

A boy's exciting adventure to save his imprisoned mother.

Cameron and the Grim

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**Cameron**

and the

**Grim**

## **CHAPTER ONE**

In Which  
There Are Surprises  
And Disappointments

**C**ameron's eyelids were heavy, tired, and quite happy with the idea of staying closed. They fluttered open, found they hadn't the strength to stay that way, and closed again all in the span of a few seconds. During the course of this, Cameron wondered what the harm would be in sleeping a little longer.

He yawned as he rolled onto his side, trying to slip back into his last dream. It had been one of

those experiences that felt more real than being awake. The feeling of the dream clung to him even though he could barely remember anything about it. There had been a giant groundhog named Wiggins involved somehow, and he remembered walking down an emerald road on their way to a party. Cameron didn't know whose party it was, or if they ever got there. All he knew was it had been a most pleasant dream.

His eyes popped open again. The sky outside his window was dark with the promise of rain. He stared at the moisture-heavy clouds and wondered what day it was. His mind was still fuzzy from the dream. It seemed like there was something he was supposed to do today, but he couldn't remember what.

A loud clang from the kitchen downstairs startled him. Cameron looked to make sure he'd read the clock right. His mom rarely woke before eight.

*What's she doing up so early?* He wondered for a moment before the memory struck him like lightning. *We're supposed to spend the day together! She said we'd go to the movies and the arcade and eat ice cream until we get sick! How could I have forgotten that?*

Excitement surged through him. He leapt out of bed and flew down the stairs into the kitchen. His mom was standing at the sink, washing the pots and pans she'd used to cook dinner the night before. She turned when he came barreling into the kitchen and smiled.

"Hey Cam," she said. "How are you doing this morning?"

"Great!" he said. "I was sleeping so well I forgot what day it was."

"Don't you love when that happens?" she asked. "I've always thought it means you spent the night in another world."

"What do you mean?"

“Well, have you ever noticed how some dreams are more real than others?”

Cameron nodded, remembering the emerald road and the groundhog named Wiggins.

“I think,” his mom continued, “there are worlds that sit on top of this one. Ones we can’t see at all while we’re awake. But something happens when we go to sleep, and all the doors open up letting us stop in and visit.”

Cameron grinned. “What are these places like?”

“Oh,” she said. “They’re fantastic places where all the animals can talk and magic is as easy as snapping a finger. Maybe you were in one of those worlds last night?”

Cameron gave this serious thought. If he had been to another world, why couldn’t he remember it better? How did he go back? Would he see the same people there?

“Maybe,” he said. “I did meet a groundhog named Wiggins.”

“Really? Could he talk?”

“I don’t know. I think so, but I can’t really remember.” He frowned. The details of the dream were cloudy. It was difficult to tell where one memory ended and another began.

“That’s okay. I have a feeling it was one of those worlds. You should write down everything you remember about your dream. It will make it easier for you to get back the next time you go to sleep.”

“Really? All right, I’ll write it down as soon as we get back from the movies. There’s a new one playing over at the Cineplex. It’s supposed to be really scary, so I thought you’d like it.” His mom’s face changed to a look of disappointment. Thinking she wasn’t in the mood for a scary movie, he quickly added: “Or we could just go to the arcade and ride go-karts, if you’d rather do that.”

“Oh, Cameron, work called. Molly’s sick and they don’t have anyone to open. I’m so sorry. I promise I’ll make it up to you.”

“But, this was supposed to be the makeup for last weekend.”

“I know,” she said. “I’m sorry, Cam. I wouldn’t do it, but we really need the money.” She walked across the kitchen, leaned down, and kissed his forehead. “I’ll tell you what, though. Mike promised he’d let me be the first to go. How about we get ice cream when I get back?”

Cameron tried to smile. “Promise?”

She gave him her best ‘you bet’ smile and planted another kiss on his forehead. “Promise. I shouldn’t be gone too long; Saturday breakfast is usually pretty dead.”

She smiled again, and Cameron tried his best to do the same. It was hard to make it look convincing, though. He was tempted to try and talk her out of going, but he knew it wouldn’t work. No matter what he said she’d still leave. All



he would have accomplished would be to make them both feel worse than they already did.

The doorbell rang.

His mom checked herself in the hall mirror, straightened her blouse, and then ran to answer the door. Cameron slinked down the hall, afraid to find out who his babysitter would be. His mom used several different ones, and some were more fun than others. As long as it wasn't Mrs. Barthow, though, he thought he'd be all right. She was paranoid and refused to let him out of her sight for even a moment.

So when his mother opened the door to reveal a sleepy-eyed Samantha, Cameron smiled with relief. Sam was only sixteen, and she was his favorite.

"Oh, Samantha, I'm glad you're here," his mother said. "I needed to leave fifteen minutes ago! Thank you for coming on such short notice."

