

## Chapter 1

“You’re not going to be a pussy, are you, Jimmy?”

Jimmy Ramirez stood in the dark, his little knees knocking together, his eleven-year-old heart pounding in his chest like a bass drum.

“It’s dark and smelly,” Jimmy said to his older friend, Tommy Olivarios, his voice sounding even younger as it echoed off the bare concrete walls.

“Give it a couple of years,” Tommy said with a knowing laugh. “All you’ll think about are dark and smelly places.” The pubescent humor was lost on Jimmy, who was only thinking that Tommy’s idea had been a bad one. A very bad one.

The two boys were standing in a concrete culvert nearly twenty feet underground beneath Riverside Park, under the heart of Miami’s Cuban community. Outside, it was hot and sweltering. The July sun had forced the locals inside while the Anglo tourists did the slow bake out on the beaches. Inside the culvert it was a comfortable seventy-six degrees and when Tommy had told Jimmy he knew a place where they could get out of the heat, it had *seemed* like a good idea.

So they’d gone home and provisioned like modern day voyageurs. Tommy swiped a can of orange day glow paint from the local hardware store and a big flashlight from his uncle’s truck. Jimmy had gone home and made two peanut butter and marshmallow fluff sandwiches, and filled a plastic sandwich bag with two big handfuls of corn chips. Armed with these supplies, Tommy had bent back the wire

mesh protecting the entrance to the storm sewer and, ignoring the warnings posted in both English and Spanish, the two had headed with youthful bravado into the subterranean bowels of Miami.

Tommy bragged that he'd been in the sewers lots of times, had found plenty of cool stuff. But just to be careful, he would mark their way with the paint because this time, he was going to go deeper into subterranean Miami, much deeper, than ever before.

"I bet there's rats in here," Jimmy cried as they disappeared into the dark storm drain, "and other worse things."

"Like what?" Tommy said.

"Like alligators," Jimmy volunteered, his voice shaking.

Tommy knew just how to handle this. "Alligators need water, don't they, and plants and stuff? I saw on the *Alligator Hunter* that they like to take their meals down to the bottom, drown 'em, leave them to get ripe so they can come back later for a snack."

If Tommy was trying to assuage Jimmy's fears it wasn't working. Jimmy knew if something was hungry down here he and Tommy were the most likely meal.

"You weenie," Tommy scoffed, "there's no place down here for a 'gator to hide. He'd starve to death first. You see any 'gators?"

Jimmy looked around. All he could see was the beam of Tommy's flashlight on the ground beside his friend's feet and the most recent swipe of orange paint on the wall beside them. There were no rats. There were no alligators. In fact, other than the small trickle of water moving

sluggishly down the middle of the culvert, and occasional black pipes of some sort leading down from the darkness above, the concrete tube was remarkably empty.

“Uh, uh,” Jimmy said finally. Tommy had all the answers.

“Then what’s the problem? You aren’t chicken, are you?”

No one wants be called chicken, especially not by an older kid, not by the kid you want to be like when you grew up. “It’s just,” Jimmy said, “it’s just, let’s not be gone long.”

Jimmy looked down at the watch his father had given him for his birthday and pushed the bar below the dial. An eerie blue glow floated in front of Jimmy’s face.

“It’s almost one,” Jimmy said. His mother had told him to be home by four, big family doings going on tonight. “We explore until two and then turn around, follow the marks back out. How’s that?”

“Okay,” Tommy relented. “We’ll stop in an hour and eat. I’m hungry already. You bring any sodas?”

“Naw,” Jimmy said. “There were only bottles in the refrigerator and they wouldn’t fit in my pockets.”

Tommy put his arm around his younger friend and gave him a friendly noogie. “That’s okay,” Tommy explained. “Real adventurers have to do without, have hardships, right?”

“Yeah, sure,” Jimmy said, feeling only a little bit better.

“Let’s go then,” Tommy said, shining the flashlight into the gloom that to Jimmy seemed to go on forever.

