

A BRAINS BENTON MYSTERY

BRAINS BENTON #7
THE CASE OF THE COURIER
CAT

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COVER AND TITLE ILLUSTRATION
BY SCOTT DICKERSON



Original Series Published By
The Whitman Publishing Company, Racine
Wisconsin

This Novel Published by Lockwood Press

This book based on the characters created by
Charles Spain Verral

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world of Brains Benton fiction.

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CHAPTER 1: THE BIG BRAIN

Well, as a long, hot, and pretty dry summer (crime-wise) began to come to an end, a new mystery arrived. And it came from one of the most unlikely clients we've ever had.

First, though, I'd better start off by filling you in, just in case you've never read any of our case files before. Yes, "our": my partner and me. We're detectives. And if you think that a couple of twelve-year-olds can't get into a real, honest-to-gosh mystery, well either you really haven't read any of our files before, or you weren't there that night last week when we were pursuing a nearly invisible creature through the forest near Lake Carmine, or being chased ourselves by savage, out of control animals. And don't even get me started on us having to explore the old Hawshorn mansion late one moonless night and the things we saw there. I'm still not certain just how we managed to get out of that one alive.

I'm James "Jimmy" Carson, otherwise known as Operative Three. My partner and chief is Barclay "Brains" Benton, otherwise known as Operative X. Don't ask me where Operatives One and Two are — they never existed to begin with. But Brains likes to make it look as though they did. Me? I'm kinda normal-looking: brown hair, brown eyes, a few freckles, average features. It comes in handy for me, since I can pretty much blend into a crowd — a very

useful feature for a detective. But Brains would stand out in any crowd: he had a shock of bright red hair, wears glasses, and had a long nose he claims to look very much like Sherlock Holmes'. And it does, too. Further, when he talks, he sounds like a walking encyclopedia. But he's a lot of fun too. He's one of the best pitchers on our team. Pitching appeals to him, he says, because it's very scientific.

This whole affair started not long after I got back from a two-week trip to visit some relatives in California. The trip was OK, but I found I missed not having Brains around and finding mysteries to look in to. I kept wondering what was going on in Crestwood. Well, the very next morning after we got back, the phone rang.

"Hello?" I heard my father say. "Hello? What? *Who* is back? Hello? Hello?"

"Who was that?" Mom asked. I could tell just from the smells alone that she was in the midst of fixing breakfast. Then I heard: "Jimmy! Breakfast is ready!"

"I'll be right down!" I was already scrambling into my clothes. I could tell from Dad's voice that he'd intercepted another message from Brains.

"It was that nut again!" my father grouched. "He said that 'Aslan is back'! Now I want to know just what all these weird phone calls are about!"

"Why don't you ask Jimmy?" My sister Ann suggested. "It's probably from one of his dumb friends."

But I wasn't paying any attention to her. I froze with one shoe half-tied. "Aslan is back" is the new code phrase Brains had me memorize. It meant that something exciting had happened, or was about to happen. He'd borrowed the phrase from one of the Narnia books. I was surprised when I heard that; I didn't think Brains ever read fantasy. He always likes factual or scientific books, especially those having to do with crime solving. But Brains told me, a bit embarrassed, that at an earlier age he'd read a lot of fantasy novels. Anyway, this meant that I'd been right: something big *had* come up while I was gone! I was going to have to race through breakfast and get over to headquarters as fast as possible. However, once I reached the breakfast table, I knew it wasn't going to be that easy. Dad had that stern, no-nonsense look on his face.

Usually my father is a very easy-going person. He's an accountant at Crestwood's public utilities works. He's really a great guy and gets along with kids just fine. But, as I've noted before, every once in a while he puts his foot down, and he had a mighty big foot!

Luck was with me, however. Just as Dad was about to start grilling me about the phone calls, the phone rang once again. This time my mother answered. Dad had hardly begun to say, "OK young man, I want to know —" when Mom interrupted him. "It's your golf buddy Steve," she said with something of a grimace. She knew what was up: yet another weekend for Dad out on the golf course. And she was right: Dad snatched the phone out of her hand, his

questions about the phone call already forgotten.

Ann just looked at me and rolled her eyes. She didn't say it, but I could hear her thinking: *saved by the bell yet again, Jimmy!* I was too busy shoving food in my mouth to even give her a nod. I needed to get out of there as quickly as possible. Mom began clearing away the plates, Ann went up to lock herself in the upstairs bathroom, Dad kept jabbering away on the phone, talking about swings, divots, bunkers and other golf stuff. I hit the ground floor bathroom and got cleaned up, then snuck out the back and grabbed my bike. Minutes later I was on my way to Brain's house.

As usual, I rode my bike down the alley to the old coach house that Brains and I had converted into our crime lab. I carefully hid my bike in the bushes, then, after checking to make sure no one else was around (like that pest Stony Rhodes), I crept to the north side of the building. Pressing the third nail in the fourth board from the bottom, I waited for the metallic voice to whisper: "Your name and business?"

"Operative Three," I replied. "Official business." Then, after waiting a moment or two, I gave the passwords: "Though words may vanish, the truth will remain." That phrase had been a clue from one of our previous cases. We call it *The Case of the Painted Dragon*. Anyway, a section of the garage wall slid open and I hurried in. It slid closed behind me, leaving me in darkness. Then a bluish light came on, revealing the staircase. By now, though, I hardly needed it: I'd been up these stairs so often I could have found them even in pitch blackness. As I went

up the stairs, I could hear them folding up behind me, as smooth as ever. Then a panel slid open at the top and I walked into the main lab.

As always, the lab still gives me thrills just looking at it. It always looks like a cross between a machine shop, a research laboratory and the inside of a space ship. Workbenches, tables filled with chemistry glassware and Bunsen burners, power tools and various machine, bookcases stuffed with books, all sorts of electronic gadgetry here and there, some of it disassembled, but all of it neat and orderly. But not just for show. Then I noticed something else: a *large* something else! At the moment it was covered with a white sheet, probably a bed sheet. Before I could even wonder what was beneath it, a large mirror swung silently open at the far end, revealing Brains — or I should say, Operative X.

He had on his white lab coat and his fingers — as always — were steepled. I caught a glimpse of something behind him that looked like a TV set, but I couldn't be sure.

“Well, Operative Three, I see your sister Ann almost spilled the beans about our secret codes. Fortunately, we were saved by one of your father's friends calling. No doubt it was Steve wanting to confirm the golf game for this Saturday.”

Doggone it, he does that to me almost ever time! I stared at him in amazement. Then I blew up: “Operative X, do you have our house bugged or something?!”

Brains smiled that infuriating superior smile of

his: “No, Operative Three. I merely deduced. Your demeanor when you arrived showed no signs of worry or remorse, you were clearly more interested in the hidden apparatus. Obviously, your father had no chance to interrogate you about my phone call. Something interrupted him before he could do so. What might accomplish that? Just prior to your taking off the other week, I overheard your father and his friend Mr. Larsen planning to play golf the first weekend after your return. Knowing your father to be something of a golf enthusiast, I deduced that a phone call from Mr. Larsen would likely keep him occupied long enough for you to hastily finish your breakfast and depart.”

See what I mean about him being so smart? Me, I would never have even remembered my father and his friend talking about golf two weeks ago. But Brains never forgets anything.

“Okay, but how could you possibly know what Ann said?” I demanded.

Brains smiled again. “Actually, Jimmy, its not that complicated. Your mother already knows about my phone calls — she mentioned that to me one time when I was at your house — and Ann has pretty much figured it out as well. Knowing the way you two get along, she probably made some sort of cutting remark about it being from one of your friends.”

I frowned at him. “How do you know she didn’t say your name?”

Brains shook his head. “If that had been the case,

your father's interrogation would have been very short and to the point — so much so that he wouldn't have been distracted even by a phone call from his friend. Plus, you would have looked very guilty when you arrived here."

Well, once again he had me. I threw up my hands in defeat. "Okay, chief, you nailed it. So," I said, turning back to the sheet-covered whatsit, "I take it that whatever's underneath here is the reason you used the new code phrase?"

Brains nodded. "Indeed, Jimmy. While you were away, my father and I installed a very important piece of equipment, one that may well help revolutionize the Benton and Carlson International Detective Agency!"

I folded my arms across my chest. "Okay, Brains, if you're finished with the theatrics, show me what you have hidden under the sheet."

Brains, to his credit, wasted no time doing so. Grabbing the sheet, he paused for dramatic effect, then yanked it off and said, "Behold! The ZORAC ADP-101 computer!"

I stared, my jaw all but hitting the floor. Creeps! Brains had an *electronic brain!*

CHAPTER 2: A CRY FOR HELP

“Brains! How on earth ... where did it come from?” I tripped over my tongue, trying to sort out my questions. Brains just stood there grinning, obviously pleased with the effect his revelation had on me.

“Hold on to your questions, Jimmy. Sit down and I’ll tell you what happened.”

So I grabbed a seat and sat, my attention divided between the computer and Brains.

“The computer you’re staring at came from Crestwood College’s computer science department,” he began. “It’s an experimental prototype that, in the end, nobody wanted.”

“Why not?” I asked.

Brains gave the computer a sober look. “I think because it’s too advanced for its own good. At least, that’s what I gather from my father. You see, he bought it.”

“He *bought* it?” I asked, incredulous. Had the Bentons struck oil someplace? I may not know much about computers, but I do know that they’re *very* expensive. You don’t just walk into a department store and pick one up!

Brains gave me a sharp look. “Yes, Jimmy. We now own it. Or rather,” he gave a slight grin, “my father does and lets me use it. It was his idea to put the bulk of the computer — what’s referred to as the

mainframe — up here, while he had a terminal and a printer installed in his office.”

“A what?” It’s bad enough when Brains uses a lot of Latin phrases and other crime jargon around me — now he was going to start using computer lingo?

“A terminal. Like the one in my office,” he said, jerking his head towards the TV-like deal I’d seen in there earlier. “And the one over there, where you obviously haven’t looked yet.” Brains pointed with his finger. I jerked my head in the opposite direction.

It sat there on a small table, looking like a futuristic TV set. I walked over to it. It was on, but all it showed was a “>” and a small blinking rectangle of white. The keyboard itself looked like the ones I’d seen on a typewriter, but there were a lot more keys, many with strange symbols or cryptic words. Believe me, I didn’t touch anything. After looking it over, I came back to my seat.

“You still haven’t told me why your father bought this,” I told him.

“I haven’t had a chance to,” he replied. “As I stated, the ZORAC ADP-101 is an experimental computer developed by two men, Ben Zoranztha and Alan Christopher. They used to work for two different computer companies: IBM and Sperry-Univac. They’d met a few years back and began to discuss ideas on how to make computers easier for people to use. One of the things they both agreed on was doing away with punched paper tape and punch cards.”

“You mean it doesn’t use any?” I asked, slightly

disappointed. I'd always liked the science fiction movies where you see the scientists — mad or otherwise — loading those huge stacks of punch cards into the computer and seeing the computer suck them in and running them through all the various slots. Plus seeing a punch card shoot out of a slot at the end of the whole process.

Brains shook his head. “No, indeed. Instead, it uses magnetic tape to run the programs. It seems magnetic tape is becoming less expensive these days. More and more businesses are choosing computers that use magnetic tape instead of the older, more frail punched paper tape. Anyway, in addition to using a more efficient storage system, the programs they run are very advanced and unique. For example, one program called ‘Balance’ does the work of an entire accounting department.”

“My dad sure wouldn't be happy to hear about that!” I said with a grin.

“But he might be happier with this one: ‘Super Typewriter’. It allows you to type anything into the computer, then rearrange what you've typed into anything you can imagine. And if that's not enough, you can punch a button and have it print out into any kind of format: personal letter, business letter, interoffice memo, and so on. I was amazed when my father and Steve Levy — he's the one who also helped us install it, and he knows a great deal about the computer — showed this to me. There's also a program that stores, correlates, and retrieves information in any way you can specify. And even a very basic graphics program as well.”

I looked puzzled. “Graphics program?”

Brains nodded. “Yes, Jimmy. Using a light pen, you can actually draw onto the computer screen itself, and it will allow you to make changes to it.”

I nodded and tried to look impressed. I still didn’t see what sort of advantage that gave you over an ordinary pencil and paper, or even a chalkboard. But I guess it would be pretty neat to see.

Brains went on. “I’ve even updated our business cards.” He pulled one out and gave it to me. “Take a look.”

I did so. In addition to the usual stuff:

THE BENTON AND CARSON
INTERNATIONAL DETECTIVE AGENCY

*Confidential Investigators and
Criminologists
Modern scientific methods
and devices used*

Brains had added:

Now completely computerized

I had to admit, that sounded impressive even to me! Then I asked him, “By the way, X, how did you guys get all this in past Mrs. Ray?”

Mrs. Ray was the Benton’s housekeeper, and was always determined to get a look inside our lab. It really made her mad that the Bentons refused to allow her to do so. But Mrs. Benton frequently said that boys should be allowed a certain amount of privacy.

Brains gave me a rather smug smile. “Fortunately for us Mrs. Ray had to go visit her sister for a few days. Keeping out your friend Stony Rhodes was a larger problem.”

By now, Brains knew full well that Rhodes was no friend of mine. If you haven’t read this before, let me tell you about Stony Rhodes: he’s my age, has yellow hair and the kind of giggle that will drive you straight up a wall after you’ve heard it a few times. He’s always trying to join our detective agency, and wants to see inside our lab almost as badly as Mrs. Ray. Brains has used him to get information from time to time — something that never goes over well with me. I gave Brains an anxious look and asked, “Well, how’d you do it? Were you able to keep him out?”

Brains nodded. “Of course, Jimmy. I just made sure he was completely engaged on tracking down a very mysterious individual who might have something to do with the theft of a valuable painting.”

By now I was grinning. Brains had used this ploy before, when he sent Rhodes tracking down the community church minister. “Who’d you have him track down this time? And was there actually a stolen painting?”

Brains shook his head. “Fortunately, no. Like Mrs. Aberdene’s pearls, the painting was simply misplaced. And the individual was former Navy Captain Burris, who used to live in Crestwood some years ago. He was wandering around the town, seeing how much things had changed since he last lived

here. I realized that he would serve as a perfect distraction for Stony. We had everything installed and set up by the time Rhodes returned with his report.”

I almost fell out of my chair laughing at the look of disappointment on Stony’s face when he must have realized that once again he wouldn’t be able to see inside the lab. Still, he probably felt pretty important with all the so-called spying he did. And he’d never know that it was all completely worthless.

One of these days, many years from now when it no longer mattered, I really planned to rub his nose in it.

The look on his face would be priceless. For now, though, I knew I’d better keep it a secret. No telling when we might have to send him off on another goose chase. Regaining control of myself again, I asked, “Apart from the new computer, has anything else come up? Something that might require our services?”

I’ll probably never be certain, but I think Brains was about to tell me no. But even as he opened his mouth to answer, the intercom buzzed. We both looked over at it, fully expecting to hear Mrs. Ray’s sharp voice demanding we come down to eat, even though it was barely ten o’clock. What we heard instead shocked us: “B-B-Barclay? I-I mean, Brains? C-can you come down h-here?” The voice was so nervous, so hesitant, that neither one of us recognized it at first.

We exchanged puzzled glances, then Brains went over to the intercom and punched the button. “Mrs.

Ray?” he said.

“Yes. I-I ...” there followed a gagging-like sound.
“...need your help. Can you come down here,
please?”

CHAPTER 3: THE MYSTERIOUS LETTER

If we were puzzled before, we were downright flabbergasted now! We exchanged looks, and you'd have to toss a coin as to which face registered more shock. Brains turned back to the intercom, staring at it as though it had suddenly become a poisonous snake. Slowly, he reached out and pushed the button again.

"Mrs. Ray ... you need our help?"

"As detectives. Yes. Yes, I need your help. Now come down here at once!" *That* sounded more like Mrs. Ray. "Please," she added, almost as an afterthought.

Still looking baffled, Brains said, "All right, Mrs. Ray. We'll be right down."

"Brains...?" I asked, not really knowing what to ask. I had about a million questions log-jammed in my head.

Brains turned to me and shrugged. "I don't know, Jimmy. I guess we'll find out."

We used the regular entrance to leave. Me, I was more than halfway expecting Mrs. Ray to barge her way into the coach house, brush us aside, and head up the stairs the way she always wanted to. But that didn't happen. So we went inside Brain's house.

Mrs. Ray was there to greet us. She was a fussy little woman, her hair done up in a bun. We went into

the living room and sat on the couch.