"No prob, Ms. Strom. I'm happy to do it. Besides, Cam basically takes care of himself."

Cameron's mom beamed a warm smile at Samantha and turned to him, bending down. She hugged him tight, then kissed him on both cheeks and ruffled his hair. He hated when she did that.

"You have a good morning, Cam. I'll be back before you know it and we'll see what we can salvage of the day. Deal?"

Cameron returned her smile. "Deal," he said.

His mother stood and started out the door, talking to Samantha the whole time.

"You know the routine," she said. "Just make sure he doesn't get too dirty; you know how he is. There's some food and drinks in the kitchen, so help yourself. I should be back by two, three at the latest."

"Cool." Samantha replied. "Don't worry about us, we'll be fine."

"Thank you so much, Samantha. I really appreciate it."

Patting her pockets, Cameron's mom went over her mental checklist of everything needed to leave the house. It was a routine she went through every time she left. For a reason he couldn't explain, Cameron found it reassuring.

"Okay guys," his mom said. "I think I've got everything. I'll see you both later. I love you, Cam!"

"I love you, too," he yelled.

The door shut and his mom was gone. Cameron looked to Samantha and smiled with self-consciousness. He thought of her more as a big-sister than anything, but sometimes he couldn't help notice how pretty she was. Her face lit up with a smile.

"What kind of trouble do you want to get into today?"

It was how she always said hello to him. Over the years it had become a sort of game.

"Why don't we ride our bikes to the lake? We can take turns jumping off the cliff."

“It’ll be freezing!”

“I know! That’s the whole point.”

“I don’t know,” she said. “What else you got?”

“Well, we could go around opening all the fire hydrants and flood the neighborhood.”

“Nice,” she said, nodding with approval. “But, what if there’s a fire? There won’t be any water left to put it out.”

“Oh, yeah. Good point.”

He thought hard for a few moments before shrugging.

“That’s it. I’m out of ideas.”

“Already? You’re slipping, Cam. Everything okay?”

He nodded. “Yeah, I’m just sleepy.”

“I know what you mean. I could fall back asleep any second.” Yawning, she moved into the kitchen and sat at the small table beneath the window. “So, what do you want to do?” she asked.

Cameron shrugged. “I don’t know.”

“I think I’m going to watch some cartoons,” she said. “Interested?”

“No thanks. I want to go down to the basement and play for a while.”

“Are you sure?”

Cameron nodded. He was used to playing by himself. In a way, he almost preferred it. Being small for his age, he always ended up getting picked on by the other kids when they got bored with whatever game they were supposed to be playing.

“All right. I’ll check on you later. Cool?”

“Cool,” Cameron said.

Samantha walked by and ruffled his hair; he didn’t mind so much when she did it. Cameron watched her walk into the living room and then headed straight for the stairs.

The door leading to the basement had always intrigued him. Unlike the rest of the doors in the house, it looked like something out of a horror movie. The paint was cracked and the

knob was dull brass. Just thinking of it sent shivers up his spine. It looked to him like a gateway to another world, which is exactly what Cameron liked to imagine it was. Each time he stepped through he found himself in a new world filled with dragons and knights. Whether it was really magic or not, Cameron couldn't say, but his mom always told him to never underestimate the power of imagination.

He found his action figures waiting where he left them the day before. Ser Lancel was still locked in battle with the Dragon of the Lost Vale, and things were looking grave for the good ser knight. Cameron knelt down and took Ser Lancel up, helping him crawl over a giant boulder and leap onto the dragon's back. Furious, the dragon tried to fling Ser Lancel away, but before he could Cameron heard a very strange sound from the back of the basement.

It was always dark back there, even with the light on. There was a dampness not felt in the rest

of the large room, and there were lots of old boxes hiding in the shadows, waiting to reach out and trip an unsuspecting boy.

The sound didn't repeat itself. After a moment Cameron thought he must have imagined it. He turned back to find the Dragon had managed to throw Ser Lancel to the ground and was about to shower him in a rain of fire.

The sound came again.

It was odd, a scraping followed by a loud thud. Cameron moved toward the back of the room, completely forgetting Ser Lancel's perilous situation. He grabbed the flashlight his mom kept on the bottom stair and clicked it on, sending a beam of pale, yellowish light into the darkness.

He saw a pair of his mom's old gym shoes sitting on top of a box with the words "Christmas Stuff" written on the side. When he moved the beam of the flashlight over a few feet, he saw some pretty normal stuff: boxes, old exercise equipment, an old stereo, and more boxes. After

three swipes back and forth, Cameron was about to give up when he noticed what looked like a tuft of white hair sticking up from behind one of the boxes. He fixed the beam on it and moved forward with slow, cautious steps.

