tammy had said, “my name is Tamara Mugwort, from Mrs. Greenbottom’s class. I wonder if you have time to meet right now. I want to discuss my future.”

“Of course, Tammy,” Ms. Jenkins replied, “I’ve heard lots of nice things about you, from your teachers. Come right in.”

Tammy gave Jimmy and Criminey – who were hiding around the corner – the thumbs up as she entered the guidance office, before the door closed behind her. The other two quickly headed down into the basement towards the room where Jimmy was sure he had heard Mitch and Crispy Bacon talking. When Jimmy knocked on the door, Mitch had answered and let him in. Criminey snuck through as well before Mitch closed the door behind them.

“Where’s your friend?” Mitch asked. “I told you to bring your friend.”

“Uh, Tammy?” Jimmy replied nervously. “She, uh, had an appointment.”

Mitch paused for a moment, a confused expression on his face once again.

“Your other friend,” he said finally. “Where is your other friend?”

This time it was Jimmy who paused for a moment, unsure of how to respond. Then he had an idea.

“You’re here, Mitch,” Jimmy replied, a faint smile on his face. “Aren’t you my friend?”

Mitch looked really confused, and torn between saying two very different things. Jimmy took the opportunity to walk through the partially open door to his left.

“Where’s the trophy, Mitch?” he asked, as he entered an adjoining room. “Is it in here?”

Criminey skipped in the room after him; Mitch followed robotically, as if in a trance. Jimmy turned on the light, and there in the far corner, sitting on a desk, was the trophy.

The plan started to go wrong when Jimmy was supposed to distract Mitch, so Criminey could steal the trophy. The problem was that no matter what Jimmy said or did, Mitch wouldn’t take his eyes off it.

“So Mitch,” Jimmy asked, “what’s 8x8?”

“Huh?” Mitch replied, eyes fixed on the trophy.

“What’s 8x8?” Jimmy repeated.

“64,” Mitch replied quickly, without shifting his gaze.

“What’s 7x11?” Jimmy tried again.

“77,” Mitch said, again without moving.

“Hey!” Jimmy yelled sharply – after trying several more multiplication questions – and threw a chalk brush he had picked up against the far wall.

“Hey, what?” Mitch replied, frozen in place.

Jimmy was nearly ready to give up when Criminey edged over near the desk and made what he would later describe as a brilliant suggestion.

“Try flying bicycles,” he said.

Jimmy grinned.

“Flying bicycles, Mitch!” Jimmy yelled. “Over here! Look!”

“What? Where?” Mitch said, turning his whole body towards Jimmy.

Criminey took the opportunity to solidify, grab the trophy, and head for the door. By the time Mitch looked back at the desk it was gone. He stared instead at the space where the trophy had been.

“I’m going to be late for class, Mitch,” Jimmy said suddenly. “I’m going to go now.”

Jimmy headed back through the door to the room where he had first met Mitch. Mitch himself didn't move a muscle.

It was at this point that the plan went really wrong. When he got into the first room, a large black shimmering circle began to appear in front of the door that led out into the hallway. It took Jimmy a moment to realize what it was: a portal. And after another moment, someone stepped through it into the room. It was Crispy Bacon. And in her hand was what could only be a ripple detector. She looked at Jimmy and smiled.

"So Mr. Chicklets," she said, "we meet at last."

Of course, strictly speaking they had met before: she had twice now addressed Jimmy's class pretending first to be both a sociologist and second a guidance counsellor. But that didn't make her greeting any less ominous.

Crispy Bacon and Jimmy sat facing each other in the back room, the only difference being that Mitch was holding Jimmy in place while the so called guidance counsellor was free to move as she pleased.

"So, Mr. Chicklets, Jimmy," Crispy Bacon began, "tell me about your friend. And just to be clear, I don't mean Ms. Mugwort."

"Mitch says he's my friend," Jimmy replied nervously. "Do you mean Mitch?"