Mrs. Ray stood in the middle of the room, glaring at us. You could see that just talking to us was distasteful. She muttered something under her breath I didn't quite catch, but it sounded like, "To think it should come to this..." I might have misheard it, though.

For a moment no one said anything. Then Brains cleared his throat and said, "Mrs. Ray...?"

She swung her head towards him. "I have a case for you two. My sister is in trouble. Big trouble." Mrs. Ray began to pace back and forth. "I was in the supermarket late last night. I'm afraid I was rather distraught. I guess that's what he noticed."

"He?" asked Brains.

"Frothingham." We both exchanged glances. Frothingham was the butler and chauffeur we helped out a while back when he was framed for a hit-and-run. We call that case *The Case of the Roving Rolls*. I never realized that Mrs. Ray and Frothingham had ever crossed paths, though I can't think why they wouldn't. Mrs. Ray went on to confirm it: "We bump into each other every now and then. A good man, Frothingham. Very mindful. Knows how to obey orders. Anyway, when he asked me what was wrong, I wasn't certain how to reply. But I couldn't keep it bottled up inside me much longer, and I let him know that I needed help for my sister. He was the one who recommended you two. Keep in mind, I visited several *legitimate* —" she really emphasized the word — "detective agencies, but their fees were

exorbitant. Far more than I could afford. Plus I remembered how you helped out Will Parslow when he was in trouble last year, and how you helped to recover the missing strand of pearls for that nice Mikko Yamada. That decided me.” She stopped with that.

“Please go on, Mrs. Ray,” Brains told her. “You have our undivided attention.”

And I must confess it: at first I didn’t think this was going to amount to more than Mrs. Ray’s sister needing someone to find her lost cat or something. You’ll see how wrong I was. Creeps! Was I ever!

Mrs. Ray began: “As you know, I paid my sister a visit the other week. I noticed right away that Cissy — Cecilia is her actual name — looked tired. Further, it seemed like she’d been crying a lot. She tried to pretend that nothing was wrong, and that I was imagining things. Me!” she snorted. “Imagining things! Well! I didn’t buy that for a moment, and before long had the truth out of her.” Given Mrs. Ray’s nosiness, I could easily believe it. Then she paused, and gave us a look that could only be described as sad. “Cissy, she ... a while back — some years ago — she embezzled some money from a company she used to work for. She worked in the accounting department, in accounts payable, and it wasn’t hard for her to, well, cover her theft.”

“Book-juggling,” Brains spoke up, “is the parlance they use, I believe.”

“Yes, Barclay,” Mrs. Ray said reprovingly, “book-juggling. She didn’t take very much, and it was only

to help her family out of a financial crisis that wasn't even her doing. That no-good lout of a husband she was married to thought he could play the stock market..." her voice trailed off. She sniffed, then plunged on: "At any rate, once the crisis was past, she began to throw bake sales, garage sales, sell cosmetics door to door, anything she could to recover the money. Even I chipped in when I could. And, to the relief of all, she succeeded. The money was put back into the company's accounts without them ever being the wiser. Her husband was killed in a car accident two years ago and she inherited everything. Since then, she quit her job and got another one in Carmine, moved to a smaller house and has lived a very frugal life. Believe me, she learned her lesson well and hasn't been in any trouble since. Well, until now. " She paused again, then went on. "A few weeks ago she received a letter. She has no idea how it arrived, it was just laying there when she stepped out to get her newspaper. Inside was a letter threatening to reveal to the police the embezzlement at her previous job. There was even a photocopy from one of the books proving what she did."

"I would have thought any evidence implicating her would have been destroyed by now," Brains interjected.

Mrs. Ray nodded. "She thought she had! She doesn't understand it. But that's not the worst of it."

"I thought not," Brains said. "Please go on, Mrs. Ray. What did the blackmailer want in return for his silence?" Brains being that polite to Mrs. Ray told me just how interested he had become in the case. Nor

was my mind drifting off the way I thought it would either.

“This —” she paused a moment. “This is where it gets bad. The letter writer told Cissy that he wants her to start embezzling from the company she works at! She is to make the checks out to herself and cash them, much as she had before. She’s to leave the money in an envelope and place the envelope by her front porch step at night, starting tonight. She is not to look outside at any time after 11:00 P.M. She may find further instructions in the morning. Failure to follow any of these instructions would result in the doctored books being turned over to the police.”

“Did they say for how long she would be required to embezzle the money?” Brains asked.

“No. Not a word! Cissy is very worried. She might be able to get away with this for a while, but if they keep forcing her to steal money from the company...” Mrs. Ray’s voice trailed off with a choked sob.

Brains nodded. “Yes, sooner or later she will be caught. And everything will point to her. Her blackmailers will get off scot-free.”

“Yes. You must help us! I’ll — I’ll pay whatever you want. Only stop these blackmailers from destroying my sister’s life!” Mrs. Ray was half-commanding, half-pleading with us.

But Brains gave her a sharp nod. “We will commence work on the case at once, Mrs. Ray. Have no fears. These perpetrators will be brought to justice. Now, do you have the letter left for your sister?”

“Yes, it’s right here,” Mrs. Ray said. “I thought you might need it.”

She handed Brains an envelope addressed to a Mrs. Cecelia Evansworth. I gathered that was her sister’s husband’s last name. Brains didn’t remove and examine the letter the way I thought he would. Instead, he thanked Mrs. Ray and told her we would examine it up in the lab. I thought she might object to that — or worse, want to come up there with us. But she merely nodded and said, “I don’t know if you’ll find anything as far as fingerprints. Both of us have touched it. And the blackmailer is probably too shrewd to have used his bare hands when preparing it.”

“Quite possibly,” Brains agreed. “But we will examine it thoroughly all the same.”

CHAPTER 4: ANOTHER STAKE-OUT

Back in the lab, Brains used a pair of tweezers to carefully remove the letter. The photocopy of the ledger was in there as well. He spread them out on his desk and examined them.

To me, they looked pretty normal. The letter was type-written, the ledger looked like the kind my dad used — though, of course, it was in black and white rather than green. Brains, however, wasted no time giving them a light dusting of fingerprint powder. Carefully he used some sticky film to remove the prints.

He placed them into a projector he had built, which allowed him to compare prints side by side. Brains went over to a filing cabinet and removed one of the slides that had fingerprints on them. These were the ones we'd taken from every student in school, and from many other people, without their knowledge. One of them was, of course, Mrs. Ray.

It didn't take Brains long to determine which prints were Mrs. Ray's. The unknown set of prints he determined to be her sister's. When I asked how he knew, he replied, "Mostly deduction, Operative Three. The prints are about where I expected Mrs. Ray's sister to have placed her fingers while reading — and rereading — the letter." He snorted and gave me a pained look. "It looks as though Mrs. Ray was correct: the blackmailer used gloves or some other method to conceal his identity. There are no other set

of prints on the letter.”

“Creeps!” I said. “So now what?”

“I’ve not yet finished examining the letter, Operative Three,” came the rather curt answer. I shut up and let him continue.

Brains removed a magnifying glass and carefully examined both front and back of each piece of paper. He frowned and looked again at the letter, then sighed. “The ledger copy doesn’t tell us much, I’m afraid. It could have been done on any one of a dozen different copying machines. I’m afraid it’s a dead end for now.”

I hated to repeat myself, but I did: “OK, what now?”

Brains paced back and forth a few moments, then stopped. “Only one thing we can do, Jimmy. The letter and the ledger copy were not as revealing as I’d hoped, so we’re going to have to find the person who left them on Cecelia Evanworth’s front porch. In short, Operative Three, once again we will have to go on stake-out!”

I bit back a groan. I hated stake-outs. I remember all too well what happened with our first one. Even though I know now it was only a parrot, it still gives me the willies. And how can I forget the stake-out not that long ago when we had to follow that eerie, glowing trail back to Borkin’s new hideout in an old, run-down house on the outskirts of town. I can still hear that dog barking at us like a half-starved tiger. I shuddered to think how this one might tun out.

“But how, Brains?” I asked. “Mrs. Ray’s sister lives in Carmine. That’s miles from here!”

“True,” he agreed. “I’ll have to arrange for Mrs. Ray to drive us out there tonight. Call your parents, Jimmy, and let them know you’ll be sleeping over here again.”

Fortunately we’d done this enough times that I already knew my parents wouldn’t mind. One quick phone call later and I was free for the night. Brains got in touch with Mrs. Ray and told her what he needed. She sounded rather disappointed that we hadn’t solved the mystery right away, but agreed to take us out there. “But Cecelia isn’t to know!” she said. “She mustn’t know that anyone is keeping an eye on her front porch. Those blackmailers might find out and threaten her!”

I saw Brains nod. “Agreed, Mrs. Ray. Yes, it would be better for all if she wasn’t aware of our surveillance. Are there some trees or shrubbery around her house where we can conceal ourselves?”

“Yes, I believe so,” I heard her reply. “The Hendersons have a large hedge across the street where you can hide.”

“Excellent, Mrs. Ray,” Brains said. “How long will it take to reach Carmine?”

Carmine was a fairly large town, almost a city. Both it and Lake Carmine were named after the man who founded the town. It was located way over on the far northwestern side of the lake, almost diagonally opposite from where we once rescued Skeets, and at the opposite end from where our cabin

was located.

“About an hour,” Mrs. Ray replied.

“We’ll want to leave around nine o’clock,” Brains told her. “It should be quite dark when we arrive.”

“Very well,” she replied. “We’ll meet outside about nine. Do not be late!” She sounded like a general snapping out orders.

“I do not intend to dally, Mrs. Ray,” Brains retorted.

“See that you don’t!” And with that, she got off the intercom.

Brains wasted no time getting prepared. Much like our first stakeout, we were to put on our camouflaged pajamas and hats. This time Brains included binoculars for both of us. And Brains included his new pride and joy: a camera with infrared film. “This camera,” he told me in a rather lofty voice, “may help Benton and Carson reach new heights in detection, Operative Three!” I nodded, impressed. “How does it work, X?” I asked him. I remembered that he had run some experiments using infrared equipment a while ago.

“The unlike a regular camera, an infra-red camera takes pictures in the lower end of the light spectrum. Most objects give off heat, and that is what the film will register. So objects or people that would ordinarily be invisible in the darkness should show up quite plainly on the film. I’ve already tested it a few times. Come and take a look, Jimmy.”

He showed me some black and white pictures

he'd developed. They were kind of on the grainy side, but I could make out some birds in trees, some cats raiding a garbage can, and a dog lying near his doghouse. "These were taken around eleven at night."

"Some of these pictures are kind of hard to make out," I told him, holding up one that showed just a mess of dark and white objects.

"I know, Jimmy," he agreed. "A few times I just pointed the camera at some random dark areas and took a picture. Even I'm not certain just what they are."

Well, neither did I. At any rate, we were soon ready to go. Then I had to take off and start delivering papers.

It was after five o'clock before I got back. We had one of Mrs. Ray's excellent meals, then listened to Professor Benton give another one of his lectures on historical wars, this time it was the British and the East Indians going at it back in the 1880's. It seemed to take forever to reach nine o'clock. Finally, though, we appeared to go to bed. I overheard Mrs. Ray saying that she needed to run over to her sister's for something. Mrs. Benton was appalled that she'd have to drive at this time of the night, but Mrs. Ray insisted. Our plan was for us to sneak down using Brain's rope ladder, meet Mrs. Ray as she was leaving the driveway and hop in the back of her car. For the most part, it went well: Brains was just attaching the rope ladder when we heard Professor Benton go by, mumbling to himself. I guess he was searching for something. Anyway, he paused by our

door, then began to open it. In a flash, Brains pulled the curtains and we both dived into our beds as quietly as we could, pulling the covers up over us. Professor Benton came in, flicked on the light, and asked, “Barclay, you haven’t seen my manuscript on Portuguese trade expansion in the fourteenth century, have you?”

“No, father,” Brains replied, trying to sound sleepy. “But you often keep your manuscripts in the left-hand cabinet in the downstairs study. Perhaps it’s there.”

“Bless me, so I do!” he replied. “I’d forgotten that. Sorry to have disturbed you.”

“That’s all right. Goodnight, father,”

“Goodnight, son.” He left, closing the door. We waited until we heard his footsteps on the stairs.

At once we were back to the window. Brains opened the curtains again and finished attaching the rope ladder. This time I remembered to have my pants on correctly! We soon made our way down. But when we reached the driveway, Mrs. Ray’s car wasn’t there.

For a brief moment we froze. “Brains...?” I started to ask.

“She must be down the street a ways,” he replied. “She couldn’t keep it in the driveway for long without arousing suspicions. C’mon, Operative Three!” And with that he ran to the edge of the driveway. I joined him a moment later. We looked up and down the street. Then Brains pointed to a dark

object near a tree. “There!” he said softly. We hurried up to it. Yes, it was Mrs. Ray’s car all right. She’d parked it away from any streetlights and had shut off the engine. Brains opened the front door and got in, I sat in the back.

“Where have you two been?” she demanded in a sharp voice. “I’ve waited and waited!”

“We were unavoidably detained, Mrs. Ray,” Brains replied. “And from the feel of the heat on the hood of your car, you haven’t been here but a few minutes.”

“Well, it seemed much longer!” she snapped. “A poor woman like myself could have been attacked by some street hoodlum while you two layabouts took your sweet time getting here!”

“Chestnut Drive isn’t particularly well known for gang activity, Mrs. Ray,” Brains shot back. “Now, if you’re quite through expostulating, I suggest we get on to your sister’s residence.”

“Hmmp!” she snorted, starting up the car. Then we took off.

We mostly drove in silence. Occasionally Brains and Mrs. Ray would exchange snippy remarks about something, but the road noise drowned most of it out. For my part, I couldn’t wait to reach Carmine.

And so, about an hour later, we did.

Once again, Mrs. Ray parked the car under a tree, far from any streetlights. She pointed at a house further up the street. “That’s it,” she told us. “That’s Cissy’s house.” Brains and I made our exit and

crossed the street in the darkness. We made our way to the house with the hedge, opposite Mrs. Evanworth's house. Brains opened his back and we soon donned our disguises and corked our faces. I was pleased to see that Brains had included his sneeze-powder flashlight. Then we settled in.

Brains and I took turns looking through the binoculars, but so far there was nothing to see. An envelope lay on the front step of the porch, as per the instructions. We kept waiting to see if someone would come by, or if a car might pull up. Once Brains froze for a moment, then, when I asked what he'd seen, made a dismissive sound. "Just a cat," he told me. I soon took over. Brains had me look up and down the street, paying attention to any sort of movement in the shadows, or any engine sounds. "They might also be using a bicycle, just to keep quite, Operative Three." But I sure didn't see any. Then, by chance, I swung my binoculars past the front porch again. I froze, my mouth hanging open. Brains must have sensed something, because I could feel him giving me a sharp look. "Jimmy?"

"Brains!" I almost yelled.

"Shhh!" he said. "Keep your voice down!"

"But — but Brains!"

"What?"

"The envelope's gone!"

CHAPTER 5: THE ASTONISHING RETRIEVER

Quickly, Brains focused his pair of binoculars on the front porch, then let out a hiss of annoyance.

I looked again as well, hoping I was wrong. But I wasn't: the envelope was gone. But how? Neither one of us had heard or seen anyone coming along the path. Certainly there had been no sounds of any cars.

"He must have been dressed in dark gray, or camouflage like ourselves," Brains muttered. "And he must be both very quiet and very fast!"

"Creeps! I'll say!" I added.

Brains continued to look around the neighborhood with his binoculars, then he shook his head. "Well, we're not going to accomplish much more tonight, so we might as well have Mrs. Ray return us home before my parents find that we're gone. But we're going to return here tomorrow night and try once again. This time, we'll be sure to pay closer attention."

We removed our camouflage gear and returned to Mrs. Ray's car. "Well?" she snapped. "What did you see? Did you catch the man?"

"Unfortunately, he eluded us tonight," Brains said. "We have no choice but to return here tomorrow night and continue our surveillance."

"So he got away with the money?" Mrs. Ray

glared at both of us. “I thought you two were supposed to be good at this!”

“The envelope retriever was more clever than we thought,” Brains replied ruefully. “He knows how to get around without being seen. All the more reason to return here tomorrow night. I have an idea or two that should help reveal our mysterious retriever.”

We drove back to Brains’ house in silence. Mrs. Ray let us out a few houses from Brains’, so she wouldn’t be heard pulling into the driveway. We quickly made our way up the ladder, undressed and got into bed.

“What are your ideas for tomorrow night, X?” I asked before we fell asleep.

“All will be revealed in the morning, Operative Three,” he said. I just snorted to myself. More than likely those “ideas” of his were pure bluff. He’s pulled this kind of thing before...