Tommy, in front with the light, spraying a swipe of paint whenever they were forced to make a turn, and Jimmy

in the rear, walking as close as possible without tripping over his friend's sneakers, the two boys ventured deeper and deeper, southwest, and away from their neighborhood.

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"Pretty good sandwich," Tommy said, taking a big bite of the brown and white concoction that Jimmy had carried under his shirt during the hour they'd trekked deeper and deeper into the storm system. For the first twenty minutes, they'd seen exactly nothing: no animals, no trash, not a shred of evidence that any human had ever ventured this way before. It was as if they were charting unknown territory, but they knew, of course, they weren't. But it was good, pretending.

Every so often, they would come to a cavern where several culverts converged and above them would be a grate where they could see the blue sky and the shadows of cars and trucks passing over the drain. For a while, they could recognize the streets.

"That's 8<sup>th</sup> Avenue," Tommy would say confidently, but then the twists and turns confused both of them and they stopped trying to chart their underground route. Eventually, they had no idea where they were. If it weren't for the glowing stripes of paint that Tommy was depositing on the concrete walls, they would have been utterly lost.

"Wish we had something to drink," Tommy said finally, his sandwich gone, along with most of the corn chips. He'd turned off the flashlight to conserve the batteries. The manhole above them cast just enough light so they weren't

sitting in utter darkness. Jimmy still thought it was plenty scary and was ready to leave. His hopes were dashed.

“Let’s go on a little more,” Tommy suggested.

“But you said we’d go in for an hour, and then out for an hour,” Jimmy pleaded.

“But it won’t take an hour to get out,” Tommy argued. “All we have to do is follow the paint. I bet we can go ten, maybe fifteen more minutes, easy.”

“Come on,” Jimmy cried, “you promised!”

“I said we’d be back at three,” Tommy countered slyly, “and we will be. If you want to leave now, go ahead, but I’m going to explore that big tunnel over there.”

“You know I can’t get out by myself,” Jimmy pleaded.

“Hey buddy,” Tommy said, slipping his arm around Jimmy’s shoulders. “Us explorers have to stick together. You’re just scared because it’s your first time down here. I was scared my first time,” he admitted, “and I was all by myself.”

Jimmy nodded, holding back a snuffle. If Tommy could do this by himself, then he couldn’t be a crybaby. He stood up and collected the lunch bags and stuffed them back inside his shirt.

“You ready?” Tommy asked.

Jimmy’s heart told him no, but he managed a nod, and followed his friend deeper into the unknown.

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The culvert Tommy chose was the biggest they had traversed so far. They walked side by side, one on either side

of the trickle of water. They passed several concrete confluences and gazed up through each manhole, guessing at where they were.

“It’s getting dark outside,” Jimmy said, worried, checking his watch again. They were standing under a grate through which very little light was filtering. Traffic on the road above was sparse, and when a vehicle did pass, they could see headlights well in advance.

“It’s only two-twenty,” Tommy said, looking at Jimmy’s illuminated watch. “Maybe it’s the shadows of buildings.”

“I don’t think so,” Jimmy said. “I think we better get home.”

Actually, Tommy hadn’t been anywhere near this far before into the underground. Sure, he’d made a few stabs into the subterranean darkness on his own, and once he’d taken Bonnie Suarez around the first corner to cop a feel, but this was his biggest trip. He only wanted to go a little further.

“I’ll tell you what,” Tommy said. “You stay here and I’ll go on a little ways. In five minutes, I’ll turn around and come back, and then we’ll leave.”

“I don’t want to stay here by myself in the dark,” Jimmy gasped. It hit him just how scared he was. His fears had been kept at bay only by his friend’s bravado. Jimmy couldn’t imagine being in the sewer alone.

“Then come with me,” Tommy said, and Jimmy realized he had no option.

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“I smell something,” Jimmy said. They had made a right hand turn and were about five hundred feet from where they’d eaten their lunch.

“Me too,” Tommy agreed, sniffing the air in the dark and stopping to sweep the flashlight along the walls of the culvert. “What do you think it is?”