Crispy Bacon smiled coldly.

“Maybe this will make you a little more cooperative,” she said, pulling a watch on a long chain from her pocket. “Mitch, hold him tight.”

Crispy Bacon started swinging the watch in front of Jimmy’s face.

“Just listen to the sound of my voice, as it goes back and forth, back and forth,” she said in a dull monotone. “You’re getting sleepy, sleepy.”

“She’s trying to hypnotize you,” Criminey said, worried. “You have to try to stay awake.”

“I will,” Jimmy replied weakly.

“Of course you will get sleepy, sleepy,” Crispy Bacon said, thinking he was talking to her.

Jimmy’s eyelids started to close. If this kept up, he was going to be under Crispy Bacon’s control any minute now. Before it was too late, Criminey solidified, wrapped in tinfoil but still invisible. He waited for a moment to make sure that the ripple-detecting machine wasn’t going to go off – which was sitting on the desk in the corner next to the trophy, which Criminey has discreetly returned when Crispy Bacon was otherwise occupied. And then he started poking Jimmy in the stomach. Jimmy immediately snapped to attention, and began struggling in Mitch’s arms.

Crispy Bacon put away her pocket watch, a look of frustration in her eyes. She pulled what looked like a black doctor's bag out from under her chair and placed it onto her lap.

"I guess it's time for the big guns," she said, grabbing a large needle filled with a blue liquid from the bag.

Jimmy gasped as she moved it towards him. She had already pulled back his sleeve when there was a loud knocking at the door to the main room.

"Who could that be?" she muttered as she got up and laid the needle on her chair. "Mitch, hold him tight!"

She quickly exited the back room and answered the door. Jimmy could make out two voices: one belonged to Crispy Bacon and the other he recognized but couldn't place. He couldn't hear what they were saying either, but Crispy Bacon seemed quite agitated. All of a sudden another portal opened up in front of him, and out walked Tammy of all people.

"Rumpelstiltskin," she whispered sharply.

Mitch immediately let go of Jimmy. He looked around the room with a familiar but recently absent look of hostility on his face.

"What's going on?" he said angrily. "Where am I?"

“Everybody through the portal now!” Tammy hissed. “You too, Mitch, before she gets back!”

Mitch and Criminey moved directly towards Tammy and the portal. Jimmy dashed over to the corner and grabbed the trophy before joining them. He looked behind him and saw Crispy Bacon charge back into the room. Then he stepped into the portal and everything went black. When his eyes adjusted to the darkness, he saw that they were in a small room with tinfoil covering the walls. It was the caretaker’s closet in the basement right across from the room where Jimmy had been trapped. All of a sudden the door opened and Mrs. Grubb poked her head in.

“Quickly now,” she said, pointing in the direction of the stairwell back up to the main floor, “before she gets back.”

The four of them – Mitch included – ran down to the end of the hallway and up the stairs.

Jimmy, Tammy, and Criminey walked slowly home after school, discussing the events that had transpired over the course of the day. They hadn’t a chance to talk about exactly how Tammy had managed to rescue them, so Tammy waited in the library until Jimmy’s detention was over – his fourth of ten detentions.

They had rushed straight from the school basement to the main gym where the Math-lympics were being held. Even so, they barely made it on time. Mrs. Greenbottom glared at Jimmy when he ran over to the judge's table and gave her the trophy. And after the Math-lympics were over, he had been too morose to want to talk about it. He was still morose.

“I'm ruined,” he moaned. “I don't even think he knows how to read.”