The next morning, I woke to the sound of “Barclay! Carson! Get down here at once if you don’t wish to have a cold breakfast!”

“I loathe agreeing with Mrs. Ray,” Brains said as he got out of bed, “but we do need to get busy this morning. I have some errands for you to run, Operative Three. And much that I must get done myself.”

I moaned into the pillow. Brain’s errands usually resulted in a lot of trouble for me. And, as I was to find out, this time was no exception.

Mrs. Ray’s breakfast was its usual excellent self,

but we didn't waste any time lingering over it. Back up in the lab, Brains told me what he needed me to do. "Operative Three, while I enter the results of last night's stake-out into the computer —"

"What results?" I muttered, but he ignored me. "— I need you to go to the drugstore and get some more calcium sulfide."

I stared at him. "You mean that eerie stuff that glows in the dark?"

Brains nodded. "Precisely. I'm glad to see you still remember it."

"I'm not likely to forget it!"

"I'm currently all out. We may need it for tonight. In addition to that, I need you to obtain some black sewing thread. I could get it from Mother, but that might arouse suspicions."

"Black sewing thread? Where am I supposed to get it?" Though I had a pretty good idea, and my stomach almost cramped at the thought of it.

"The Spindle Thread, of course. That's where most women get their sewing materials."

I knew it! He was going to send me into a *girl's* store! If anyone ever caught me going into a place like that, they'd never let me hear the end of it!

"Once you're finished there, go by the hardware store and get a sack of potassium chloride. I'll be needing that as well."

"Creeps, X!" I exclaimed. "I'm not certain if I can get all of that into my bike's basket."

“The sacks of the calcium sulfide and potassium chloride will be small, Operative Three. I foresee no trouble. Unless you find carrying the black sewing thread to be difficult?” he said in rather withering voice. I glared right back and prepared to leave the lab. “And one last thing, Operative Three.”

“What?” I said, turning back.

“Exercise due caution in obtaining these items. Please keep in mind that we may have been spotted last night, in spite of our camouflage. If that is the case, whoever is behind this scheme may well be planning to keep tabs on us.” His voice lowered and his eyes narrowed. “Possibly to capture and interrogate us. Be on your guard!”

Creeps, what a thing to plant in your head! But I’d worked with Brains long enough that I knew better than to take it too seriously.

“Right, chief!” I replied, then left via the front entrance.

I got my bike and took off. I decided to go by the hardware store first and get the chemical stuff Brains wanted. Then swing by The Spindle Thread and getting the black thread. With any amount of luck, I could be right in and right out of the place before anyone saw me. I seriously thought about just asking my Mom for the thread, but I was afraid she’d ask too many questions. And if Ann overheard, I’d never hear the end of it.

The trip to the hardware store went fine. But as I was paying for the small bags of stuff, in came Stony Rhodes. I’ve told you about him before: he had

yellow hair and this really stupid giggle that about drove you up a wall. He was forever trying to join our detective agency. About the only good thing you could say about him was that he was a handy source of information every now and then. And given that he often tried to use said information to persuade Brains to allow him to join, it was hardly worth the trouble to get it from him.

“Hey Jimmy!” he cried out, approaching me at the counter.

I looked around for some place I could hide, but knew that it was already too late. Biting back a snarl, I turned to him. “What do you want, Rhodes?”

“Is Brains ready to let me join you guys yet?” he asked eagerly.

I grinned. “He might, if you can pass the initiation test!”

“What’s the test?” he asked.

“Oh,” I said, buffing my nails with my shirt and taking my time about it, “just that you have to kiss Ophelia O’Reilly.” Ophelia O’Reilly was Stoney’s age, and about the ugliest girl in junior high. It’s said that her face would turn a medusa to stone. She hung out with a girl named Heather Hix.

That made Stoney mad. “Ha ha! You think you’re so funny, Carson! Well guess what! I don’t need your dumb detective agency! Want to know why?” he challenged me.

Actually, I was kind of curious as to why he said that. Usually he just made his dumb threats about

how he was going to get even with me. But I knew better than to ask, because then he would hold out. So I studied my nails some more and said indifferently, “Not really.”

“Because I have my own detective agency, that’s why!” he shouted triumphantly.

That made me look at him. He nodded. Then I laughed. “Your own detective agency, huh? What, exactly, are you going to be doing? Helping little kids look for their lost toys?” I was almost about to fall on the floor from laughing. The idea of someone like Stoney being a detective was hilarious.

Then another voice spoke: “Oh, you think that’s funny, Carson? Think we can’t be as good as you and Brains?”

That voice stopped me in mid-laugh. And if it hadn’t, the fist that grabbed me by the shirt and whirled me around sure would have: *Martin “Tuffy” Wagner!*

I gave a shaky gulp, looking from him to Stoney and back again. Now it was Stoney’s turn to laugh.

“Yeah, that’s right, Carson! Tuffy’s a bona-fide member of my agency —”

“*My* agency, squirt!” Tuffy corrected him.

“*Our* agency,” Stoney went on. “Him and The Knife and Heather, too!”

I think my face went two shades paler than it already had been.

“The Knife” was Billy Hix, one of Tuffy’s pals.

Got his name from the switchblade he was always carrying around. He never missed with it, too. Heather Hix, who I mentioned a few moments ago, was his older sister. Big, muscular, not really attractive and every bit as much a bully as The Knife was. Chances are, they probably weren't going to include her, but somehow she caught wind of it and forced her way in. Believe me, she wasn't the kind you could say, "No!" to.

"Uh, sounds like you guys have a great agency!" Well, what else was I going to say? Especially with Tuffy still hanging on to my shirt.

"Yeah, and we'll solve every mystery that comes our way long before you and Brains do!" Stoney crowed. "Every single mystery!" he repeated.

Given Crestwood's lack of crime at the moment, I can't say I was particularly impressed at the boast. Before I could reply, however, Mr. Clemmons gave me the bags of chemicals, now in a bag he'd had to go and hunt down.

"Say, what's in the bag, Carson?" Tuffy demanded. Not having much choice, I showed it to him. "You planning on doing some gardening, punk?" he asked with a laugh.

"Something like that," I replied cautiously.

"I bet it's for Brains!" Stoney spoke up.

I shot him a venomous glare, then realized I should have just played dumb. He caught my look and nodded to Tuffy. "Yeah, it's for Brains! What's he want with it, Carson? You two working on a

case?”

“No!” I said a bit too loudly. “It’s for ... some experiments Brains is doing.” Well, it wasn’t exactly a lie.

But Tuffy still hadn’t released my shirt. “If you two are working on a case, I want to know about it,” he told me.

“Why?” I asked him, though I knew perfectly well: so he and his gang of would-be detectives could horn in on it.

The question threw him for a moment. “Uh, so we can find out — uh, I mean, so any case we’re working on won’t, uh, bump up against yours!”

“Well, you don’t need to worry,” I answered carefully. “There haven’t been any crimes here in Crestwood of late, so there isn’t anything for Brains and I to be doing.” Which was pretty much true, as far as Crestwood was concerned.

Tuffy finally released my shirt. “Well, if you guys get hired for a case, you’d better let me know!”

Stoney chimed in. “Yeah, Carson, you’d better tell us about it first!” Like there was somebody else I had to tell? “’Cause Tuffy’ll pound you into the ground if you keep silent about it!” Tuffy nodded his agreement.

I knew better than to mouth off to Stoney, like I ordinarily would. “Okay,” I said. “I’ll let Brains know.”

But Tuffy shook his head. “Naw, you keep this to yourself, Carson.”

“Yeah, this is our business, not Brains’!” Stoney added.

“Remember, we expect to hear from you before long,” Tuffy said as I started to head out the door.

I paused and turned back to them. “Before long?” I said.

Tuffy nodded. “I know you guys. It doesn’t take you long before you’re in the middle of another mystery. So when you do, you’re to tell me or Stoney all the details.” He smacked a large fist into his palm. It made a meaty *THWAK!* sound. I gulped. “Or else!” Like he needed to add that! I just nodded and went outside.

Creeps! Now what? I rode over to the Spindle Thread, wondering what to do. I could hardly betray Brains by telling Stoney or Tuffy about our cases. But I didn’t want to get clobbered, either. Of course, I hadn’t exactly promised to tell them anything. Unfortunately, with someone like Tuffy, that wouldn’t matter. I knew perfectly well the consequences should I refuse to do what he asked. My head whirling, I went on in the store.

At first, I couldn’t even recall what I’d come in for. I just stared around at all the various sewing machines and items. There were also dressmaker forms and various kinds of cloth.

“Yes, young man, may I help — why, Jimmy Carson! What brings you to my store?” It was Mrs. Trotter, the store owner. Then I heard giggling.

“Yeah, Jimmy, what are *you* doing in *here*?” That

was Heather Hix and her small gang of girls. They often beat up the smaller, younger girls in school. I recognized them: Ophelia O'Reilly, the girl I teased Stony about, was large, brown-haired, really fat, but had plenty of muscle; Dorcie Mayland, who was black-haired and short, but had a real nasty streak, and Eve Dansmith, tall, blond, with weird yellow-colored eyes and was even nastier. None of them were as mean as Heather, though.

Seeing them in here — and knowing perfectly well what they'd say about me when they left — made my mind even blanker that it had been before. I honestly didn't know what I was doing in here. I was about to turn on my heel and march straight out when, by chance, I saw on the counter a spool of black thread. I walked over to it and picked it up. "This!" I said, almost triumphantly.

"Just one spool?" asked Mrs. Trotter.

"Yes, ma'am, that will be fine," I told her. She went over to the cash register.

Meanwhile, the girls had been giggling to themselves. "You planning on taking up sewing, Jimmy?" Heather asked.

"Or maybe you plan to make yourself a new dress!" Eve said.

"Or one for his friend Brains!" Dorcie threw in.

Ophelia didn't say anything. Just stood there chomping on her gum like a cow in a field — which she kind of resembled.

"Now girls," Mrs. Trotter admonished them. "Be

nice to Jimmy. I'm sure this is for his mother or his sister Ann." I didn't say anything, just handed over the money.

"Oh, you don't need to worry, Mrs. Trotter," Heather said in a sickly-sweet voice. "We're just having some fun with Jimmy. Aren't we, Jimmy?" she asked, giving me a significant look. More like a glare, really. "Why, my brother Billy thinks very highly of Jimmy!" she said. "He tells me that Jimmy's going to be a great asset to our new detective agency. And as long as he is, why, he has nothing to worry about!"

Oh, brother! My face burning red, I got out of there as fast as my dignity would allow me. But it wasn't over yet: I'd no sooner come out when I heard: "Hey Carson! What were you doing in a girl's store?" It was Tuffy again.

I thought about getting on my bike and riding away, but remembered that I'd secured it to the street sign outside the shop. Besides, he'd already seen me. No point in trying to get away.

"There was, uh, just something there my mother needed." I really hated to lie, but there were times when you simply had to. Then, on impulse, I brought the spool out and showed it to him. "Just some thread."

He took it from me and squinted at it, like it was a grenade or something. Then he thrust it back at me. "Yeah, okay. Just you remember what I said about letting us know of any cases."

Before I could reply, I heard someone say, "Oh,

he'll remember, Martin.” It was Heather of course. She and her gang were standing right outside the door. “My brother will make sure of it.”

Tuffy turned to her with a snarl. “You stay out of this, Heather! Just because we let you join our detective agency doesn't give you any right to —”

Before Tuffy had a chance to finish, she walk right up to him and socked him on the jaw, knocking him down. If you ask me, he looked more surprised than hurt. Tuffy jumped back to his feet, looking for a moment as if he was going to throw a punch in return. Then he restrained himself. But Heather looked as though she had more punches where that first one came from. “Don't talk to me about rights, Martin! I know a few good lefts as well!” This caused her gang to laugh and jeer at Tuffy. It was the first time I could ever remember seeing him looking embarrassed. While he tried to bluster, I removed the lock and chain, got on my bike and began to slowly back away from it all. At the nearest street corner, I ducked around it, then took off as fast as I could pedal.

Back at the lab, Brains was working with the computer. I guess he was entering data. Turns out I was right. He was typing in what had happened last night. Although it looked really neat and futuristic, I still couldn't see the big advantage over using a typewriter like Brains normally did. But I didn't say anything. In fact, I barely paid it any attention. Once I'd placed the stuff on the lab bench, I yelled out, “Brains! We've got a big problem!”

Brains turned towards me and arched an eyebrow.

“Pray elucidate me, Jimmy.”

I’d been around Brains long enough to know that meant to give him the dope. And so I did: “It’s Tuffy Wagner! He, Stony Rhodes, Heather and The Knife have formed their own detective agency. And they want me to start blabbing to them about any cases we might have!”

I’d hardly finished speaking when I saw Brains do something I very rarely see him do: nearly fall off his chair laughing! In fact, he was laughing so hard he was having a hard time speaking. “T-T-Tuffy? And B-Bill Hix? And *S-Stony Rhodes??*” He went on laughing for so long I was on the verge of laughing myself. I guess it did sound kind of silly at that.

“*That’s* your ‘big problem’, Operative Three?” In a few moments he had pulled himself together.

“Seriously, Jimmy, I thought you might have been followed by our mysterious thief from last night. *That* would have been something to worry about. Not the attempt to form a detective agency by four individuals whose collective brain power couldn’t light a ten-watt bulb. Now, if you’re quite through being worried over nothing, I suggest we look over your purchases.”

“But Brains!” I objected. “What do I tell Tuffy if he wants to know what case we’re working on?”

“Anything you want to, Operative Three,” he replied absently. He’d already dismissed it from his mind. I wondered, though, if he wasn’t making a mistake in doing so...

Brains looked over the chemical stuff. "Very good, Jimmy. Yes, and the black thread. Tonight we shall rig a surprise for our thief. The calcium sulfide will be used to cling to his shoes to show us the way. However, insofar as it would probably be visible, either in the moonlight or by the front porch light, I'm using the potassium chloride to cover it up with, rendering it mostly invisible."

"But creeps, Brains!" I objected. "Won't that prevent it from clinging to his shoes?"

Brains shook his head. "Not so, Jimmy. The potassium chloride has a very low friction index, and won't stick to his shoes. Only the calcium sulfide will. We'll still have to be careful with it, lest the man slip and fall."

"So what's the black thread for?"

"You will see later on tonight." And that was all I could get out of him about that. Brains went back to fiddling around with the computer. There wasn't much else for me to do until tonight, so I went on home. There, my mother found plenty of yard work for me to do. I finished just in time to start my paper route. It was dinnertime when I finished, and afterwards we watched some TV. Then I headed back to the lab.

Brains was ready. He told me he had his chemicals in a knapsack which he put at the base of his window. "You take the knapsack with our camouflage outfits, Operative Three."

Soon we went on to bed. Shortly afterwards, when we heard Mrs. Ray's car pull out, we made our

way down the rope ladder and over to her car.

“I certainly hope you do a better job of surveillance than you did last night!” she told us a bit huffily.

“Benton and Carson always get their man,” Brains replied loftily. Gosh! We’re now like the Canadian Mounties! Apart from a snort of disbelief, Mrs. Ray didn’t bother to reply. The drive over was in silence.

Once we were there, we set up our camp by the hedge once again. Then Brains removed his equipment and we went over to Mrs. Ray’s sister’s house. Taking out the spool of black thread and a pair of scissors, Brains began to cut out six-foot lengths of thread. Then he had me stretch them out across the ground in front of the porch step. We lay them out on either side of the concrete walkway. Using more thread, we lay them lengthwise across the horizontal threads, so we had a sort of grid that was almost impossible to see, even with the porch light on. By now I could see what Brains was up to: the black thread would hold the pattern of a shoe or shoes that was pressed on to it a lot better than just the grass alone.

“Of course,” Brains told me, “some of it is bound to get scuffed up — that’s inevitable, I’m afraid. But there should be a few spots where the impression will hold. That’s why we’re using so much of the thread.” Once we finished with the thread, Brains began sprinkling the chemicals around. First the eerie calcium sulfide, then the potassium chloride to help cover it up. Brains was careful to sprinkle only small

amounts. When he was done, we both gave the yard a careful go-over. Well, if you really knew what to look for, you could probably see what we'd done. But someone in a hurry, wanting to grab the envelope and go — wouldn't even know it was there. We hurried back to our observation spot behind the hedge.

Brains took first watch. Then I took over. As the time approached, both of us used our binoculars more often. Brains suddenly called out quietly, "Jimmy, look — over there!"

I swung my binoculars around and focused on the front porch. I kept looking for someone to be sneaking along, but all I saw was a cat approaching. It sniffed at the envelope out there, then kind of flopped on its side against it. I continued looking around but still didn't see anyone. "Where, Brains? Where is he?"