“Maybe an alligator drug a dog or something down here,” Jimmy said. “You know, to keep it so it can rot.”

“Smells like its already rotten,” Tommy said making a face that Jimmy couldn’t see. “Let’s find out what it is.”

“I don’t want to,” Jimmy cried. “Let’s go. Let’s go now!”

“Go now and never know what it is?” Tommy said. “You won’t be able to sleep at night, wondering what it was.” Tommy took Jimmy’s hand and pulled him around the corner to see a horror no young boy should ever see.

“Tommmmy!” Jimmy yelled as the beam of the flashlight reflected a pair of white, unblinking eyes. The eyes belonged to a body, caught in the juncture of several large black pipes that intersected the concrete culvert. The body was twisted, contorted, taking on impossible angles, looking more like a broken rag doll than a human being.

Tommy dropped the flashlight and the light immediately went out.

“Oh, Tommy,” Jimmy cried. “Where are you?” Jimmy’s heart exploded in his chest and the last syllables of his lament cracked and broke with raw fear.

“I’m here,” Tommy croaked, fumbling in the water for the flashlight. After a moment, he found it but his attempts to flick it on and off proved unsuccessful.

They were in the dark with a person.

“What’s wrong with the flashlight?” Jimmy whimpered. “We can’t see anything. We can’t find our way out. We’re going to die like...like that guy over there.”

“Shut up,” Tommy said, opening the flashlight and drying the batteries and contacts on his tee shirt. Reassembled, the flashlight blinked once, went black, and then relit with a strong, steady beam.

“Is it still there?” Jimmy whispered, unwilling to look around.

Tommy looked over his shoulder and swept the beam across the far wall. “Yeah,” he croaked, “it’s still there. We’re out of here!”

The boys turned and ran, ran like their young legs had never run before. “I’ll lead,” Tommy said, dropping the spray can and taking off in the opposite direction. He kept the flashlight’s beam ahead on the right-hand wall, picking up the slashes of orange paint as they ran.

Sneakers sloshing in the water, Jimmy struggled to keep up with his older, larger friend. He didn’t have to slow down to study the markings, so like a snake, the two expanded and contracted, their hearts racing ahead of them, eager to get away from the terror.

“What’s that?” Jimmy said when they’d slowed to a trot, sufficient distance between them and the bodies that the hairs on the back of their necks no longer stood at attention. Tommy turned his ear into the tunnel.

“I don’t hear anything,” he said. But he felt something. A breeze coming down the culvert ruffled his buzz cut. A steady breeze. Tommy looked down and realized the trickle

of water running down the center of the concrete culvert was now a couple of feet wide, and getting wider.

Jimmy noticed the same thing. “The water’s getting deeper,” he cried. Just then, the sound hit them, the sound of hundreds of thousands of gallons of storm water racing through the narrow confines of the sewer. Their young eyes bugged out and their screams caught in their throats as they finally realized the foolishness of their youthful adventure.

Had they been older, they would have known that it didn’t have to be raining right where you were for danger to be present. In fact, a severe thunderstorm had just dumped nearly seven inches of rain in under two hours on southern Dade County. The ground, already saturated from downpours the previous week, absorbed little of the deluge, and almost all the rain was shunted into the county’s system of storm sewers and canals. The section of sewer Tommy and Jimmy had unfortunately chosen to explore drained most of Coral Gables and South Miami, northward, into retention ponds along the Miami River, and eventually out into Biscayne Bay and the Atlantic Ocean.

Had they been older, they might have also understood Bernoulli’s Principle. That is, an increasing volume must move faster through a constant restriction. So the prodigious runoff from over sixteen hundred square miles was accelerating, the force of the greater volume pushing a wall of water through the six-foot diameter culverts at nearly thirty miles per hour. They might have also known that their little legs were capable of five, maybe six, miles per hour, and that for only ten or fifteen minutes. Still, they had no choice.