Jimmy had come in second last in his Math-lympics category – reducing fractions. And the boy he had beaten was from a team whose motto was “participating is more important than winning.” Although the boy in question probably could read, he was certainly no math genius. The rest of the team did quite well. Tammy and Peter won their categories as expected, and Lucy finished a respectable third. Mitch surprised everyone – especially himself – by finishing third in speed multiplication as well. He looked over at Jimmy suspiciously when he was done, and half-heartedly exchanged high-fives with the Blingers when he went back to the bleachers to sit down. But it was Jimmy's poor performance that knocked the team down from first to second. Mrs. Greenbottom had a pained expression on her face as she passed the trophy to the teacher – a longstanding archrival, apparently – who coached the winning team. And what made it worse was that Ms. Chicklets had been in bleachers watching the whole fiasco. When it was over, she came down and gave Jimmy an extra-long hug and then left without saying anything.

Criminey tried to cheer Jimmy up by changing into a series of increasingly ridiculous tinfoil hats. With each change of costume, he solidified and made himself visible briefly for Tammy's benefit. Although Tammy giggled at most of them, Jimmy didn't crack a smile until he saw Criminey wearing a hat with a tinfoil figure on the top – clearly meant to be Mrs. Greenbottom – having her brain drained of blood by a horde of very realistic Monster Slaughter Vambies. While it was visible Tammy pulled it off Criminey's head and put it on Jimmy's, where it remained even after Criminey de-solidified.

“Well that's interesting,” Tammy said.

“At least it will come in handy whenever I need a tinfoil hat,” Jimmy replied.

Tammy rolled her eyes and shook her head this time.

“So I was only in Ms. Jenkin's office for a few minutes, when she excused herself and went into her back room,” Tammy said. “I took the opportunity to search her desk and found a file with Mitch's name on it. And in the file I found the safe word: Rumpelstiltskin.”

“What's a safe word?” Jimmy asked, still a little confused. “And how did you open a portal, anyhow?”

“A safe word is a word used to break someone out of a hypnotic trance,” Tammy explained. “Dr. Drake must have hypnotized Mitch to wake up when heard ‘Rumpelstiltskin.’ And it wasn’t me who opened the portal; it was Mrs. Grubb. When Dr. Drake didn’t return from the back room, I opened the door and peaked inside. When I saw it was empty, I realized you might be in trouble. I remembered you said that Mrs. Grubb worked with your dad, so I went to find her. And we came up with a plan where I would portal in and get you while she distracted Dr. Drake.”

Jimmy nodded and the three of them walked quietly the rest of the way home. When they reached Jimmy’s house, Jimmy and Tammy waved good-bye. Criminey made himself myself visible and bowed low.

“Now it’s time to face the music,” Jimmy said, more to himself than anyone else.

And then he and Criminey walked up the front steps towards the door. Although, strictly speaking, Criminey danced up the steps.

Chapter 7: Friday, Please Don't Pry Day

As it turned out there was relatively little music to face, metaphorically at least. Literal music was another matter, altogether; Mr. Bolger spent much of the evening playing bands he liked when he was in college. Jimmy thought they were awful; but Criminey, as always, danced enthusiastically. What was surprising, however, was how nice everyone was to Jimmy. Ms. Chicklets made his favourite dinner – homemade pepperoni and pickle pizza – and spontaneously hugged him more times than he cared to remember. Mr. Bolger even offered to play a game of Monster Slaughter with him. Jimmy declined: he wanted to enjoy himself, after all; and Mr. Bolger seemed more relieved than insulted.

Even during the rush to get out the door the next morning, his parents remained unusually attentive. Ms. Chicklets gave him an extra-long hug before leaving for work.

“I’ll see you later,” she said significantly, tears in the corners of her eyes.

“Okay, Mom,” Jimmy replied, a little puzzled about what she meant.

Mr. Bolger even put down his newspaper during breakfast.

“Is there anything I can do for you?” he asked.

“Well, I am a little worried about Crispy Bacon, Dad” Jimmy said.

“Crispy Bacon?” Mr Bolger said. “I could fry some up for you if that’s what you’d like.”

“Dad,” Jimmy replied, “what’s going on? Why are you and Mom being so nice?”