"No one has approached the envelope yet, but that's the same cat I saw last night," Brains informed me. I just kind of glared at him. "So what? We're supposed to be waiting for whomever it is that picks up the envelope. Who cares about some dumb cat?"

"Perhaps we'd better start caring," said Brains. "Look at the front porch again, Operative Three."

I did so — and about dropped my binoculars. The envelope was gone!

"What? — but ..." For a moment I was at a loss, then looked back at Brains again. "You're not suggesting...?"

"That the cat did it?" he finished for me. "It

certainly appears that way, Operative Three. Consider: the same cat was here last night. After it left, the envelope was gone. Now we saw it approach once more, and the same thing happens again. Hardly a coincidence, I would think.”

“Okay, but why on earth would a cat do such a thing? And for that matter, how? With its mouth?”

“Excellent questions, Operative Three!” Brains said with a nod. That made me feel good, as praise from Brains always does. “You may be right, though I caught a glimpse of the cat as it went around the other side of the house, and there was no signs of it carrying the envelope that way. At the moment, I am at a loss as to the method by which it was accomplished. As to why the cat would want the envelope: I have a theory, but we will need to be here tomorrow night in order for me to test it.”

“Mrs. Ray may not like coming out here once again,” I warned him.

“Mrs. Ray had better start accommodating herself to the idea of taking us out here. We may have to return several more times before I can get a lead back to our mysterious blackmailer.” We packed our stuff up and got ready to go. Before we left, Brains and I went back to Mrs. Evansworth’s yard, got rid of the black thread and swept the piles of potassium chloride and calcium sulfide to one side. We worked as quickly and quietly as we could.

As I suspected, Mrs. Ray wasn’t happy at being told that we’d have to come back out here again, and that we still haven’t caught the blackmailer. “And to

think of the small fortune I'm paying you two!" she exclaimed. Brains and I exchanged glances and I just rolled my eyes heavenwards. Paying us?? She hadn't given us so much as a plugged nickel! Well, not counting the meals at Brain's house, anyway.

CHAPTER 6: THE NEW CASE

The next morning, Brains told me he was working on a new way to be able to track the cat. “We can’t use the calcium sulfide, Operative Three,” he told me. “Cats lick their paws to clean them, and calcium sulfide is very poisonous.”

“So what do you plan to use instead?” I asked.

“I believe I can mix up a form of food coloring that is both non-toxic and will glow much like the calcium sulfide. This will, in fact, simplify the operation: instead of sprinkling the calcium sulfide around the whole yard, we can pour a small amount near the front porch where the cat will doubtless sniff at it, then step through it.”

“Won’t the cat try to avoid it?” I asked. “I thought cats didn’t like to get their paws wet.”

“Yes, we need to take that into consideration. Don’t worry, Operative Three. I will soon have a plan to make certain that the cat steps into the liquid.”

So I left him mixing chemicals. Mrs. Benton had told me earlier that Mom needed me to come home. When I got back home, I soon found out why: back-to-school shopping!

“You’ve already grown out of last year’s clothes, Jimmy!” she told me as I protested. Shopping for school clothes — let alone being reminded that the start of school was just around the corner — wasn’t exactly high on my list of fun things to do. So, before

I knew what was happening, I was whisked away in the car along with Ann, who was shopping for her sophomore year in college. She, of course, was looking forward to it. Why do girls find shopping for clothes to be so much fun? Just one of the many mysteries about them that I doubt even Brains will ever figure out.

By the time we were finished with it all, I was ready to have a Cherry Fizz at Doc Saffron's drugstore. I mentioned this to mother, who also thought it was a good idea. So we drove over to the drugstore. Inside, I was surprised to see Lew Jarmen there. Lew is the ace reporter at the *Crestwood Daily Ledger*. He's written stories about many of our cases.

"Hey, Jimmy!" he called out. "Have you and Brains started investigating Mrs. Aberdene?"

I stared at him, puzzled. That name rang a bell, but I couldn't recall from where. And why should we be investigating her, anyway? I guess the look on my face told him that we hadn't. "The mayor's wife, remember?" he said with a grin. Then I had it: she'd thought her pearls had been stolen a few years back. But it turns out she'd simply misplaced them.

Oddly enough, that non-case led to our first real investigation with the Duvals. We named that one *The Case of the Missing Message*. "What happened to her?" I asked Lew.

"Her pearls are gone again." I started to roll my eyes but stopped when Lew went on: "But this time they really were stolen, along with some other rather expensive pieces of jewelry. Chief Hadley promised a

full investigation, of course, but you know how that will go.”

Yeah, did I ever! Brains and I have butted heads with Chief Hadley more than a few times in the past. Neither one of us has a particularly high opinion of the Chief’s deductive skills. Of course, this being the mayor’s wife he’s bound to concentrate on it more than usual, but there was little question that the mayor would require the services of Benton and Carson before long.

When I finally got back to the lab, I immediately told Brains about it. He just gave me a distracted look. “Yes, Jimmy, I heard about it on the police scanner. We’ll investigate it in due time. For now, though, we must concentrate on finding out how the cat is collecting the envelope and where it takes it. I’ve mixed a batch of non-toxic glows-in-the-dark liquid. Further, I’ve added some cat mint — better known to you as ‘catnip’ — to it as well. This should cause the cat to sniff it, drink it, and even roll in it. Of course, some cats are not affected by cat mint but we will simply have to hope that this cat isn’t one of them.”

“And if he turns out to be one of those kind of cats? Then what?” I asked.

“We shall take another approach,” Brains replied.

So that night, once again we took up our positions behind the hedge. Brains had poured the liquid close to the porch step where it would be exposed to the porch light. “Even though the porch light isn’t very bright,” he said, “it should be sufficient to cause the liquid to

glow for a while.” Well, I’d take his word on that.

The cat was a little later this time, but not by much. Sure enough, it stopped to sniff the mixture. It licked it a bit, then proceeded to roll in it. You could hear the cat’s loud purrs even over here. That’s when Brains spoke up. “Jimmy! Look at the cat’s side!” I thought there was something strange-looking about the side of the cat: it was as if it was fat on the side facing away from us. For a long time the cat just wallowed in the mixture, purring away. Abruptly, it got up, shook itself off, then proceeded to the front porch. Once again it rubbed itself against the envelope, then trotted off — and the envelope was gone.

Brains flashed me a triumphant look. “Let there be no further doubts about it, Operative Three,” he told me. “We’ve discovered the method by which the payments are being obtained!”

“But we still don’t know how, though,” I reminded him.

Brains shook his head. “Not necessarily, Operative Three. The strange bulge we saw on the cat’s left side must have something to do with it. When the cat rubs against the envelope, it must trigger something in the bulge that scoops it up and stores it. And the fact itself that the cat rubs against the envelope...” He scratched his chin. “Someone must have trained it to do so.”

I started at Brains in surprise. “I didn’t think you could train cats! I mean, they’re supposed to be independent and stuff.”

But Brains shook his head again. “No, Jimmy. While it is true that cats are much harder to train than dogs, it can be done if you start the training early enough. This is how they get cats to perform in movies and on TV. And this cat in particular is a Siamese.”

“Which means?” I prompted him.

“Siamese are well known for their intelligence, and therefore are the easiest to train. Further, with their unique coloration, they would blend in well with the shadows during the twilight hours like now. Speaking of which, it’s time for us to start pursuing our four-legged courier.”

We went over to the front porch, then started following the eerie pattern of glowing cat prints. Even though they were pretty small, it still gave me the willies to see them. It didn’t take us long to catch up. And this time the cat, having rolled in the mixture, glowed like a ghost. That really gave me the creeps! The cat had paused and was licking its coat. This caused it to roll around on the ground again, purring loudly. Brains let out a kind of hiss of annoyance and pulled me back.

“The mixture is working a little too well,” he told me ruefully. “The cat is trying to clean itself, and every time it does, the cat mint is affecting it all over again.”

“Anything we can do, X?” I asked.

“If there was a way to wash it off, I’d do so,” he told me. “But its resistance to water notwithstanding, the cat is not likely to let you or me handle it in any

way. Further, it would defeat the whole purpose by washing the mixture off of its paws.”

“So now what?”

“We just have to be patient and let it continue on its journey.”

Well, the cat finally seemed to snap out of it. It got up, shook itself, and went on. Brains and I kept as close as we could. By now, though, Brains’ mixture was drying up and the footprints were getting smaller. Further, they weren’t glowing as brightly as before. By now we were on the outskirts of town. The cat was heading off into the woods. I could just barely make it out.

All at once, Brains took out a camera and began to shoot pictures. I stared at him in surprise. “X!” I said. “What are you doing? Nothing’s going to show up on the film!”

“Relax, Operative Three,” Brains told me as we hurried on. “This is my infra-red camera, remember? It’s hard to say whether the cat will show up on the film or not, but at least we’ll have a pretty good idea where its heading once we develop the pictures.”

“How? Even I don’t know where we’re heading!”

Brains took another picture, then hurried on. “I’m not too certain either, Jimmy, though I suspect we’re not far from Lake Carmine. For one thing, you can smell the water even this far back. For another, you can hear the sounds of traffic on Lake Shore Road.”

Brains was right: I could. As we continued after the cat, soon we could hear the sound of water

lapping gently at the shore. Before we could go any further, though, I heard Brains let out an exclamation.

“What’s wrong, X?” I asked him.

He sighed. “I’m out of film. I should have thought to reload it this afternoon. I never dreamed the cat would be going so far that the glow mixture would die out on us like this.” He shook his head. “I really hate stopping when we’ve come this far, but without any further way of tracking the cat, I’m afraid we’ll end up lost.” Like we weren’t already? “Sorry, Jimmy, but we might as well make our way back.”

“At least we know a few more things about the case than we did before,” I said consolingly. Brains just kind of grunted in agreement.

We came close to getting lost. We were able to follow the very dim footprints for a bit, but they soon faded out completely. Fortunately, Brains had memorized several of the trees on our way in. So, with some hesitation, we made our way back to the neighborhood. Before long we were back in Mrs. Ray’s car. I almost wish we had stayed in the woods: she was fit to be tied!

“Barclay Benton!” she roared. “Have you any idea how late it is? It’s almost midnight!”

“I am well aware of the time, Mrs. Ray,” Brains replied in his usual superior way. “New developments have occurred which required us to leave our observation post.”

“What new developments?” she demanded.

“We are close to locating the perpetrator of this blackmail. It may take a few more nights, but we should have his identity before the end of the week.”

I gaped at Brains in surprise. I didn't think we were that close. As I've found out several times, sometimes cases like these can take on some weird twists. I'd have to talk to Brains about this when we got back.

“See that you do!” Mrs. Ray responded as she fired up the car. “This is taking much longer than I thought. Every time my sister makes a payment, she comes one step closer to being caught! This blackmailer needs to be dealt with soon!”

“Do not be distressed, Mrs. Ray,” Brains told her. “He'll soon pay for his misdeeds.”

She just snorted in response and drove off. It was another silent ride back.

Once up in Brain's bedroom, I began asking him questions. “What about the glow stuff on the cat's back and paws? Won't the blackmailer notice it and realize that someone's trying to track him down?”

Brains stopped in the middle of changing and snorted. “Please, Jimmy! It was one of the first things I took into account. By the time the cat has reached its destination, all of the mixture will have turned to powder and flaked off.” He shook his head. “I will admit that we're lucky in that the cat is a short-hair. It might have taken a longer on a long-haired cat. No, this mixture I deliberately made in such a way that it rapidly turned to powder and either falls off or is licked off by the cat. It was, of course, one of the

drawbacks as well: that it wouldn't last very long."

"What are you planning on doing tomorrow night?" I asked.

"You mean, what are *we* planning on doing tomorrow night?" he corrected sardonically. "We will continue to observe the cat. We still need to observe its ultimate destination. And soon, too. As Mrs. Ray astutely observed, her sister's embezzlement of the company's funds can't go on indefinitely. Sooner or later someone will notice."

"Are you going to continue to use the glow stuff?" It was kind of a dumb question. I mean, what else could he use?

"Obviously, Operative Three."

"What I mean is: won't it just wear out about the same place as before?"

As we got into bed, I saw Brains nod his head. "Yes, Jimmy. I'm currently working on a plan to give the glowing liquid a 'boost,' as it were. Now, let's go on to sleep. Tomorrow — or rather, today — should be relatively quiet, allowing me to work out the details of the plan."

So I said good night and Brains turned out the light.

Relatively quiet, Brains said?

Creeps! Talk about famous last words!

The next day was *anything* but quiet!

CHAPTER 7: THE HOUSE OF HORROR

The next morning, Brains decided to look into the theft of Mrs. Aberdeen's pearls. We took our bikes and arrived at the house around 10:30. I was curious about how Brains intended to search for clues. I was also a bit worried about the clues: most of the evidence would have been taken by the police by now. But Brains had a few ideas along those lines.

Once we got there, Brains had me go talk with Mrs. Aberdeen while he went upstairs to look around.

"What am I supposed to talk to her about?" I demanded.

"Anything, Operative Three. The weather. Her poodles. The chances of Crestwood College winning the homecoming game this year. I probably won't need more than five minutes to examine the crime scene."

"But what if you run into a servant or someone?"

"The Aberdeens don't have any servants, Operative Three," Brains replied. "And Hizzoner is currently at City Hall. I should be undisturbed. Make sure I stay that way," he told me in a no-nonsense tone.

I just shrugged. "Okay, X. I'll think of something."

"Very good." Well, we were at the front door, so I rang the doorbell. Mrs. Aberdeen answered it. "Yes?"

What do you boys want?” Her tone was kind of snappish, but that was kind of understandable.

“Mrs. Aberdeen,” I spoke up, “We’re with the Benton and Carson International Detective Agency, and we’ve come to help find your stolen pearls.” I whipped out one of our new cards and handed it to her.

“Benton and Carson?” she said, peering at it through her glasses. “It seems I’ve heard of you two before. But I’m afraid I won’t be needing your services,” she said, handing the card back to me.

“You won’t?” I said, ready to tell her why she should change her mind.

“They’re already working on it, you see,” she replied.

“The police?” Brains spoke up. “I can assure you, Mrs. Aberdeen, that Benton and Carson have methods of helping that are far beyond anything the police —”

She cut him off. “Oh, dear, no! Why, I wouldn’t trust Chief Hadley to find a porcupine in a balloon store!” Seems we weren’t the only ones with rather low opinions of Crestwood’s police chief. “No, I’ve already engaged the services of the Martin-Hix Detective Agency. They were here yesterday right after I phoned the police about it. Why, they happen to be —”

“Martin-Hix?” Brains and I said it almost in unison.

“That’d be us, Barclay,” I heard a familiar voice

say: it was Tuffy Martin, with the others right behind him.

“— here right now,” Mrs. Aberdeen concluded.

For a moment, all of us stared at each other. Tuffy was on the verge of saying something when Mrs. Aberdeen invited us in.

Inside, Brains ignored Tuffy and his bunch and began to look around.

“You won’t find anything down here, Brains,” Tuffy jeered. “And we’ve already looked upstairs.” Brains shot him an annoyed look. I could tell he was thinking of evidence that might have been trampled on or tampered with by these fumble-fingered amateurs.

“Yeah!” Stony chimed in. “And we’ve looked everywhere. But we’ll find them! In fact, we’re going to mmph!” It was Heather: she clamped a hand over Stony’s mouth. Even though I enjoyed the sight, I kind of wish she’d let him babble on another moment or two. Obviously she wasn’t about to let that happen.

“Well, we’d better get moving along,” Heather said quickly. “We have a few other cases we need to look into.” This to Mrs. Aberdeen.

“But first, we need to speak with Jimmy here,” Tuffy said, clamping a big mitt right on top of my shoulder. “Mind if we borrow him a few minutes, Brains?” That’s when we noticed that Brains had vanished. Before I could even begin to wonder what happened to him, Tuffy hustled me right outside, the

others in tow. Mrs. Aberdeen waved good-bye to us and closed the door.

Shaking his arm off my shoulder, I turned to Tuffy and said, “Well, what do you want?”

“Hey, is that any way to talk to an old friend?” Tuffy replied with a none-too-friendly grin. Before I could reply, Tuffy draped an arm around my shoulder and yanked me close. In a low voice he said, “Now, Carson, what did I tell you about keeping us informed of any potential crimes? You were supposed to have let us know that the pearls were stolen!” One of his hands formed a massive fist.

“Tuffy, I didn’t even know about this until yesterday!” I protested.

