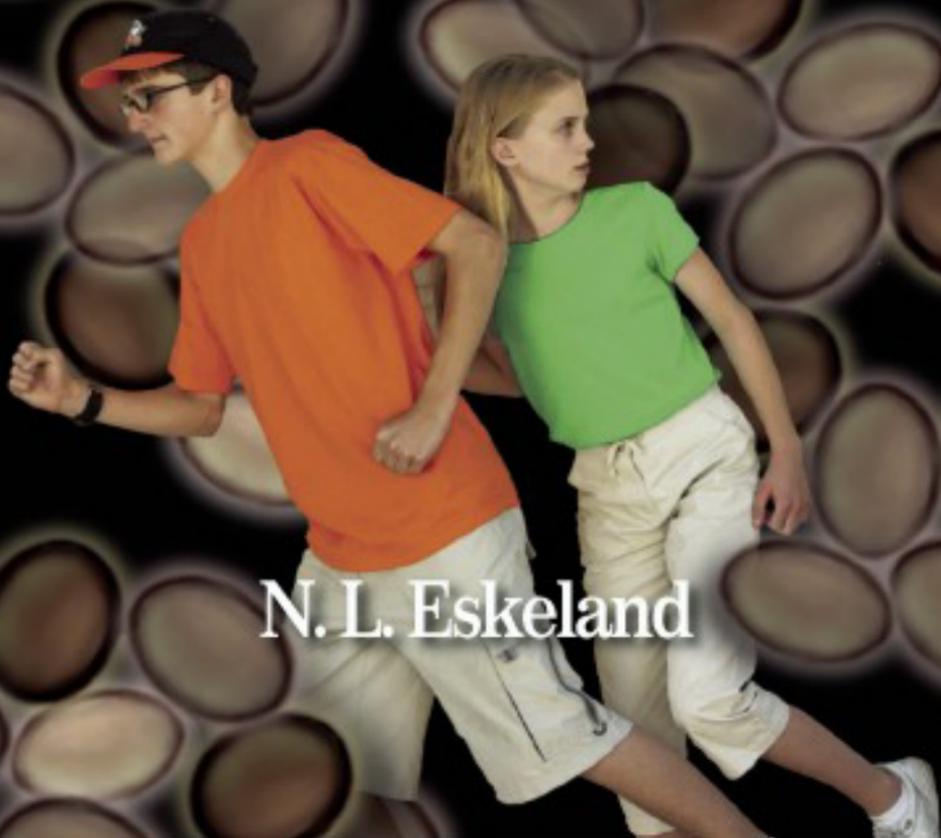


Joshua Keegan solves the case of

MENACE IN THE WALLS

A summer project turns treacherous...



N. L. Eskeland

MENACE IN THE WALLS

By

N. L. Eskeland

Science2Discover, Inc.
Del Mar, CA

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Published in Del Mar, California, by Science2Discover, Inc.
Web site: <http://www.science2discover.com>
Library of Congress Control Number: 2002117318

Publisher's Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Eskeland, N. L.

Menace in the walls / N.L. Eskeland.

p. cm.

ISBN: 0-9673811-6-9

1. Laboratories—Ohio—Cleveland—Juvenile fiction. 2. Stachybotrys—Juvenile fiction. 3. Molds (Fungi)—Juvenile fiction. 4. Sick building syndrome—Juvenile fiction. 5. Infants (Newborn)—Death—Juvenile fiction. 6. Cleveland (Ohio)—Juvenile fiction. 7. Mystery fiction. I. Title.

PS3555.S514 M46 2003

813'.54—dc21

2002117318

Printed in the United States of America

Acknowledgments

My sincere thanks to Dorr G. Dearborn, M.D., Margaret Pizzi, R.N., and Cathy Joseph, R.N. for their valuable information on the medical aspects of this story.

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Chapter 1

EMERGENCY!

“Let us through!” the medics pleaded with emergency room visitors at Cleveland General Hospital, as they wheeled in an unconscious child with a respirator mask covering her tiny face.

Joshua Keegan jumped to the side, staring at the young flood victim as a wailing woman followed the gurney. “Oh God! Save my little girl!”

Joshua shivered and rubbed his thin arms, and then heard his mother calling, “Joshua, don’t just stand there. Bring me some bandages. Hurry!”

“Right away!” Joshua yelled back. *Now where are those bandages?*

A nurse brushed his arms as she ran by. He reached out to catch her attention, but she turned around and frowned at him.

“Where are the bandages?” he asked.

“By the nurse’s station,” she said, still scowling at him.

Joshua’s eyes caught a rolling cart filled with needles, pads, and gauze. He gathered the bandages, and as he was running toward his mother, a roll of gauze slipped from his hand and spun on the floor. He fell on his knees and fumbled with the gauze as several people scurrying by stepped on it. Joshua’s heavy breathing fogged up his eyeglasses as perspiration brought them to the tip of his nose. He pushed his glasses up, gathered the gauze and threw it in the trash. He then picked up a fresh roll of gauze, several packages of bandages,

and hurried to his mother.