“Your mom is worried about you, Jimmy,” Mr. Bolger replied. “She thinks she was too hard on you earlier in the week and knows you’ve been trying. But after what happened yesterday ...”

“You mean with Mitch and the SAU agent?” Jimmy asked. “How does Mom know about that?”

“No, I don’t mean ... what?!” Mr. Bolger replied, shocked.

Jimmy sketched the previous day’s events. Criminey chimed in periodically to emphasize his own contributions.

“Well at least you’re safe,” Mr. Bolger said when they were done, “both of you. But it is puzzling that Yolanda – Mrs. Grubb – didn’t tell me any of this. Very puzzling indeed.”

Shortly afterward Tammy arrived, and she, Jimmy, and Criminey headed off to school.

As they approached Mrs. Greenbottom’s house, they saw Mitch and the Blinger brothers waiting across the street. Mitch came over to join them, while Tommy and Joe stayed where they were, nervous and confused expressions on their faces.

“First, flying bicycles and now invisible friends, Chicklets?” Mitch said. “It’s starting to make sense.”

“I don’t know what you mean, Mitch,” Jimmy replied. “Aren’t you my friend?”

“Drop it, Chicklets!” Mitch said, angrily. “I remember everything.”

Jimmy and Tammy looked at each other nervously and got ready to run.

“No, you’re not my friend,” Mitch continued, a little more calmly now. “But you saved me from that ... whatever she was. So you’re not my enemy, either.”

Jimmy and Tammy visibly relaxed as Mitch went and rejoined the Blingers across the street. The Blingers seemed to relax as well.

Jimmy, Tammy, and Criminey sat together again at a table in the lunchroom. It had been something of a stressful morning. They had avoided running into the so-called guidance counsellor, Ms. Jenkins, so that was good. Jimmy thought he saw her once, and dove around a corner, banging right into Mitch. Mitch pushed him up against a locker, scowled, and then let him go.

“It’s Crispy Bacon,” Jimmy tried to explain, “around the corner.”

Mitch just looked at him like he was crazy.

“He means he thought he saw Ms. Jenkins around the corner,” Tammy, who had just joined them, said.

“Why didn’t you just say so?” Mitch replied angrily, and then, turning to Tammy, continued, “I tried to tell Principal Gardner what she did to me, but he said he didn’t believe me, and just kicked me out of his office.”

But the most stressful thing was when some of the kids started making fun of Jimmy’s poor performance in the Math-lympics. The worst was when Peter Burrows came over to talk to Tammy.

“Poopy-pants and Poopy-brains – what a pair,” someone said.

Peter just ignored it – apparently he was used to the taunts. But Jimmy was mortified.

Tammy and Jimmy had just finished eating when the cafeteria video monitors suddenly started flashing. Again. Tammy looked over at Peter Burrows, who was sitting alone at a nearby table. He met her eyes and smiled faintly. The words "Government Agents Infiltrate School" started blinking on the screens. The room fell silent. After a few moments, the words "Who is She?" appeared followed by an image of Crispy Bacon labelled "Ms. Jenkins, Guidance Counsellor." Two more images appeared on the screen in succession. The first was a picture of Crispy Bacon when she was pretending to be a sociologist, which was labelled "Dr. Drake, Sociologist." The final image was of what appeared to be a government ID badge. On the top left of badge was another picture of Crispy Bacon. On the top right it read "Agent Sabrina Fairbairn, S.A.U., D.O.F." And on the bottom there was a barcode. After another few moments, the words "What Does She Want?" appeared on the video monitors, followed by screenshots of two emails, both of which were addressed from sabrina.fairbairn@sau-dof.gov and sent to director@sau-dof.gov. The first email read,

Director,

I have infiltrated the school. Contact has been made with local assets. Attempting to locate target.

SF

And the second email read,

Director

Project “Manchurian Classmate” has been implemented. Mitch McGee is under our control and has been reintroduced into the classroom. Target has been identified.