Tuffy whirled me around and stared at me. “Don’t give me that, Carson! Stony was in Doc Saffron’s drugstore yesterday and overheard your conversation with the reporter. If not for him, we wouldn’t have found out about the theft. You should have called us right off the bat!” He brought his fist right up to my face. “Thought you’d agreed to that...”

By now I was wondering just how many bruises and broken bones I was going to get before this was through. And so I panicked, just like always. “Look, Tuffy, it would hardly have mattered! Brains is so wrapped up in our investigation over in Carmine that he barely even gives this case much thought. I mean, yeah, we’re here, but I doubt if Brains is really going to be doing all that much —”

“Wait a second, wait a second!” Tuffy ordered, cutting me off. “What do you mean, ‘our

investigation in Carmine”? Is there some other case I ought to know about?”

I clammed up, horrified I’d even said that much. I shook my head vigorously. “No! Uh-uh. There’s no other case but this one. Please believe me!” I don’t think he did.

Tuffy might have gone further, but he seemed to notice for the first time that he was in a wide-open space where everyone could see them. “Maybe we’d better talk somewhere else where we can have a bit of privacy!” He grabbed me by the shirt and almost started to drag me with them. Before I had gone more than a few steps, though, a voice spoke up.

“Well, Jimmy, though I admire your effort to make some new friends, I think we have other things to attend to right now.” It was Brains.

For a moment Tuffy didn’t know what to do. His head kept turning back and forth between me and Brains. Tuffy knew that he didn’t dare reveal that he’d made me a stool pigeon, unaware that I’d already tipped Brains off about it. Finally he just let me go, patted me on the arm and said in a far-from-convincing sort of way, “Yeah, Jimmy and I are good friends now, aren’t we, Jimmy?” He gave me a hearty thump on the back which almost knocked me off my feet. “We’ll talk later,” he said with a false smile. “C’mon!” he said to the others. They looked after him kind of puzzled, then followed him off.

“X, where were you?” I demanded.

“Keep your voice down, idiot!” Brains hushed me. “I was upstairs looking at the scene of the crime.

Not that there was much to see, I'm afraid. The police did their usual half-witted job, and from what I could tell, those morons messed it up even further."

"So, you didn't find out anything of use," I said despondently as we walked to our bikes.

Brains shook his head. "Other than the fact that the burglar was five feet six, had long blond hair and uses too much grease on it, is left-handed and needs a shave, used a bicycle to arrive here and depart, and is prone to clumsiness, nothing at all."

I stared at Brains in astonishment. "Creeps, Brains! How'd you figure all that out?"

"Wait until we reach the lab. And I want to know just what it was you told them about Carmine," he added in a frigid voice. I felt my face turn several shades of red. Before I could reply, he nodded. "Yes, Operative Three, I caught some of Tuffy's last remarks."

Feeling miserable, I followed Brains on back to the lab. Once inside, he had me repeat word for word the entire conversation with Tuffy. "Oh, nice going, Operative Three," he said angrily, once I'd finished. "'There's no other case but this one. Please believe me!'" he quoted, mocking me. "You think that big oaf is going to believe you for *one minute*?"

"I know, X, I know," I said, hanging my head in shame. "I could have bitten my tongue off. But Tuffy had me panicked and before I knew it I was blabbing away..." I let my voice trail off, seeing the fire in Brain's eyes.

“Yes, Jimmy, I know. It’s not the first time you’ve done this.” I turned even redder, if possible. Brains finally let out a sigh. “Well, it’s done. The only good thing is that they have no idea who we’re working for or our method for getting out to Carmine. And Carmine is a fairly large town, so they have no idea just where we are working.” I nodded in agreement, then paused. “But Brains, Tuffy plans on finding out later on. What should I do?”

“Make sure you’re nowhere near them, Operative Three,” Brains responded. I could have told him that was easier said than done. Then I remembered what Brains had discovered at Mrs. Aberdeen’s house. “Say, how’d you find out all that stuff about the burglar, X?”

Brains just gave me “heaven—help me” look. “Do I really need to go into it, Operative Three? You’ve been around me long enough to know how I deduce certain facts.” Before I could say anything, he sighed and said, “Oh very well.” Fact is, I knew he loved giving me these explanations almost as much as I like hearing them. “Most of what I found out came from examining the room where the pearls had been stolen from as well as the backyard. I realized that whoever came to steal the pearls wasn’t exactly going to waste time getting in and out of the mayor’s house, so there should be a straight line from the back of the fence to the balcony that leads to the master bedroom. And there was. The height of the burglar was easily deduced from his strides through the garden, which had been watered earlier, to the balcony. Further, there was a place where the burglar

had tripped over an easily-seen garden hose and landed face-first into the mud, which led me to believe him to be fairly clumsy. Evidence in the master bedroom supported this. That he was left-handed was obvious from the mud prints his gloves left as he climbed up to the balcony and the doorknob he used after he picked the lock. Further, he tripped over a hassock in the room and used his left hand to help himself back up. When he tripped, he banged his head against the dresser, leaving behind some strands of blond hair coated with grease. Fortunately the police overlooked that.”

“How’d you know about the hassock? Wouldn’t it have already been set back up?”

Brains nodded. Now that he was explaining some things, he’d become more relaxed. “True, Jimmy. But the hassock seems to be kept in a particular location, judging from the imprints of the rollers on the carpet. It had been moved to the side when they picked it back up, but there was still some leftover garden mud right by the roller imprints. “

“What about the bicycle? And needing a shave?” I prompted.

“The first one was easy. Following his path back through the garden, I could make out some tire tracks in the dirt on the other side of the fence. Further, the police hadn’t reported the sounds of a car or motorcycle going by earlier. It’s true that he might have fled on foot, but a bicycle makes for a swifter getaway, as well as being able to be seen pedaling nonchalantly away, rather than trying to run away.

“As for his needing a shave: I bent down and examined the impression his face made in the garden. Using my magnifying glass, I could make out tiny holes in the mud. Obviously, from the stubble of his beard.”

I nodded, very impressed. “Wow, you sure found out a lot, X!”

Brains shook his head. “Sadly, no, Jimmy. Like I said, other, more vital evidence has been removed or trampled. True, we now have a vague description of the perpetrator, but little else. We don’t know who he is or where he went afterwards.”

“So what now, Brains?”

“Now I continue to work on a method to track the cat back to his lair,” he said. “The case of the stolen pearls will have to wait until further clues or news becomes available.”

I decided to hang around the lab. I didn’t want to run into Tuffy again. But there really wasn’t much for me to do. Finally Brains ordered me out of the lab.

I left via the regular door. And was promptly ambushed by Tuffy and his gang.

“Well, Jimmy!” Tuffy said. “Isn’t this a surprise?” I nodded, thinking *not exactly a pleasant one*. “We knew you’d probably be here with Brains, so we waited for you to come out,” he went on.

“What do you want, Tuffy?” I asked, already knowing the answer.

“Oh, I just wanted to pick up where we left off,” Tuffy replied. “You were saying something about —”

“James Carson!” a shrill voice shouted. “You come here this instant!” It was Mrs. Ray. She marched right up to us and began shaking her finger. “And you, Martin Wagner! I believe you and your friends have better things to do than hang around in the Benton’s driveway!” You almost have to admire the way she stood up to them. In spite of the fact that Tuffy almost towered over her, Mrs. Ray didn’t so much as flinch.

“Uh, yes ma’am,” Tuffy replied. “We can talk with Jimmy later.” He motioned to the others and they soon left.

Well, if that didn’t beat all: to be rescued by Mrs. Ray!

“What are you and Barclay up to?” she said. “Why were you over at the mayor’s house, instead of working to help my sister in Carmine?”

I winced at the sound of it and tried to motion her to keep her voice down. Tuffy and the others weren’t that far away yet. But she didn’t get the picture. “Now you get back up to that *so-secret* lab of yours,” her voice almost dripped acid, “and keep working on a way to help my sister, do you hear me? I want to start seeing results, not *excuses!*”

I sputtered some more, trying to find a means to slip away, but nothing doing. Mrs. Ray all but picked me up and tossed me back into the coach house. Not knowing what else to do, I soon returned to the lab.

Anticipating an angry comment by Brains, I held up my hands in supplication. “Brains, I’m sorry, Mrs. Ray practically forced me to —”

To my surprise, Brains gave me a slight grin. “It’s okay, Jimmy. I understand. I heard Mrs. Ray — and I fully suspect that half the neighborhood did as well — perfectly. Well, as long as you’re here, you might as well give me a hand with this new chemical formula I’m working on.”

“What’s it do?”

“It will allow me to track cat, of course. I’m sorry I didn’t think of this first. It will work much better than the glowing liquid, and be much harder to detect by anyone.”

“How does it work?” I asked him.

“First of all, we’re not going to be at our observation point by the hedge. Instead, we’ll go back to the spot where we lost the cat last night. I’m going to sprinkling the mixture across its trail. This new formula contains a very mild radioactive isotope. You needn’t be concerned, Jimmy, the amount is less than that of a radium watch. It should cause the cat no harm at all. But it will be enough to register on the Geiger counter I plan to borrow from Crestwood University. I’m sure my father will allow me to borrow one for a short time. Another thing, too, Operative Three: if possible, I’m going to have us move to Mrs. Ray’s sister house for a night or two.”

I gaped in surprise. “You are? But why, Brains?”

“It will help simplify things. Sooner or later my parents will come into my room one night and find us missing. I’d just as soon that didn’t happen — or their finding out about the rope ladder.”

I nodded. “Yeah, okay, I see your point. But will Mrs. Ray’s sister agree to that?”

“I believe she will. Especially since we’re beginning to close in on the blackmailer.”

“We are?” Sure didn’t seem like it to me. In fact, we hardly seemed to be making progress on either case.

“Yes, Operative Three. I predict a conclusion to the case within the next few days,” he said in a rather lofty tone. “For now, though, I need you to do something for me.”

“What’s that, Brains?”

“I need you to enter the chemicals into the computer as I call them out to you.”

Brains went over to the computer and switched it on. The TV-like thing Brains called a “monitor” was blank for a few moments, then all sorts of weird letters, numbers, and words began to appear, scrolling up the screen. After a few minutes it stopped, leaving only a wedge-shaped deal like this: “>” and a blinking white rectangle. “This is what’s known as the ‘command prompt’, Jimmy,” he said, pointing to the wedge. “And this is the cursor.”

“Okay,” I said, a bit uncertain. “Now what?”

“Now I tell it to load a program.”

I blinked. “You mean, we’re going to watch a TV program?”

“Not exactly, Jimmy,” he said with a smile. “A computer program is a set of instructions that tells the

computer what to do. At the moment, I just need a program that will keep track of the various chemicals and the amounts of each that I use. I may need to use this again someday, and this keep it in a central location. If I were to write it down on a piece of paper, said paper could end up getting lost.”

Not likely, I thought. Brains was *very* organized, and never lost track of anything. Unlike me.

But I have to admit was rather fun typing in the names (most of which I had to get Brains to spell out) and numbers, using the tab key to shift over to the other side of the screen and enter the amount. What I really liked was the fact that if I misspelled a word, I could use the backspace key to erase it, then type it in again. Try doing that on a typewriter! I said as much to Brains, wondering if there was a way to type reports and such on it.

Brains nodded. “Indeed there is, Jimmy! Remember my telling you about the ‘Super Typewriter’? That’s one of the available programs on the computer. This fall, you and I should be putting it to good use for our classes. Even better, we are allowed to make suggestions on how to make it better!”

I stared at him in surprise. “You mean, the two guys who invented this thing would listen to us?”

Brains nodded again. “Yes indeed, Jimmy. You and I, my father and mother, even Mrs. Ray — assuming she’d ever use it! They’re always willing to listen to any sensible suggestions to make the computer work better. Remember, a computer is

never really a finished product, any more than a car is. They're always making improvements to them. So the next model of ZORAC should be even better than this one. Anyway, let me show you something else that should make editing even easier."

Brains showed me how to use the delete and insert keys. He was right: these were even better than the backspace key.

We broke for lunch, then went back at it. The afternoon passed even faster than I thought it would. But when it came time to go home, I told Brains that I was worried about running into Tuffy and his bunch.

Brains nodded his head thoughtfully. "Yes, I overheard part of the confrontation earlier. But I think I know what we can do about that, Jimmy."

"What?" I wondered.

Brains went over to one wall where he had a pull-down chart of Crestwood. "Tuffy and his bunch know Crestwood pretty well, and Stony knows it even better. But I still know of a few secret routes you can use that should help you avoid them."

And sure enough, Brains really did know of some weird paths I would never have thought of. This time I left by way of the secret entrance, after Brains made sure that no one was around. I took off as fast as I could. But I really needn't have hurried: I didn't see a sign of Tuffy and his gang all day. Not even later, when I went out on my route. This puzzled me, but I was hardly complaining.

After dinner, I returned to the lab. Brains had his new mixture finished and was testing it with the Geiger counter he'd borrowed. It was clicking merrily away.

"Sounds like you've got it, Brains," I said.

He nodded. "Yes, Jimmy. Tonight we should track the cat to its lair!"

Wow! Made us sound like big-time hunters in the jungles of Africa or someplace like that. "Were you able to get Mrs. Ray's sister's permission for us to stay there tonight?" I asked.

Brains nodded again. "Yes, that's been taken care of."

"How'd you swing that one?" I asked.

"It was easier than you might think. Mrs. Ray was more than happy to not have to drive us over to Carmine every night, and her sister was grateful to hear that we were soon going to wrap up the case. I let Mother and Father know that we were going to be fishing and swimming in Lake Carmine during our last few days of summer vacation. " He gestured towards the wall and for the first time I saw the rod and reels there.

"You're actually going to do some fishing?" I asked with a grin. Brains wasn't all that keen on water sports.

To my surprise, Brains gave me a grin in return. "I have been working on a device that can lure fish to a hook — no worms needed." He picked up a small plastic box. "It's a waterproof sonic lure," he

informed me. "It simulates the type of sound an insect makes when it is on top of the water."

I eyed the device dubiously, but if Brains said it would work, it probably would. We soon loaded up our gear into Mrs. Ray's car and took off.

Once we reached Mrs. Ray's sister's house (she told us to call her Cissy), she showed us a spare room with two beds that she had ready for us. After dinner, Brains got the mixture put out for the cat. This time, we kept careful watch from one of the windows.

Right on time, the cat came by and lapped up the formula. Then we watched as it rolled on its side, activating the odd pouch. We caught a glimpse of envelope as it seemed to be sucked into the pouch, which promptly closed up. "Might be some sort of adhesive which presses against the envelope," Brains muttered to himself.

Mrs. Evansworth watched with us. One thing I learned about Mrs. Evansworth: she's nothing like her sister! In fact, she was almost as nice as Mrs. Ray was, well, argumentative.

"Yes, Myra was always something of a grouch, even when we were little," she told us during dinner. "I thought that getting married would mellow her a bit, and for a short time it did. But her husband became ill and passed away not hardly six months after they were married, and she grew even grumpier, if that was possible."

Well, I was sure glad that Mrs. Evansworth didn't turn out the same, in spite of having a lousy husband.

Anyway, she watched as the cat departed along its path. Brains and I had already snuck out back and were racing along to where we'd last seen the cat before the glow stuff wore off. Brains was confident we'd reach the spot before the cat. "After all," he said, "unlike us, the cat has no particular reason to hurry."

"Do you think it might detect that we're here?" I asked.

"Not if we're quiet enough," he said pointedly.

In the dark, the forest pretty much looked the same all around. But I knew Brains: he never forgot a location. Before long he had us settle down near some bushes in an area that did kind of look familiar.

Now we had to remain almost motionless. Thankfully, not for very long.

With hardly a sound, the cat pranced on by, its tail raised. For a moment though, when it was directly opposite us, it froze. Then its head began to swivel around. Somehow it had sensed us. Brains and I both held our breaths, not daring to move. The cat's tail twitched several times. It advanced towards us, then stopped. The cat let out a kind of half-growl. Then it got down on its belly and folded in its legs and tail. It seemed to be grinning at us.

Brains and I looked at each other, uncertain what to do. How could we get the cat to resume its journey? It got tense as we tried to figure something out without making any noise. Brains turned back to me and looked about to say something when Mother Nature took over for us:

There was some sort of crackling in the forest behind us. We couldn't tell what it was. Bears? Mountain lions? Whatever it was, the cat was instantly on its feet. A moment later it sprang away. Almost in a panic, Brains activated the Geiger counter and we took off in pursuit. Several times Brains had to stop and wave the machine's arm around. He adjusted a knob several times. The clicking increased as he moved the wand in one direction, then we took off once more. As we did so, I thought I could hear more noise behind us. But I was too busy trying to keep pace with Brains to pay it much attention.