Cameron reached out and moved the box, jumping as a small, fuzzy man shrieked and tried to hide behind another one that was a bit too small for the job.

Cameron bolted and was halfway up the stairs before he stopped himself.

The surprise of seeing a strange person in his basement was shocking. But the realization of how especially strange and tiny the little man was sank in, and Cameron was able to overcome his initial fright. He turned back down the stairs and walked to where the small man was still cowering.

“Hello,” he said. “My name’s Cameron. Don’t worry, I won’t hurt you. Well, not unless you plan on hurting me, anyway.”



The little man looked over the small box, eyeing Cameron warily. “Well then,” he said in a squeaky voice. “That’s sounds pretty reasonable now, doesn’t it?”

He stood up and started patting his clothes. The amount of dust coming off the little man was considerable, and Cameron found it hard to believe all of it came from just crouching on the floor. When the little man was satisfied he was dust-free, he walked over to a tiny, old trunk and sat upon it.

The man, though Cameron thought he was most probably *not* a man, was no more than two and a half feet tall, with a large nose, sparkling eyes, and a head that shined on top. The sides of his head were covered in wild, wiry, white hair that stuck out in all manner of angles, giving him a comical appearance. His clothes were patch-worked, seeming to be made of pieces of different garments. The left sleeve of his shirt ended just below the elbow, while the right hung past his

hand so he had to keep pushing it up over his wrist. There were more colors in his garb than Cameron cared to count, but it was safe to say the entire rainbow was represented.

The little man pulled a small flask from his pocket and took a swig. After Cameron declined a sip, he tucked it away and smiled so large his face was almost cut in half.

“My name’s Fizzywig, Master Cameron; it’s nice to meet you. Sorry about the racket; I’m not as young as I used to be, and this old trunk is a bit heavier than I remembered.”

“That’s all right. I was just playing. You didn’t interrupt anything important.”

“Well now, I don’t know that I agree with you, there, sir. Playing’s about the most important thing a body can do, if you ask me. Why, I’ve never been able to figure out what people that don’t play do with their time.”

“I guess I hadn’t thought about it that way before.”

“I’d say not, to suggest playing’s not important.”

Fizzywig took another sip from his flask and looked at the trunk with dread. He seemed as though he could think of a thousand things he’d rather be doing than moving it.

“What’s in it?” Cameron asked.

“Oh, this and that. All the things I can’t stand to leave behind; you know how it is.”

“Can’t stand to leave where?”

“At home, of course. I hope you don’t mind, but I’ve been living in the space between your walls for the past nine and a half years. I know I’m late on rent, but I’ve tried to stay out of your way. I don’t have much on me, but...”

Fizzywig started searching his many pockets, becoming so flustered Cameron felt he had to say something to calm him down.

“That’s okay, really. You don’t have to worry about it. I didn’t even know you were there; I doubt mom did either.”

“Are you sure?”

Cameron nodded, smiling.

“Well then, I’m in your debt. If there’s ever anything I can do for you, don’t hesitate to let me know.”

Cameron thanked him, wondering what he might ever need the strange little man to do for him. Nothing came to mind, and, at the moment, he was more interested in Fizzywig himself. Eyeing the little man again, he tried to figure out what, exactly, he was.

“Um, Mr. Fizzywig, sorry, but I have to ask. You aren’t...well, that is to say...what *are* you, exactly?”

Fizzywig chuckled. “That’s quite all right, sir. I’m not surprised you haven’t seen a gnome before. We do our best to stay out of the way of big folk like yourself, and we’ve gotten quite good at it over the years. If I do say so myself.”

“Well, considering we’ve been living in the same house for over nine years and I’m only just now meeting you, I’d say you’re right.”

“That’s because you’re a person of great intelligence, sir! I could tell the moment I laid eyes on you, I could.”

Cameron blushed with embarrassment. He wasn’t used to receiving compliments from anyone other than his mom, and as every eleven year old knew, those didn’t count.

Pulling a large box over so he could sit on it, Cameron turned his attention back to Fizzywig’s trunk.

“So, are you going on a trip or something?”

“No sir, no holiday for me. I’m afraid that after nine lovely, peaceful years, I’m having to find a new place to live.”

Cameron felt a wave of disappointment roll over him. It was something he was used to, but for some reason this time it really stung. Here he

was having his first conversation with a gnome, only to find out the gnome was leaving!

“Why do you have to go? I promise mom won’t charge you rent, and you can come play with me whenever you want.”

A look of genuine disappointment covered Fizzywig’s face. “That’s awfully kind of you. And a very tempting offer besides, but I’m afraid I can’t stay. In fact, you’d do well to leave yourself; if I do say so myself.”

This took Cameron off guard.

“Why? What do you mean?”

“Well, I reckon it’s time for the Grim to be coming back, isn’t it? It’s been eleven years since the last time; I say he’s mighty hungry about now.”