SF

There was no signature at the end of the video this time, just a series of numbers: 1, 3, 5, 7, 11, 13, 17, 19,

“Hmm,” Tammy said to no one in particular, “they’re all primes.”

And no one in particular listened either.

It was the last class of the day, and Jimmy’s eyes were glued to the clock. Not literally, of course. That would be awful. He couldn’t wait to be out of there, even if it meant an hour of sanding desks and washing chalkboards during his fifth of ten detentions. There were about ten minutes left – ten whole minutes – when there was a knock at the door and in walked Ms. Chicklets, of all people.

“Class,” Mrs. Greenbottom announced, “as you may have heard, Ms. Jenkins has been relieved of her duties as Guidance Counsellor.”

Lucy Underhill leaned forward, and tapped Jimmy on the shoulder.

“Did you hear?” Lucy whispered. “Principal Gardner sent the police after Ms. Jenkins. But when they got here, she was gone. And her office had been emptied.”

Mrs. Greenbottom loudly cleared her throat and Lucy quickly sat back in her seat.

“As I was saying,” Mrs. Greenbottom continued, “until we can find a suitable replacement, Ms. Chicklets – who some of you may know – has kindly agreed to step in on an interim basis, one afternoon a week.”

She gave the signal for the class to say “good afternoon” to Ms. Chicklets in unison. As always, some of the students got her name creatively wrong. Even Criminey got in on the act, calling her “Ms. Piglets.” Usually Jimmy found this quite hilarious. On this occasion, however, he held his head in his hands and groaned quietly to himself.

Mrs. Greenbottom scowled at the class for a moment, before reaching into her desk and pulling out what appeared to be a small trophy.

“One more thing, class,” Mrs. Greenbottom said. “As you know, our Math-lympics team can in second yesterday. A respectable second.”

She paused, waiting for the class to applaud. A couple of students started to boo, when they noticed Mitch and the Blingers glaring at them. They quickly stopped and started clapping softly instead. The rest of the class slowly joined in. After the applause died down – which didn’t take very long – Mrs. Greenbottom started again.

“Every year, after the Math-lympics, we give out our MVP trophy,” Mrs. Greenbottom announced. “It is awarded to the participant who makes the most positive contribution to the success of the team. This year the contributions of one participant stand out. For recruiting students to the team, tutoring students on the team, and responsibly taking care of the Math-lympics trophy, this year’s MVP trophy goes to Jimmy Chicklets.”

There was a stunned silence in the classroom. And no one was more stunned than Jimmy. After a moment, Mitch and then the Blingers started clapping. Soon everyone else joined in. Criminey jumped up on Jimmy’s desk and started dancing. All of a sudden his outline became faintly visible.

“Criminey, no!” Tammy blurted out.

“Runny nose, uh, ho ho ho,” Joe Blinger tried to quip, hesitantly, “give me some, uh, pee and, uh, I drunk it.”

Everybody laughed, but nobody was quite sure why.

After the final bell rang, Jimmy went straight down to the detention room. He was in a lot better mood than usual about it, and was still holding his MVP trophy. There were about ten other kids there already when he arrived. Principal Gardner had just started handing out their cleaning assignments when there was a knock on the door, and in walked Ms. Chicklets once again. This time she wasn't alone: with her was Frank Boffin – the boy who had given Jimmy the cigarette outside the Principal's office. Principal Gardner looked like he was going to be sick.

“Ms. Chicklets,” he said weakly, “what brings you here?”

“Last night I received an anonymous report concerning school finances and student detention rates,” Ms. Chicklets said, indicating a file folder she was holding. “It seems to point to both a decrease in the care-taking budget and a corresponding increase in after school detention rates. And there seems to be a certain amount of unclarity about where the savings in the care-taking budget have gone. All very puzzling isn't it, Principal Gardner?”