Well, the chase seemed to last half the night, though it really couldn't have been more than an hour. We soon came upon a boathouse. The cat didn't go in it, but turned right and headed up a path that lead to a clearing. And that's when we saw the old Hawshorne Mansion.

I'd probably better stop here and tell you a little more about it. If you've been reading all our chronicles, then you probably remember my telling you about the old Madden house. Well, what I've never mentioned was that there was another, even creepier house called the Hawshorne Mansion. I've never told you about it because, well, it's over by Carmine, and no where close to us. So I never figured we'd ever have anything to do with the place.

Like the Madden house, the Hawshorne mansion goes way back to the turn of the century. The Hawshornes were really wealthy when they arrived at this part of the state. Seems they came from old

money — and not all of it came from legal sources. There was more than a few rumors about pirates, blockade runners and other nasty stuff. The branch of the Hawshornes that settled down here obviously thought they were going to be raising a large family, and that their kids and kid's kids would be living in the same house (Brains told me that a lot of the Victorian families of old would encourage their kids to stay with them long after they were fully grown. "It's why so many Victorian mansions were so large," he told me). And it was the same with the Hawshornes: they built a gigantic mansion, easily four stories high and with a ton of rooms. They soon moved in, a happy family, all set to start having kids. But things didn't turn out that way for Hawshornes.

First, the area was hit by some sort of epidemic. Then a drought. Lake Carmine dried up that year. Next, a bank panic caused a lot of banks to go out of business, including the one in Carmine. The family fortune began to dry up. The Hawshornes were in danger of losing everything.

Then one night Mr. Hawshorne told his family not to worry, that he had found a way to bring in more money. They were happy to hear that, but puzzled as to what it was. It wasn't long before they found out: it seems he got hold of some sort of book of dark magic he could use to turn things around. At first they thought he was nuts. He was often down in the basement drawing pentangles, lighting candles, doing all sorts of crazy chants. But on Midsummer's Eve, all at once the sky grew almost black with thunderclouds. Lightning was everywhere and it

began to pour down rain. Some of the family later said that the thunderclaps sounded more like deep, ominous voices. Then came a scream down in the basement. The family rushed down there and found Mr. Hawshorne dead on the floor. Blood was everywhere and they said that his heart had been torn out of his chest. But there was also something else: a large chest filled with gold coins.

You'd have thought they would be happy with that; it certainly saved the family home. But almost at once the squabbling broke out over who the gold belonged to. Plus, there were more than a few hints that someone had done in Mr. Hawshorne and made it look as though a demon or something supernatural had killed him. Soon the family was mired in all sorts of legal problems, scandals, and even fist fights at the local tavern. The family fell apart, with only some remaining in the mansion. And that pretty much ended when the last of the money from the gold coins was lost during the Stock Market Crash of '29. After that, the last of the Hawshornes moved out and went to California.

The house has been deserted ever since. A few people have tried to buy the place, but it never remained inhabited for long. Personally, I would loved to have known why they left, but most of them just quietly packed their stuff and quit the place. No explanation was ever given. Gave me the creeps just thinking about it.

So here we were, Brains and I, staring at the Hawshorne mansion and watching as the cat went around to the side of the house. We quickly followed

and caught a glimpse of it as it seemed to go right through a solid door. I might have wondered if we were chasing a ghost cat or something, but then made out the flapping of a cat door. We carefully approached the side door. It had a window in it, but there was no light. Brains and I exchanged a look, then he gently tried the door. It was locked. We continued to circle the house. It had a back porch that was screened in, but the door there was locked as well. Brains managed to spring it, but the door to the house was also locked. The other side of the house had windows, but no other doors. Finally we went up onto the front porch and tried the door. No use, it was locked like the others.

“Now what, X?” I asked in a quiet voice.

“Let’s go back to the door we saw the cat enter,” Brains said thoughtfully. “I wish to try something.”

We soon returned to the back door. Brains lay on his side and stuck his arm through the cat flap.

He rolled on his back and tried to reach upward. Then he gave up with a sigh. “I can just touch the doorknob, Operative Three,” he told me. “But I can’t reach the lock.” Looking around the yard, I found a small branch with some twigs at the end and was kind of bent. “Here, X, try this. It might just work.”

Brains took the branch and looked it over. He nodded. “Nice work. Operative Three. It just might at that.”

He got back into position and tried once more. It still took a few minutes, then I heard something go *click!* Brains pulled himself out of the cat door and

said, “Try the door, Operative Three.” I did so, and it opened right up.

We both switched on our flashlights, then covered them with our hands and went inside. We seemed to be in a kind of washing room. I saw a real old-fashioned “wringer”-type clothes dryer, and some tubs with wash boards. Brains only gave the stuff a cursory glance, then moved on to the door at the far end. It was open, of course — the cat definitely wasn’t inside the room. We came into a kitchen. Close by I could see the door that led to the back porch.

“People are living here all right,” Brains said very quietly.

“How can you tell?” I asked him.

“Just smell,” he said. I took a sniff and realized he was right. First off, you could smell the odor of cooked food quite plainly. Second, it wasn’t as dusty as you might have expected an abandoned house to be. I didn’t even see much by way of cobwebs (for which I was glad).

“X, what happens if we run into someone?” I asked him in an equally quiet voice. “We can’t just tell them we’re working on a newspaper story like that other time.”

Brains gave a quiet chuckle. “No, Operative Three, but we can tell them that we came out here on a dare to see if we could spend the night here. Whoever lives here might understand that.” That was Brains for you: always thinking ahead.

We soon left the kitchen and began exploring the rest of the house. We had to take our time; there were rooms everywhere. Most were locked, and those that weren't were mostly empty. Except for one: it turned out to be a mini-chapel, complete with a small pipe organ. In spite of ourselves, we couldn't resist exploring it just a bit. We both winced at the creaking sound the hardwood floor made as we walked over it. There was a lot of dust and cobwebs in here. Maybe that was what was starting to make me feel nervous. I don't know. But there was a sense of oppression in that room. I accidentally backed into Brains. He left out a muffled yelp and whirled on me: "Jimmy! Watch what you're —" he broke off, then continued in a smaller voice, "— doing!"

"B-B-Brains," I said, trying to prevent my teeth from chattering, "l-let's move on t-to another r-room. I-I think w-we've seen all there is t-to see here."

Brains nodded, and we all but bolted out the chapel door. But it didn't seem to do any good. Both of us seemed to be a bundle of nerves as we headed to the upstairs room. The sense of oppression faded a bit, but soon returned. Brains was becoming irritable and edgy as we continued to find no trace of the cat or anyone else. None of the bedrooms looked slept in, in any way. We explored the rooms on the third floor and the finished attic, but turned up nothing. I was almost sweating bullets up there. I kept expecting a ghost or monster to pop out from some darkened corner at any moment. Brains didn't seem to be in any better shape.

As we left the attic, Brains said, "W-we n-need to

look for a b-basement, Op-Operative Th-Three.” He, too, was having a hard time controlling his teeth. “M-maybe the b-blackmailer is d-down there.”

I’m telling you, my blood about froze at the thought of exploring this place’s basement! ‘G-go down th-there, X?’ I said, my legs feeling like they were made of lead. “Where Old Hawshorne w-was said to b-be attacked by the d-demon or whatever?”

‘S-superstitious n-nonsense, Op-Operative Three!’ Brains replied. ‘In-Insofar as we c-can’t seem to find out wh-where he is, the b-basement seems to b-be the only l-likely location.’”

“But h-how can we g-get to it?” I asked.

“P-probably in the k-kitchen,” he replied and began to head back towards it. We kind of knew our way around the first floor by now. Back in the kitchen, it still took some searching, but we finally found the entrance to the basement. The door was stuck, and we both had to put our shoulders to it to force it open. It gave out a loud screech that did nothing for our nerves. But the worst was yet to come.

We’d just started down the staircase when there came a loud clanking sound, like a huge chain being dragged over something. It was followed by a loud *BOOM!* like a gigantic hammer slamming on metal. There came more clanking noises, then another *BOOM*. We thought we heard a maniacal laugh, but it was hard to say. You see, that was the final straw: our nerves broke! We turned and ran through the washing room and out the side door as fast as we could, not

even bothering to shut it behind us. We raced around the house and headed straight back into the forest. We didn't slow down until we reached the area where we'd been waiting for the cat to go by. Both of us were trembling like a tree in an earthquake.

CHAPTER 8: A STARTLING DEFEAT

We made our way back to Mrs. Evansworth's house, panting and exhausted. We went inside the front door and was surprised to see that Mrs. Evansworth was still up. Then I noticed that it was only 11:30. I thought it would be a lot later than that.

She looked at us in surprise and said, "Are you all right? You look very pale!" Then she added, "Did you catch the blackmailer?"

Brains pulled himself together with an effort. Regaining control of his breathing, he said, "There have been a few complications, Cissy, but nothing we can't handle. Do not be concerned. We should have our hands on the blackmailer before long."

"I — I hope so," she said, looking nervous. "I can't keep covering up for the company's losses much longer. They could pull a surprise audit at any time!"

"Rest assured, we shall soon bring a speedy end to this case," Brains said confidently. I just nodded and smiled as best I could. Then we made our way to our bedroom.

After we both had a shower and were in our pajamas, I said to Brains, "Now what are we going to do? Surely you don't intend on going back there!"

Brains shook his head. "Not yet. We need to return to the lab tomorrow morning. There's some items I need to get from there."

“Like what?”

“Among other things, my own specially designed lock pick,” he told me.

I looked at him, eyes wide. “Y-you mean you’re going to go b-back —”

“I mean,” he interrupted, ‘that *we’re* going back there tomorrow night, Operative Three! You heard Mrs. Evansworth. It’s only a matter of time before she’s caught. We now know where the cat went to, though not where inside. I still suspect the basement.”

“But — but Brains! What caused that horrible clanking and banging sound we heard? And the whole house positively reeked of evil! Don’t deny it, Brains! You felt it as much as I did.”

“A good detective is not put off by some minor adversities. And I suspect that the fear we felt was merely our nerves getting better of us. In fact, I feel ashamed, running away like that.” Curiously, he sure didn’t look it. In spite of his words, he looked more than a little bit relieved. “I do not pretend to know what caused the racket we heard when we tried to go down the steps. It is but one more mystery that needs to be investigated.” He began pacing the floor. “In spite of our cowardice, I feel we accomplished much tonight, Operative Three. We have discovered the cat’s destination, and have eliminated a good portion of the house from our search. Tomorrow night we can go right to the house and investigate the basement. I believe we should turn up some very interesting clues.” And with that Brains went on to bed. I soon

joined him, my mind whirling.

I didn't sleep well that night. I kept having nightmares of being lost inside the mansion, with something horrible chasing me while my legs were like two strands of spaghetti and the floor like glue.

Just when I seemed to reach a safe location, Tuffy would suddenly turn up and slam the door in my face, laughing and asking me what case Brains and I were working on. "I'll let you in if you tell me, Jimmy," he'd yell through the closed door. And I could feel the horrible monster just a few steps behind me.

I thought morning would never come, but finally it began to grow light and I could hear the sounds of Mrs. Evansworth fixing breakfast. Both Brains and I sat upright at about the same time. From the looks of his bed sheets and the dark circles under his eyes, he didn't have a much more restful night than I had.

During breakfast, Brains asked Mrs. Evansworth if she would take us back to Crestwood for a while. Actually, she didn't have to: turns out that Mrs. Ray was planning to come by for a visit. So we were stuck here for a bit.

Mrs. Ray arrived later on in the morning. Brains was anxious to get going, but he knew they would want to know how the case was progressing. And sure enough, it was the first words out of her mouth when her sister answered the door: "Cissy, I want know what those boys have been up to! Are they anywhere close to catching the blackmailer?" Then, before Mrs. Evansworth could even reply, she turned to us. "Well, are you?"

Brains knew this was coming, of course. “Indeed we are, Mrs. Ray! We have learned the cat’s destination, and have even searched the premises. Tonight we plan to investigate once again, and this time I believe we shall either have the culprit in irons or know his identity. And do not be concerned about any more payments to the blackmailer. You can stop them as of now.”

Both women looked pleased at that, but a bit puzzled. So did I. I glanced at Brains, who nodded. “Mrs. Ray, it is imperative you return us to Crestwood as soon as possible. There are several items I need to obtain from the lab. You can return us here later on in the afternoon.”

Mrs. Ray looked sharply at him, but nodded. “Very well, Barclay. I’d like to know, however, just why my sister can *safely* stop the payments.” Believe me, she really accented the word “safely.”

“Because I plan to get hold of the cat tonight and keep him here,” came the rather startling reply.

“But Brains!” I objected. “Won’t the blackmailer release the ledgers to the police if he doesn’t get his money?”

Brains nodded. “In time he would. But not right away. Understand, he won’t realize what’s happened to the cat. Did a predator get to it? Was it hurt somehow during the journey? Keep in mind that all payments have arrived on time. Suddenly the cat disappears. Why? He won’t know. It’s unlikely you’ve gone to the police, so he has nothing to fear from them. The cat was his sole means of

communication with you, too. He will begin to panic, which could work well for us. At any rate, you should have several days grace before he does anything so drastic as to send the ledgers to the police — his only hold over you.” Neither Mrs. Ray or Mrs. Evansworth looked particularly relieved. Brains went on hastily, “And we should have his identity well before then.”

“You’re taking some mighty big chances, Barclay,” Mrs. Ray said disapprovingly.

But Mrs. Evansworth shook her head. “No, Myra, it will be a profound relief not to steal any more money. I’m in deep enough as it is.”

Mrs. Ray gave her sister a sympathetic look, then nodded. “Yes, that’s true.” She drew herself up. “Very well then, we shall keep the cat here.”

“Provided we can catch it,” I added.

“It should not be a problem, Op — uh, Jimmy,” Brains said, catching himself quickly. “I believe I can construct a trap the cat won’t be aware of. But I need to be back at the lab to do so.”

After a bit more talking, we took off. About an hour later we were back at Brain’s house. After we went in and greeted his parents, Brains directed me to go to the Crestwood *Ledger* and see if anything new had developed on the missing pearls. “Knowing Chief Hadley,” he said scornfully, “I doubt seriously if anything has. But it never hurts to stay on top of things.”

“Right, Chief!” I said and soon took off on my

bike. I kept a wary eye out for Tuffy and his bunch, and stuck to Brain's secret routes. But there was still no signs of them, to my profound relief. At the *Ledger*, Lew informed me that no progress had been made, in spite of Brain's deductions. "They're keeping an eye out for anyone who fits the description," Lew told me. "But there's been no signs of him yet." I thanked him and went on. This time I went on home.

It was nice to have my mother's cooking again. I told my mother and Ann about how we went swimming and fishing at Lake Carmine, and about Mrs. Evansworth. I said nothing about last night's adventures, but I kind of got the impression that Mom could tell something had happened.

Later on in the afternoon, the phone rang. It was Brains. "Jimmy! Get over here, fast!" he practically barked. I looked at the receiver, puzzled. Brains sounded mad about something — so mad he didn't even bother with our code phrases.

On my way over to Brains, Stinky Green, who had taken over my route while we were out of town, stopped me. "Hey Jimmy!" he called out. "Gotta say, I'm surprised!"

"About what?" I asked, only half paying attention. I was still wondering what had made Brains so angry.

"Don't you know?" he asked in amazement.

"Know what?" I replied a bit impatiently.

Stinky pulled out one of the rolls of the *Ledger*,

took off the rubber band, unfolded it and showed me the front page. There, under a large photograph of Tuffy, Stony, Bill and Heather, was the headline:

NEW DETECTIVE AGENCY RECOVERS STOLEN PEARLS

I gaped at in astonishment. The article, written by Lew Jarmin, went on about how Tuffy and his bunch had tracked down the thief — one Karl Treacher — to a local pawn shop in Carmine where he'd been attempting to sell the pearls. Karl had tried to flee, but Tuffy tackled him and knocked him flat while Heather got ahold of the police. The picture showed the four of them looking jubilant.

“How come you guys didn't capture this guy?” Stinky wanted to know.

“We've been busy...” I replied faintly. Well, now I knew why Brains was so upset. In kind of a daze, I made my way to the lab.

I tried the secret door, but for the first time since Brains allowed me into the lab, I couldn't get in.

No acknowledgement came over the hidden speaker. Then I heard what sounded like a muffled thud and a crash. Wondering if something had happened to Brains, I circled around the coach house and entered via the regular stairs.