“Run,” Tommy yelled, now aware that the air, pushed ahead of the wall of water, was much more than a breeze. Jimmy took off. Tommy followed, shining the flashlight ahead, calling out, “right, Jimmy, right!” and, “straight, keep going straight!”

As their sneakers splashed in the rising water and their knees pounded like pistons, the two boys raced toward safety. Once or twice they missed the markers and had to double back, losing precious seconds. Yet, their lungs were grateful for even a momentary respite. The sound, originally a low rumble, now screamed in their ears like a giant waterfall. Neither boy looked back. They ran for their lives.

“Aaaaargh!” Jimmy screamed, tripping and falling on his hands and knees in the rapidly rising water. His palms and legs were tortured as Tommy, unable to stop, somersaulted over him, landing hard on his shoulder with a resounding crunch. The flashlight flew from Tommy’s hand and extinguished, landing out in the darkness somewhere. The tunnel roared with the sound of the water closing in on them.

“Get up,” Tommy yelled, grabbing Jimmy under the arms and hoisting him to his feet. Tommy was sure his shoulder was broken, the pain nearly made him pass out.

“Where?” Jimmy cried, confused, turned around, unsure of which way to go.

Tommy felt the rush of air in his face and turned them both around. “This way,” he yelled in the darkness over the sound of the water bearing down on them. “We’ve got to go this way.”

Without the light they were utterly lost. Jimmy had no idea how close to the opening they were, and couldn't remember how many turns they had made on the way in. Still they could only run for their lives.

Tommy pushed his young friend to the right at the first juncture only to realize that the wind to his back had ceased. He pulled the shivering Jimmy back out to the tunnel and turned left, the breeze at his back steady once again. Left then right, then straight. Always with the air at his back, seeking its release somewhere ahead.

Tommy could barely breathe and Jimmy's little lungs wheezed with an asthmatic howl that sounded like an animal in pain. Tommy was old enough, lucid enough, to say a prayer for the two of them: he said he was sorry, and asked Jesus to make it easy on their moms and dads.

And then, suddenly...there was light and the screen that Tommy had moved aside several hours before loomed in front of them. They wriggled through, and with legs that burned and protested, scrambled on all fours up the embankment beside the entrance, and collapsed.

Jimmy cried and gasped. Lying on his back, the younger boy choked on his own tears. Tommy rolled on his side, away from Jimmy and puked, the sandwich and chips failing to stay down.

Just then, the sewer opening below them exploded in a solid torrent of water. The force of the flood shot a six-foot diameter stream of dirty rainwater well out into the catch basin of Riverside Park. The roar went on and on; the torrent failed to diminish until the entire retention area was under water. And then in an instant it was over.

The sky above was blue with only a speckling of fluffy white clouds. The late afternoon sun was warm. There was no hint that a record rainfall had occurred only forty miles away. There was no hint that two young boys, two foolish young boys, had almost become statistics.

“Lucky, huh?” Tommy said finally, wiping his mouth on his throbbing shoulder before turning to see how his friend was.

Jimmy’s sobs had subsided. His hands and knees bled freely from where he’d fallen. His shirt was open and torn, the lunch bags now somewhere out in the park.

“You okay?” Tommy asked.

“Uh, huh,” Jimmy said, painfully brushing dirt and grass off his torn knees. “I don’t ever...”

“I know,” Tommy said.

“What about what we saw?”

“What?”

“What do you mean, what?” Jimmy said. “The body down there?”

Tommy thought a moment. If they told anybody, they’d be sure to get in trouble. They were going to get in plenty of trouble as it was. And did they really see anything? Maybe they’d both just been scared, didn’t really see anything at all. That was it, just their imaginations.

“I’ll tell you what,” Tommy said, helping Jimmy get up. “Maybe we can...”

Jimmy stopped, moaned, and fell to his knees. Tommy turned around and nearly fainted. Wedged in the egress screen of the Riverside Park storm sewer was the dead body,

now torn and mutilated beyond belief, looking more like discarded rubbish than anything that had once been human.

It was time to grow up.