“The...what?”

Fizzywig looked at Cameron like the boy had lost his wits. “The Grim, lad. Don’t you know about him?”

Cameron had to admit he did not.

“A wicked being he is, feeding off laughter and good cheer. Gnomes are his favorite, too, ‘cause, as everyone knows, we gnomes are the laughingest and cheeriest of all creatures. Though, next to gnomes, whom I’d say are getting harder and harder for him to find these days, he prefers children. The best thing to do is hide; I say.”

“Why don’t you hide here? We can stick you in a closet or under my bed, and if he comes looking for you we’ll say you’re not here.”

“I wish it were that easy, but there’s no hiding from the Grim in a closet or under a bed. No sir. He’s drawn to kids and gnomes then, isn’t he? If there’s a gnome or a child within two miles he can smell them as sure as you and I can smell apple pie from across the kitchen.”

“Then where can you go?”

“A place of broken dreams would be about the best place to hide. It’s well known, sir,” Fizzywig said, nodding.

“A place of broken dreams, where is that?”

“As sorry as I am to say it, lad, they’re a lot easier to find than you may think. Why, there’s one not more than three miles from here in that direction.”

Fizzywig pointed with a short, shriveled finger toward the stairs. Cameron knew if you followed that direction out of the house it would take you across the road and out of the neighborhood. Beyond that, he couldn’t say. He was almost positive, though, that he had never seen a place of broken dreams before. He quite thought he would remember that.

“I don’t understand.”

“That’s plain from the look on your face, though, isn’t it? I find things like these are best to just take at face value. If you try to think about them too much you’re liable to talk yourself into not believing them, and that’s dangerous business. Dangerous business indeed.”



The little gnome jumped off his trunk and dusted himself off again. He took one more swig from his flask before turning to Cameron.

“It’s been a pleasure meeting you, sir, but I’m afraid I’ve got to get on my way. As I said before, I’m not as young as I used to be, and it takes me a while to get anywhere, especially when I’m lugging this thing around.”

He gave the trunk a good hard kick. Apparently a harder kick than he had planned, as he set to hopping about on one foot while holding the other.

“Bloody thing,” he muttered.

After his foot quit throbbing enough for him to walk again, Fizzywig gave the trunk a hearty shove. But despite the obvious effort he was putting in to the task, he wasn’t having the slightest luck in moving it. Cameron, sorry their meeting was over and seeing an opportunity to spend a little more time with the gnome, walked over and picked the trunk up with one hand. It

was heavier than it looked, but he could still manage it without trouble.

“Where would you like me to carry it?”

Fizzywig looked at him with shock.

“Well aren’t you a strong one? If you’d be so kind as to carry it to that little hole over there,” Fizzywig said, pointing, “I’d be very appreciative.”

Cameron saw the hole he meant, but it was too small for either the trunk or Fizzywig. Not sure what good it would do, he did as the gnome asked anyway. He set it on the ground and Fizzywig scurried across the floor to meet him.

“That’s awfully kind of you, sir. You’ve saved me a great deal of trouble. Now I owe you two debts.”

Cameron waved as if to say it was nothing, but he smiled at the pleasure of having helped.

“Now, I’ve got to get going or I’ll never get there before nightfall. Please, because you’ve been so kind to me, I beg you to leave before sundown as well.”

“Thanks, Fizzywig, but I’ve got my mom here to protect me.”

“I’m sure she’s a wonderful woman, sir, but, and pardon me for saying it, I don’t think she’ll be much good against the likes of the Grim. He’ll eat adults as quick as he’ll eat you or me. Your only real hope of saving yourself or your mom is to get out of here for a while. He won’t come to a house that’s not got at least one child or a gnome.”

“I thought you said he’ll eat adults, too?”

“Oh he will, but only if they get in his way. It’s children and gnomes he’s drawn to. Take my advice: be well away from here by nightfall.”

Cameron frowned at the idea of leaving his mom. Deciding to worry about it later, he watched as Fizzywig stuffed the trunk into the too-small hole. Afterwards, Cameron would be unable to say exactly how it happened, but Fizzywig did manage to get the trunk to fit. It contorted, shifting and shrinking until the side going in was small enough to fit, while the rest

remained its normal size. It was strange to watch indeed!

Fizzywig pushed the trunk, putting all of his weight behind it. A loud sucking sound came from the hole. The trunk quaked and was pulled the rest of the way in. Once the gnome had his trunk through, he moved to follow it. Before he did, though, he turned to Cameron one last time.

“Remember, I owe you two favors! If you want to live to collect them I suggest you find a place to hide for a few days.”

Cameron thanked him and promised he would consider it. With sadness, he watched Fizzywig shift and shrink as the little gnome walked through the hole and left Cameron alone.

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