When I reached the top of the stairs, I stopped in amazement. The place was a wreck: chairs overturned, glassware smashed, papers scattered

around. Before I could even call out, there came a scream of rage and Brain's personal chair went sailing across the room, crashing into his desk, knocking both over.

Brains came out and gave an unbroken beaker a vicious kick. Glass shards flew across the lab floor. Brains was breathing hard, his face contorted with rage. His right hand gripped the edge of the door to his inner sanctum so hard that his fingers were white.

Brains didn't say a word, but shot me a glare. I nodded, knowing what he was asking. "Stinky showed me the headline," I said in a very quiet voice.

"Leave, Jimmy," he said. His voice was quiet as well, but in a deadly sort of way.

"But Brains, you told me to —" I started to say.

Brains abruptly picked up a large book and threw it at me. I was so startled that I made no attempt to dodge it. It struck me right in the chest, staggering me back. "I SAID *LEAVE!!*" he screamed. "*BEAT IT!*" Brains added and began looking around for something else to throw. I left, almost in tears.

I walked back down the stairs, my legs feeling like they were made of lead. That was an expression I'd heard often or read in books, but up until now I'd never known just what it meant. Now I did.

I got on my bike and slowly began to pedal off, absolutely no destination in mind, my own mind in a whirlwind.

I've known Brains for a good six years now. I've seen him happy, seen him sarcastic, seen him angry,

like that time Chief Hadley thought we were playing a trick on him when we found the dummy in the car at the bottom of Boiling Pond. But in all the time I've know him, I've never seen him lose control like that. I knew he'd be upset over Tuffy finding the pearl necklace thief, but this was unbelievable. And for him to go crazy and destroy the lab... I wondered if this was the end of the Benton and Carson Detective Agency.

CHAPTER 9: SINISTER DISCOVERIES

After a while, I found myself back at my own house. For a short time I sat on my bike, staring at it, wondering what I ought to do. Then I shrugged, parked my bike in the garage, and went on inside.

“Hello, Jimmy,” my mother greeted me. “What did Brains want?” Then she looked at me again. “Are you all right?”

I looked at her, startled. Then I realized that I probably did have a rather hangdog expression. I bucked myself up as best I could and replied, “Uh, sure Mom! Just fine.” Remembering her first question, I said, “Brains, uh, Brains just wanted to, uh, tell me something.” My face fell again as I remembered just what it was that Brains had told me.

Her eyes narrowed. “Did you and Brains have a fight?”

I shook my head. “No, we didn’t.” Well, that was pretty much the truth. “We just —” I broke off, not knowing how to put it in such a way that Mom wouldn’t pry too much. “Brains — wasn’t feeling too good,” I told her. Then I hurried off before she could ask any more questions.

For the first time I wish there had been some yard work to do. Anything to take my mind off what happened in the lab. I didn’t even have my paper route — as I said, Stinky Green was handling that. So I just lay on my bed, staring at the ceiling. I soon

drifted off. I was on my bike, being chased around town by something I couldn't name but was very frightened of. I didn't even dare look behind me to see what it was. After a while I reached my home and ran inside. But the dream abruptly changed, and now I was trapped in the Hawshorne mansion, being chased by Brains who kept throwing books and chemistry glassware at me, screaming at the top of his lungs, "LEAVE, JIMMY! YOU'LL NEVER LEAVE, OPERATIVE THREE! GET OUT OF HERE! TRY LEAVING MY MANSION, JIMMY, YOU'LL NEVER GET OUT!" and other weird, contradictory stuff like that. I fled down into the basement, where Tuffy Martin, Stony Rhodes and the others were dragging around chains made from giant-sized links, easily as big as they were. They'd pick them up as though the huge links were weightless and slam them against the wall. Then they'd point at me and laugh, saying, "We got you, Jimmy! We got you good!" Stony Rhodes ran up to me, slinging his chain, which then turned into a long string of pearls. "I'm a full partner now, Carson. Brains has booted you out. It's now Benton and Rhodes! See?" He handed me a card, but the printing was mostly gibberish. I could only make out "The Benton and Rhodes Detective Agency." I wondered if it was possible to feel any lower than I did. I slumped against the basement wall — and suddenly felt it give way. I let out a cry as I fell into darkness. Then came a crash as my back hit something. My eyes flew open and I found myself staring up at the ceiling. I'd fallen off my bed.

"Jimmy, are you all right?" I heard my mother

call out. “What was that noise?”

Still groggy, I sat up, rubbing the back of my head. “Uh, nothing, Mom. I just, uh, tripped over something.”

“You should be more careful,” she admonished me. “Now you get washed up. Dinner’s almost ready.”

“Okay,” I replied and got to my feet. I still felt really low, and that dream — or rather, nightmare — sure didn’t help matters any.

At dinner, I just picked at my food, even though it was chicken dumplings and gravy, one of my all-time favorites. I saw both Mom and Dad staring at me, but neither said anything. I could barely even touch the blueberry pie with ice cream.

After dinner, I tried to watch TV. But the comedies and westerns couldn’t interest me, and as for detective stories — forget it! As I tried to find something else to watch, the phone rang. Ann answered it.

A moment later she called out, “Jimmy, it’s for you. It’s Brains.”

For a moment my heart jolted, and I sat up. I was about to dash to the phone when suddenly I was hit by another thought: Oh, so now Brains wanted my help with something, did he? He thought I would come crawling back to the lab on my knees, did he? Thought he could make Stony Rhodes a full partner, did he? Okay, that last thought wasn’t exactly rational, but I was too mad to care. “Tell him I’m

busy!” I yelled at her, gave the TV dial a final flip, and settled back to watch some sort of political talk show — the kind I usually steered clear of.

Before I turned back to the TV, I caught a glimpse of Ann staring in surprise at me. I heard her say something over the phone, but didn’t quite catch just what. At any rate, she soon joined me on the couch. She stared at the TV a moment, then looked back at me. “Since when did you start watching ‘Meet The Press’?”

“Since now!” I practically barked. Ann didn’t reply for a few moments. Then she said, “I’ve had fights with my friends too, you know.”

“So who said we had a fight?” I growled.

Ann laughed. Okay, admittedly, that was a dumb response. Again, I was really too mad to worry about it. To my surprise, she patted me on the knee. “I know you’re mad now, and you think you’ll never speak to Brains again. But you’ll make up sooner or later. You’ve been friends for too long to let whatever it was come between you. You’ll see.”

I didn’t say anything, but I’ll have to admit I as rather touched by what she said. Ann and I have had our share of fights and often snipe at each other, but it was nice to know that under all that she really cared. Before I knew what I was doing, I reached out and gave her hand a quick squeeze, then let go. She gave my knee another pat, but nothing else. For a long while we stared at the TV, not paying the slightest attention to what was going on, both of us lost in our own thoughts. After the show was over, I was about

to go upstairs and get ready for bed (in spite of it not really being that late) when the doorbell rang.

“You want to get that?” Ann said.

I just shrugged. “All right,” I said and got up. When I opened the door, I was amazed to see it was Brains. I stared at him for a moment, open-mouthed. After that scene in the lab, I honestly didn’t think he’d ever want to see me again. For a moment I felt angry again and wanted to slam the door in his face. He must have seen that in my eyes, because he quickly said, “Jimmy, I can understand if you don’t want to speak to me, so please let me speak to you.” He paused for a moment. “Please?” That was so unlike Brains that I felt my anger give way to astonishment.

“Uh, okay,” I replied uncertainly. For a moment I fidgeted, not knowing whether to invite him in or not.

But Brains solved that: “Let’s go for a walk, Jimmy. It’s a nice evening for it.” I nodded and closed the door behind me.

We struck out in what seemed to be a random direction. For a few minutes neither one of us said anything. Then Brains turned to me and started speaking. “Jimmy, I really owe you a big apology for this afternoon. To just say ‘I’m sorry’ doesn’t seem adequate.” He paused, then continued. “I was very angry when I heard that Tuffy and his so-called detective agency had found the pearls. That was supposed to be our case, one I had already performed the groundwork on. In my arrogance, I thought I could soon wrap up Mrs. Ray’s case, then solve this

case easily, almost as an afterthought. I'm afraid I had my pride wounded. And, to my everlasting shame, I took it out on you."

He paused again. I continued to stare at him: I've never heard Brains this apologetic before, not even after we ... I mulled that over a moment, then realized I couldn't think of a time when Brains had last apologized to me. But Brains continued:

"Jimmy, I don't have many friends. No, that's not quite correct: outside of you, I have *no* other friends our age. Sure, I have a few adult friends like Will Parslow or Frothington, but that's hardly the same. You're the only true friend I have. And I know I've been hard on you sometimes, treating you more like a gofer than a partner."

"A 'gofer'?" I asked, puzzled.

He laughed. "Sorry, that's colloquial expression for an assistant. It comes from someone telling you to 'go for this' and 'go for that'."

I nodded. Yeah, that often described the kind of stuff I did for Benton and Carson all right! Brains went on, more soberly. "But don't think for a moment that I haven't appreciated all the work you've done for me — some of it quite dangerous. I certainly haven't forgotten how you saved me last spring! I once told your father that I didn't know what I'd do without you. That probably sounded patronizing to you at the time, but I meant what I said. For all my brain power, I really wouldn't be able to accomplish much alone." He gave me a quick grin. "The 'Benton Detective Agency' would be pretty much a failure."

I couldn't help but grin in return. "Or 'The Benton and Rhodes Detective Agency'?"

He gave me a startled look, then added. "Or the 'Benton and Martin Detective Agency'!"

Both of us were grinning by now, and before you knew it, we suddenly collapsed on the front lawn of a house we were passing by, rolling in the grass, clutching our sides because we were laughing our heads off! Some old woman came out of the house and chased us off, muttering something about "crazy kids these days!"

Before long, we were downtown. Right up ahead I saw our usual drugstore. Brains turned to me and said, "Jimmy? How about a couple of Cherry Fizzes on me?"

Well, never let it be said that Brains didn't know how to make up properly. Or that I didn't how to take advantage of it! "Sounds good to me, Brains."

"I've got a few things to discuss with you, too. Things I think you'll want to hear."

Sounded intriguing, though I knew Brains well enough to want to keep a wary eye on any crazy schemes he might come up with.

Inside, Brains ordered us two Cherry Fizzes. When they came, we retired to one of the booths. Fortunately the drug store was fairly empty.

Before Brains could begin, I asked him, "Brains, how did you know about Tuffy and his bunch finding the pearls? Your paper hadn't even been delivered yet!"

Brains frowned at me. “The police scanner, Jimmy. Remember?”

“Oh.” I mentally kicked myself. Yes, I should have realized. “I wonder how they managed to find the guy.” A moment later another thought occurred to me. “For that matter, what were they doing in Carmine anyway?”

Brains nodded. “That’s exactly what I wanted to talk to you about.” He paused a moment, then went on. “I didn’t have much of an appetite.” I nodded to show that I knew what he meant. “After dinner, Father pulled me aside for a talk. It was a very enjoyable conversation, one that we haven’t had in a long time. I felt much better when it was over, and spent some time getting the lab back in shape. As I did so, I mulled over what I’d found out from the newspaper article. I called Lew Jarmin and found out even more.

“Also, I pondered what we’d found at the mansion last night.” He took a sip from his Cherry Fizz. “Then a lot of the pieces of this puzzle suddenly fell into place. Not everything, I’m afraid,” he held up his hand as I started to say something. “But a lot of it.”

“Well, spill!” I commanded.

Brains gave me a brief grin then continued. “First of all, the stolen pearls. Tuffy and his gang found the thief mostly by pure dumb luck. They were walking down one of Carmine’s more rundown streets when Heather happened to see Karl Treacher in a pawn shop, holding on to what was very obviously a string

of pearls. The others in the group didn't believe her at first, but when they went in and demanded to know where Karl got the necklace, Karl panicked. He tried to run, but tripped over a broom in a nearby aisle. The others pounced on him."

"I can believe that, Brains," I said. "Ann once told me about Treacher, he was in her class. Seems that in addition to being a klutz and a nurd, he was also suspected of stealing from kid's lockers and from the school office supply room. He even tried to date Ann once, but she wanted nothing to do with him."

Brains smiled. "Looks like your sister has good instincts. At any rate, if I'd kept my head I would have realized that I had nothing to be jealous of. Tuffy and his group had not used any deductive ability at all. Just blind luck, which sometimes helps the amateur beat the professional. Which brings us to your second question: what were they doing in Carmine to begin with? The answer is, I'm afraid, obvious."

"Mrs. Ray?"

Brains nodded. "Mrs. Ray and her all-too-loud voice. Now they knew where to go, and since Billy Hix has a car, transportation wasn't a problem. Remember the odd noises we heard in the bushes last night?"

I nodded, my eyes widening. "You mean — ?"

Brains nodded in turn. "Yes, Jimmy. That was obviously Tuffy and the others following us." Brains pursed his lips. "I'm uncertain just how they tracked

us to Mrs. Evansworth's house. Mrs. Ray mentioned her sister, but not her last name. And Carmine is a large city, bigger than Crestwood."

"Maybe they trailed us," I suggested. "Maybe they waited for us nearby. Then when Mrs. Ray drove off, they followed us to her sister's house."

"A good suggestion, Operative Three," Brains said. "But not too likely. For one thing, Billy Hix's car has large headlights, the kind of which even Mrs. Ray couldn't fail to notice following her all the way to Carmine."

"Oh." I was a bit sorry to have that idea shot down, but I could see Brain's point. "What if they planted a tracking device on Mrs. Ray's car?" But even as I suggested it, I saw how silly that was.

Brains must have seen my face because he nodded. "They're not likely to be able to purchase a tracking device here in Crestwood, nor do any of them have the expertise necessary to invent one."

"Creeps! Well, I'm out of ideas," I said.

Brains nodded. "Same here. Well, it matters little. The important thing is that they now know about the Hawshorne mansion. If they go in there blundering around, they could destroy the whole case."

I looked at Brains. "But Brains, what about the weird sounds in the basement? And remember how creepy it felt in there? I seriously doubt they'd stay in there for very long!"

Brains gave me a kind of a sly look. "Yes, one would think so. Now, as for the 'creepy' feeling: I

think I know how that was accomplished.”

I stared at him, surprised. “You mean, there’s a way to cause you to feel scared?”

Brains nodded. “Surprisingly, Jimmy, there is. Of all things, I found it on the computer. I was looking for files concerning human physiology, when I came across an article on low-frequency sound. According to the article, ultra-low sounds, down around ten or fifteen cps —”

“CPS?” I asked.

“Cycles per second. Anyway, when sounds that low are produced, they cause unwarranted fears in the human mind. Very much the ‘something awful is behind me’-type sensation. Consider: this odd feeling first started in the temple. And that temple had a pipe organ. Now, even the largest of pipe organs cannot create a sound that low. But if they were modified...” Brains let his voice trail off significantly. I just nodded. Creeps!

“And the sounds we heard when we started to go down to the basement?” I asked.

Brains shook his head. “Doubtless a recording of some sort, broadcast at a very loud level. Given the state of our nerves, it’s not to be wondered that it frightened the daylights out of us.”

“What can we do about it?” I wondered.

“Easy enough,” Brains replied. “Back at the lab I have some ear plugs we can use.”

“Will it be enough to shut out those really low sounds?” I thought about how some church pipe

organs could make your feet tingle.

Brains shook his head. “Not completely, Jimmy. But it should be enough to muffle the sound to an extent.”

“Okay, but how will we be able to hear each other?”

“I’ve got some pad and pencils. We’ll have to write down any messages. Or, if it’s important enough, we’ll have to risk pulling out an earplug to hear one another. We certainly don’t want to be shouting at the top of our lungs.”

“No, we don’t,” I agreed. Then a thought hit me: “What about your plan to capture the cat tonight?”

Brains shook his head. “Actually, Jimmy, I’ve decided not to go through with it.” Before I could ask, he went on: “We just don’t have the time anymore. That’s my fault; I wasted it when I destroyed, then restored, the lab. In any event, it really doesn’t matter. Now the Tuffy and his bunch know where the mansion is, it is of utmost importance that we return there and capture the blackmailer before they stumble in there and make things worse.”

I nodded agreement, then it hit me: here we were, Brains and I, planning another mission into that creepy mansion. And even though he explained to me what was probably scaring us, that didn’t mean he had it right. What struck me so odd was that this was usually the point where I made all my objections to going back to a place like that. This is where I normally put my foot down and told him I had no

intentions of returning to that place of terror. So why wasn't I doing just that? Why, instead, did I feel an odd sort of excitement? What was wrong with me?

"Jimmy?" Brains said. "Are you all right?"