Joshua's heart pounded rapidly, as he knew this was the opportunity of a lifetime. When his mother, Dr. Katherine Davis, a pediatrics pulmonary specialist, was called to help in the emergency room, she had taken Joshua with her. A mighty flood was raging outside. The hospital was short-staffed and needed all the help it could get, even from a thirteen-year-old like Joshua.

"Tough working here, isn't it?" his mother remarked, glancing at him behind eye shields as he handed her the bandages. Like all of the rest of the emergency room staff, she had put on scrubs and protective gear.

"Yes. But I wouldn't want to be anywhere else!" he said, smiling.

The emergency room looked like a clinic in a war zone. The smell of disinfectant permeated the air. The waiting area overflowed with the injured and their families. Joshua watched his mother as she introduced heated oxygen into the lungs of the unconscious child, through a breathing tube. Joshua gathered that the child was a near-drowning victim. A few years earlier, he had witnessed paramedics using a similar technique to raise the temperature of a victim who had almost drowned in a neighbor's swimming pool.

A monitor hooked up to the baby leaped to life as it registered normal vital signs. Dr. Davis was finishing up with the procedure when Joshua yelled, pointing at the other side of the large room.

"Mom! Mom! Dr. Channing needs you right now! He is over there."

After giving instructions to a nurse, Dr. Davis walked toward Dr. Channing's patient, with Joshua following close

behind.

A baby, with a shriek that could send a deaf dog to the doghouse-in-the-sky, lay on a large stretcher. Blood oozed from his nose.

Using her stethoscope, Dr. Davis listened to the baby's heart and lungs. She looked up at the nurse beside her with concern, "This is not good. I need a chest x-ray done immediately."

"Yes, doctor. I will inform his parents at once!" The nurse gathered the baby in her arms and disappeared.

Dr. Channing, a tall, imposing-looking man, seemed anxious and glanced at Joshua's mother. "What do you think?" he asked.

"I'm not sure, yet. A couple of days ago, two infants with nosebleeds, coughing, and congestion were admitted, and x-rays showed damaged lungs." Dr. Davis' voice quivered slightly.

Joshua heard the conversation and frowned. "Does that happen often to babies?"

"No. In fact, it is a very rare phenomenon," said his mother. "I'm mystified that within three days, three infants came in with the same symptoms." She looked around the room and sighed. "I hope and pray that this storm will end soon."

"Doesn't seem that it wants to," Dr. Channing said, shaking his head. "We've had a long, wet season and surely this beats them all. I don't remember ever seeing a storm like this in the thirty years I've been on staff here. This is the storm of the century—even Lake Erie overflowed its banks!"

A skinny, short nurse ran toward them. "Dr. Channing—Dr. Davis—we need you right away!" She grabbed Dr. Channing's

arm. “A baby boy has just been admitted, and he’s in bad shape.”

“Do you know what happened to him?” the salt-and-pepper-haired Dr. Channing asked the nurse as he and Joshua’s mother followed her.

The nurse’s voice was barely audible as they walked down the hall. Joshua shuddered at the possibility of seeing another child with a nosebleed. *What could be causing all these kids to have the same symptoms?* The baby’s shrieking stopped as soon as the nurse picked him up. His mouth quickly turned an odd bluish color, and his face was the color of fresh snow. His small body flopped like a rag doll, as blood oozed from his mouth.

Tears stung Joshua’s eyes as he watched the dying child. “Mom, please, don’t let him die!” he mumbled.

The child and his caretakers quickly disappeared through a door, followed by a couple of nurses wheeling in a machine. Joshua recognized the device as a defibrillator which delivers a brief electric shock to the heart to enable it to regain a normal heart rhythm.

Joshua closed his eyes and prayed, “Please, God, let the baby live!” He returned to the emergency room.

The day was turning into night and Joshua was exhausted. He was assigned the task of going to the nurses’ station and the storage room to replenish supplies that kept quickly disappearing. An unused cart, which he found in the hallway, served as a perfect vehicle for transport. He hauled it into the crowded storage room, loaded several large boxes of bandages and syringes on it, and made his way back to the nurses’ station where his mother was making notes in a patient’s chart.

Just then, Joshua saw his dad, Douglas Keegan, walking

through the door. His heart sank. “Why is Dad here?” he asked his mother.

“He’s here to pick you up, dear. You can’t possibly spend the night in the hospital.”

“Why not? When are you going home?”

His mother glanced at him with raised eyebrows. “Does it look as if I could leave anytime soon?”

Joshua looked around him. New patients were constantly being carted in. He wondered where they would end up—*Back home? The Intensive Care Unit? Or the morgue?* He quavered.

“I guess not,” he replied.

Despite feeling tired, he wished that he could stay longer. Watching his mother and running to the storage room were more interesting than the alternative of being at home with his whiny sister, Kelley.

“Hi, Dad!”

“Hi, son.” Mr. Keegan walked toward his wife and greeted her with a quick peck on the cheek. Then he turned to Joshua, tousling his son’s thick, dark hair. “Ready to go home?” he asked.

“Not really. And stop doing that! I’m not a little boy anymore.”