Principal Gardner nodded without saying anything, a look of panic on his face.

“The report also indicated that I should get in touch with Mr. Boffin here,” Ms. Chicklets continued. “Frank, tell Principal Gardner what you told me.”

“This fella offered me some cash to sit outside the Principal’s office and offer cigs to any kids sitting there,” Frank said. “And then I was supposed to scoot whenever they took one.”

“Thank you, Frank,” Ms. Chicklets said. “All very mysterious, don’t you agree, Principal Gardner?”

Principal Gardner nodded again, ever so faintly.

“But I do want to compliment you on how clean you’ve kept the school despite your shrinking care-taking budget,” Ms. Chicklets continued, “as well as on your policy of having students spend their detention time cleaning up, rather than just sitting around twiddling their thumbs.”

“Th-thank you, Ms. Chicklets,” he croaked.

Ms. Chicklets then handed him the file.

“I’m confident you’ll make sure this is all properly taken care of, Principal Gardner,” she said, and then added, “I have, of course, kept a copy for my records.”

“Yes, Ms. Chicklets. I assure you it will be dealt with,” Principal Gardner replied, a faint look of relief on his face.

“And don’t you agree that ten days of detention for being disrespectful to someone who turned out not to be who she said she was is a bit on the long side, Principal Gardner?” Ms. Chicklets asked, turning towards Jimmy and smiling.

“Of course, Ms. Chicklets,” Principal Gardner replied immediately. “Jimmy, you are excused from any further detention. You can go now.”

“Oh, Principal Gardner, no need for that,” Ms. Chicklets said sweetly. “I’m sure you’d agree that five days of detention is a suitable punishment for being disrespectful to a school official, even one who turned out to be a fraud.”

Principal Gardner nodded in agreement. Jimmy waved good-bye as Ms. Chicklets left, followed closely by Frank Boffin. Then he got back to the business of completing his fifth of five detentions.

Chapter 8: Saturday, No Laughing Matter Day

The next morning, Jimmy and Criminey slept late – it was Saturday, after all. Strictly speaking, it wasn't clear if Criminey slept at all: he was always awake when Jimmy saw him. And Criminey himself wasn't any help.

“All I know,” he said, “is that I don't remember anything after you fall asleep and before you wake up.”

“Well maybe you are imaginary, after all,” Jimmy said.

“Am not!” Criminey replied indignantly. “Just ask Tammy and Mr. Bolger.”

“Maybe they hallucinated you,” Jimmy suggested.

Rather than replying, Criminey changed into a t-shirt, solidified, took it off and threw it at Jimmy. On the front was a picture that looked just Jimmy – except for a moustache and a missing tooth – with the caption “I’m the one who’s imaginary.” Jimmy looked at it and started laughing hysterically. After a moment, Criminey joined in too.

By the time they made it downstairs – after multiple games of Monster Slaughter – Ms. Chicklets had already gone out to do some errands. Jimmy was wearing the t-shirt Criminey had made him, along with the tinfoil hat. Mr. Bolger was reading his paper when they came down, so he didn’t notice at first.

“Nice hat,” he said warmly, when he finally put down his paper to refill his coffee. “Where’d you get it?”

Jimmy ran through the general process of how it worked, while Criminey chimed in with the details of his design decisions.

“Interesting,” Mr. Bolger said, “very interesting. I’d heard rumours about certain creative powers, but nothing specific.”

“So you don’t know what sprites can do, Dad?” Jimmy asked. “But I thought you an expert.”

Criminey nodded in agreement.

“Actually, boys,” Mr. Bolger replied, “Criminey’s the first sprite that’s existed in almost a thousand years.”

“What? How?” Jimmy and Criminey asked, almost in unison.

“It’s a long story, boys,” Mr. Bolger replied, “a long story.”

Mr. Bolger picked up his newspaper again and started reading it, while sipping his coffee. Jimmy and Criminey looked at each other in shock.