His father had been mussing his hair since he could remember. Joshua had always enjoyed getting the extra attention, until his latest birthday several weeks ago. Strangely enough, he had felt embarrassed when his dad had ruffled his hair in front of his birthday guests.

Outside, it was raining and cold. The temperature had dropped several degrees since morning. Joshua trudged to the BMW behind his dad, who was battling the howling wind

that turned his large umbrella inside out.

Drenched, they finally made it to the car, which was parked two blocks from the hospital. A strong leather odor penetrated his nostrils, and Joshua instinctively rubbed his nose.

“So, did you learn something today?” asked his father as he turned on the ignition.

“It was totally unbelievable, Dad. It was sad seeing all those people hurt, especially the baby with the nosebleed. But I felt that I was being useful as I was helping Mom.” The movement of the windshield wiper was going full blast, left, right, left, right; it almost hypnotized him, and so he blinked his eyes twice.

“Great! So, do you want to be a doctor?”

“Maybe,” Joshua thought for a minute. “But do you know what’s the best part of it? It’s the quick decisions the doctors have to make. It’s really cool. And watching Mom take care of the baby with the nosebleed was awesome! I think I’d like to grow up and be a doctor who cures mysterious illnesses. Don’t you think that would be neat?”

Mr. Keegan glanced at his son and smiled. “You mean you don’t want to be an engineer like your old dad? You’re pretty good with computers.”

“Maybe. Well, I don’t know. I guess I still have time to decide.”

Joshua kept thinking about the baby with the nosebleed and the other two whose lungs were damaged. Except for breathing, what did the chest have to do with the nose? He wondered. He had just finished studying human anatomy in science class at school, and he thought he knew the subject quite well. He would have to ask his mother about it later.

Joshua turned on the radio just as an announcer was issuing a special report, “East Cleveland is a disaster area. To the east of downtown, in Mitland, the roads have literally turned into rivers. Cleveland General Hospital has been inundated with the casualties of this fierce storm. When is it going to end? Well folks! I finally have some good news that we can use! It looks like we will get a break. There is no rain in the forecast tomorrow! Hallelujah!”

“Yeah!” Both Joshua and his father shouted and laughed.

“You know son, I’m real proud of you for helping today at the hospital.” Mr. Keegan glanced at his son and ruffled his hair again. Joshua pulled away.

“Oops, sorry! I’ll try not to do that again.” Mr. Keegan quickly withdrew his hand and put it back on the wheel. He began to whistle.

“Dad, I’ve been thinking. Do you think Mom could find me a summer job at the hospital?”

“Why the hospital?”

“I just think it would be a cool place to be.”

Mr. Keegan chuckled. “Do you think it’s cool to be around sick people?”

“I didn’t mean that, Dad,” Joshua responded. He yawned and suddenly felt sleepy and tired. He placed his head on the headrest and closed his eyes for a few seconds. But his mind was going a hundred miles an hour and he was too excited to sleep.

An idea started to form in his head. *Besides being a pediatrician, isn’t Dr. Channing a scientist?* He wondered. *Maybe I could do something in his laboratory; that would be incredible!* He turned his head to his dad and said, “I have a great idea! What if Dr. Channing offers me a summer job in his

laboratory? I would be a scientist for the summer!” Joshua bobbed his head with excitement.

“Perhaps. You would have to talk to your mom about it. Just be aware that Dr. Channing can be quite demanding.”

“I can handle him. He has always been nice to me.”



It took them an hour to make it home to University Circle just five miles south of downtown Cleveland. The night was dark and starless. As Joshua entered the quaint four-bedroom, Cape Cod-style house, his sister greeted him. After hugging her dad, Kelley pulled Joshua by the arm and bombarded him with one question after another.

“Tell me all about it! In detail!” she demanded.

“Tomorrow I’ll tell you. I’m so tired now; I just want to go to bed.” Joshua shrugged her off.

“No! Now!” Kelley’s blonde eyebrows furrowed. Her deep, blue eyes sparkled, as she pushed a long, stringy lock of canary-colored hair away from her face.

Joshua had always wondered about their striking physical differences. They didn’t look like brother and sister at all. She didn’t even look like his parents who both had brown eyes and hair. *Maybe she really belonged to strangers and the nurses at the hospital accidentally switched babies when she was born.* It wasn’t a far-fetched thought; he had read about babies being mixed-up in hospitals. On the other hand, it could be genetics. He had just learned about inherited traits in the seventh grade. His maternal grandmother was a natural blonde.

“Tomorrow, I promise,” he said, “after church.”

Kelley kept pulling his arm. “You’re selfish! While you were busy saving the world with Mom, I was held a prisoner here with Jenna. That’s not fair!” Tears came to her eyes.

“Oh, stop being such a whiner!” Joshua pulled her away from him and ran upstairs. Once he was safely in his room, he locked the door. Joshua heard the babysitter leave as the front door opened and shut. His sister stomped up the stairs, and then slammed her door.

He wished he didn’t have a sister who talked too much and meddled in all his affairs. *I should have been an only child*, he thought. *Why did my parents have to have another child?* He felt a little guilty for not loving his sister, who was almost two years younger than him. She was a constant nuisance.