"Uh, sure!" I answered, snapping out of it. "Just fine! When do we take off?"

"In about an hour," he told me. "We need to return to the lab and get our stuff. Are you finished yet?"

"Just a moment," I said, sucking up the last of my Cherry Fizz, making sure it made the right slurping sounds at the bottom. "Now I'm ready!" Brains grinned and we soon took off.

We entered the lab via the regular entrance. I almost hesitated going back in, remembering the condition of the lab earlier. To my surprise, everything was back to normal. There were no papers or books out of place or broken shards of glass lying around. In fact, as far as I could tell, the chemistry area was completely restored. I stared at it for a moment, then said, "Brains, how did you...?"

Brains noticed where I was looking. "Oh, the chemistry glassware? I have replacements, of course. Did you think otherwise?" He shook his head. "Even I can be a bit clumsy sometimes, Operative Three. So I always made sure I had replacements for every piece of equipment." He shook his head again, a bit dolefully. "Now I'm going to have to go buy some more."

"I guess the computer is still working," I said,

walking over to it.

“Oh, yes! Enraged as I was, even I wasn’t crazy enough to throw things anywhere near it.” Brains soon dug out the box that had our equipment. He added to it two plastic boxes of earplugs, the lock pick he’d wanted, and his pepper-spray flashlight he’d rigged up some years ago.

While he was getting ready, Brains had me do some more work on the computer. This time he had me use the Super Typewriter. As I’ve mentioned once, I hadn’t had typing yet, so I was still pretty much a two-fingered typist. But this was something else again! Thanks to my previous experience with the database program, I knew how to use the special keys to correct mistakes.

But Brains showed me even more amazing stuff, like being able to rearrange entire paragraphs by a process he calls “cutting and inserting”. You could even copy and insert as well. And the feature called “word dropping” let you type for as long as you wanted — no need to hit any carriage return! Instead, the word at the end of the sentence would “drop”— intact! — down to the beginning of the next line. After you were finished, all you had to do was go back and check for any misspelled words or typos, correct them, then send it to the printer. Man, this was typing heaven! And Brains tells me that one day there may even be programs that will check your spelling and grammar for you. I wondered how soon before they’d be out, but Brains said it would probably be some years yet. Anyway, what Brains had me do was to start transcribing our old cases, going back as far

as the *Case of the Missing Message*. “Ours is the very first detective agency to utilize a computer to keep track of its case files,” he told me with some pride. “Later on, once all of the files have been transcribed, I fully intend to use the database program in such a way as to pull up names, addresses and other related facts from the typed files, should the need ever arise. Detective agencies in the future will doubtless have better, faster computers, but they’ll always remember who was the first to use the computer like this. Benton and Carson will be on the lips of all future detectives!” Well, that sounded a bit grandiose to me, but all the same I loved the idea of it!

I was finishing up the *Case of the Counterfeit Coin* when Mrs. Ray called up to us and let us know she was ready to leave. So we loaded the box in her car and took off. As we drove along, I realized that we were probably going to be in great danger, probably more so than on any other case. But I also realized that Brains and I were friends again. And as far as I was concerned, that made me the happiest kid on the planet...

We made good time returning back to the Hawshorne mansion. Brains led the way around to the side of the house, lock pick in hand. As it turned out, though, he needn’t have bothered: we found the door ajar, with one of the smaller panes broken. Obviously, someone had been here before us. Nor was it hard to guess whom. Inserting our ear plugs, we went on inside.

This time we headed straight for the basement.

The door was locked, so Brains went to work with his lock pick. A few minutes later he had the door open and we headed down the staircase. Curiously, we didn't hear the rattling and banging noises we'd heard last night. There was a door at the bottom, also locked. Another few minutes and he had that door opened as well.

What lay inside made us both gasp. For one thing, the basement was enormous. A stone staircase went down about twenty-five feet, so the ceiling must have been thirty feet overhead. There were large benches crammed with chemistry glassware: beakers, flasks, test tubes, glass tubing stretching this way and that. It was a regular mad scientist's laboratory. Other work benches had power tools, soldering irons, oscilloscopes and all sorts of electronics stuff. Off in the distance we could see huge metal cylinders.

But what really caught your eye was the cages: it seemed like there were hundreds of cages, filled with all sorts of animals. Dogs, cats, rabbits, monkeys, reptiles. There was even a horse and a tank with a dolphin in it. And believe me, the smell of all those animals really hit your nose right off the bat!

Carefully, we made our way down to the basement floor. It didn't take Brains long to find what amounted to a master control.

He motioned to me to remove my ear plugs. I did so, and I heard him say, "Come and look at this, Operative Three."

The console was covered with knobs, buttons, switches and dials. There was also a built in tape

player too. After studying it a few minutes, Brains turned down a knob that controlled the sound volume, rewound the tape and hit "Play". All at once we heard the same dragging and banging sound we'd heard last night, though it was, of course, not as loud.

Brains stopped it a few moments later. He flipped a few more switches and adjusted a few of the knobs. "Feel that?" he asked. I didn't, not at first.

A short time later, though, I began to feel more and more nervous. "B-Brains, maybe w-we'd b-better leave." I said.

Brains gave me kind of a shaky grin. "N-no need f-for that, Op-Operative Th-Three. W-watch." He flipped a switch. At once, the nervous feeling I had was gone. I let out a sigh of relief. Brains did the same.

"Low-frequency sounds?" I asked.

Brains nodded and pointed towards the huge cylinders at the far end of the basement. "More than likely, those are the culprits."

We wandered down among the cages. Several of the dogs barked at us. The birds squawked and flapped their wings. The cats just crouched low and kept an eye on us. One of the cats I recognized right away: it was the Siamese cat. Near the cage on a table was what looked like a small purse made from the fur of a Siamese cat and an envelope. Brains picked it up and looked at it. "Hmmm," he commented. "Ingenious. Watch, Operative Three." He mashed one side of the purse against the envelope, much the way a cat would have if it had

rolled on its side. There was a faint clicking sound, then a kind of scraping sound. The clicking sound repeated once again. When he picked the purse back up, the envelope was gone.

“How did it do that, X?” I asked.

“I suspect it works like a magician’s purse: there’s a special kind of spring-loaded tongue that doubtless has something mildly sticky on it. When the cat rolls on its side, it releases the tongue. The tongue presses against the envelope and draws it back inside, then seals itself again. The fur that’s covering it is definitely a synthetic — you can tell that just by feeling it.”

I ran my hand across it, and he was right. In a way I was glad — I hated to think that our blackmailer skinned animals as well.

We kept on walking. Soon the cages formed a “T” intersection. Brains went one way and I went the other. It was kind of hard to make out things in the dim basement light, but I saw up ahead of me some bizarre-looking animals. Wondering just what they were, I crouched down and stuck my face up close — then jumped back!

It was Stony Rhodes, sound asleep. Or maybe not too sound: when he heard my exclamation, he opened his eyes and stared up at me in astonishment. “Jimmy? Jimmy Carson?” I nodded, almost as astonished as he was. He turned his head and yelled at the other cages. “Hey guys! Jimmy’s here!” That was when I found out that the other strange-looking “animals” were actually Tuffy and the others. Stony

turned back to me. “Is Brains here to?”

“Yes, I’m here, Stony,” Brains said behind me, causing me to about jump out of my skin.

“Brains,” Tuffy called out. “Can you get us out of these cages? I don’t know when that guy is going to be coming back.”

“What guy?” I asked in turn, before Brains could reply. “Is there more than one? Do you know who he is?”

Tuffy shook his head. “Naw, I’ve never seen the guy before. He’s the only one that I know of. But that guy was enough!”

“Tuffy, tell us what happened,” Brains said. “How were you apprehended?”

“Yeah, how he’d get the jump on all four of you?” I threw in.

Tuffy began: “We saw you guys go in here last night —”

“Wait a minute!” I exclaimed. “How did you manage to follow us here anyway?”

They all kind of exchanged looks. Then Tuffy said, “Uh, well, we overheard what Mrs. Ray said about you guys investigating something for her sister, here in Carmine. As it happens, a friend of Heather’s —” he jerked a thumb in her direction “— lives here, not far from Mrs. Ray’s sister. We didn’t know that at first, not until we saw her car pull up and you two guys get out of it. We saw you take off, so we immediately began to follow. Stony here —” he turned and shot the twerp an angry glance “— wanted

to run up and demand to know where you were going, but I put the brakes on that! Anyway, like I was sayin', we watched you guys go in here. I decided to wait and see what happened. A short time later, here you two came, running out the door like a thousand devils were on you tail. I didn't know what spooked you, not then, anyway, but I decided we'd better a little bit better prepared for it. So we decided to come back tomorrow during the day and investigate."

"But then you stumbled upon Karl Treacher at the pawn shop," Brains filled in.

Tuffy grinned. "Yeah, we really beat you to the punch there, Benton!"

"But you wouldn't have done so if I hadn't kept insisting it was him," Heather told him in a rather sour tone.

"Yeah, yeah, are you going to keep harping on that?" It was Bill, her brother.

"Well, you kept saying I was nuts, that it couldn't possibly have been him!" she retorted.

"So you were delayed until nightfall," Brains put in, cutting short the argument.

Tuffy nodded. "Can't say any of us were happy about that." He paused a moment, then continued. "Anyway, Bill tried to use his knife to pick the lock, but it must've been rusted or somethin', 'cause it wouldn't budge. So we found a branch nearby and broke the window. Once we were in, none of us had a clue as to where to start looking, or even what we

were lookin' for! We just knew you'd been in here a while. So we started walking all over, poking into things and trying to find something important. Man alive, this place really gives you the creeps! It wasn't long before all of us were sweatin' bullets. Stony, here, about jumped out of skin when he caught his reflection in a closet door mirror. I almost bashed in Bill here when he came out of a room unexpectedly. Well, I think all of us were about ready to call it a night and get out here when Heather came upon this weird miniature church or something. We all went in there, sure we'd find a corpse or somethin'. Then..." his voice trailed off. "I — I don't know how to describe it."

"It was like a wave of fear," Heather said.

Tuffy nodded. "Yeah, a wave of fear. Like nothin' I'd ever felt before. And that was it."

Brains stared at him. "You mean, you lost consciousness?"

"You fainted?" I put in. Hard to believe that of someone like Tuffy!

Tuffy really did look embarrassed. Then he kind of half-snarled, "Yeah, well, you'd've fainted too, Benton!" He paused a moment, then went on. "Well, next thing we knew we were in these cages. While we were kinda getting our wits back together, this man approaches us."

"We couldn't see who he was," Stony added. "His back was against one of those lights behind you."

I turned around and noticed the floodlights for the

first time. Some were aimed in this direction. A person standing with his back to them would really be in deep shadows.

“He looked at us,” Tuffy continued, “and said, ‘So, I’ve finally captured Benton and Carson, plus two of their friends.’ Man, we were all floored by that! So I tried to tell the jerk that we weren’t you, and who we really were. But he ignored us.”

“Musta thought we were lyin’!” Bill said indignantly.

“Anyway,” Tuffy went on, “he said, ‘Now you learn the price of interfering with my plans.’ I asked him, ‘What plans are those?’ but he just turned and walked away. I kept calling after him, trying to get him to explain, but he went up the stairs and left us.”

“How long ago was that?” Brains demanded.

Tuffy shook his head. “An hour, maybe. Who knows? I’ve got my watch on, but I wasn’t exactly paying attention to the time.”

“Well, I did,” Heather commented. “It was about ten o’clock when we went back into to that weird temple and fainted, and around ten-thirty when we woke up.” She looked at her watch. “And now it’s 10:50.”

“He’s been gone about twenty minutes, then,” I said.

“Thirty minutes, Jimmy,” Brains said. “We’ve been talking longer than you think. Well, let me work on the cage locks and see if I can pick them.” He turned back to Tuffy. “Tell us anything else you

might think to be relevant.”

Tuffy glared at Brains. “How? I don’t even know why you guys came —” He paused a moment as the rather obvious question popped into his mind. “Say, just what *are* you guys doing here, anyway? What’s this place have to do with old biddy Ray’s sister?”

“Truth be told, Tuffy, we are uncertain of that ourselves.” Brains was using his lock pick on Tuffy’s cage first. I kept my mouth shut, not knowing just what Brains planned to tell them. “We followed a cat here.”

“A cat?” Tuffy asked, puzzled.

“It’s currently in a cage just around the corner from here.” Brains told him. He looked at Tuffy. “I’m afraid the details of the investigation are confidential. But it is of gravest importance that we talk with the man who is behind all of this.”

“Looks like you’re about to get your chance,” Heather said. “Here he comes now.”

And, indeed, we both heard the door to the basement open and close. Brains still hasn’t unlocked Tuffy’s cage. He stood up and motioned to me. “We need to hide, Jimmy.”

“Hey, what about us?” Tuffy demanded.

Brains turned back to him. “If we are captured, Tuffy, it’s hardly going to do you or the others any good. We shall get you out as soon as we get a chance.”

“How are we going to get any information from this guy, Brains?” I asked.

“Obviously, we must capture him,” Brains replied. “Keep your eyes open for anything we can use. For now, though, let’s get behind that stack of boxes.” He pointed to some that were close to the cages. By now, the man was at the bottom of the stairs and starting to head our way.

Brains and I hid behind the boxes, after first shifting them slightly so we could see and hear what the man might say.

At first he didn’t say anything. Instead, he looked the animals over. He removed some of them, including our friend the cat. Taking them to a nearby vet’s table, he gave them a thorough check-over, using the stethoscope, thermometer, scales and such. Then he gave each animal — a small dog, the Siamese cat, a rabbit and a monkey — injections from some bottles. He looked as though he was going to repeat the procedure with some other animals when Tuffy called out: “Hey mister! How long ya gonna keep us in these cages?”

Brains and I exchanged startled glances. Well, we hadn’t exactly ordered Tuffy not to talk to the man. Both of us held our breaths, wondering what the man would do.

He walked over to Tuffy and answered, “As long as I wish to. And if you think that to be unfair, keep in mind that I didn’t ask you to stick your noses in my business.”

“Hey, we’re detectives!” Tuffy answered. I felt Brains wince. “It’s, ya know, what we do.”

“Yeah!” the others chimed in.

“Hey, what’re you doing with all these animals anyway?” Heather asked.

“And what’s the connection to Mrs. Ray’s sister?” Tuffy threw in.

The man looked at him, puzzled. “Who?” he asked.

Tuffy, in turn, looked startled. “Uh, I mean, ya know, that woman...” His voice kind of trailed off.

The man frowned at Tuffy. “If you’re referring to the Cecelia Evansworth, I should think it to be rather obvious: I am blackmailing her for the money needed for my experiments.”

“Blackmailing...?” Tuffy said, astonished. Then he recovered. “Uh, yeah, blackmailing! What —” But he was interrupted by Stony.

“Experiments? You mean, with all these animals?”

The man turned and frowned at Stony. “Obviously, ‘these animals’. Do you see anything else around here to experiment on?”

“What are you doing to them?” Heather asked.

“Why should I tell you that?” the man countered.

“But why would you need a lot of money for them?” Stony asked. “I mean, can’t you take them to a vet or something?”

It was a pretty dumb question. Oddly enough, however, it’s what caused the man to open up.

“I can hardly do that,” the man responded. “Not if

I want my experiments in intelligence enhancement to work.”

“Intelligence enhancement?” I couldn’t tell which one of them asked that, maybe Heather.

Turns out the man, who still wouldn’t reveal his name, had been working on a means to make animals smart — *real* smart. He’d stumbled upon a way to do this when he was a grad student at MIT. But he could never get the necessary funding to do anything about it. He tried to get a job with some drug firms, but none of them wanted to hire him. “Because of my extracurricular work, my grades were never very high,” he confessed.

Then he tried some chemical companies, like DuPont. But they weren’t interested in him either. Finally, though, he caught the notice of the US government. Some sort of top-secret agency called DARPA. They put him to work and gave him the money he needed. Only, when it came time to show them the results, the drugs he used didn’t work. So the government took back their money and kicked him out. “I was devastated for a while.” Just to make ends meet, he ended up working at the same firm Mrs. Evansworth did. It was there that he found out about her embezzling — and her later reimbursement. “I thought that might come in handy one day, so I made copies of the ledgers. Believe me, it wasn’t easy to do. She really kept a close eye on them. But I was able to sneak out a few of the ledger pages, make copies, and put them back in without her knowing it.” When she later quit and got another job, he didn’t think it mattered anymore. “I almost threw

them out.”

In the meantime, he kept working on the intelligence enhancement formulas, trying to figure out what had gone wrong. He finally figured it out after reading some science article. He used a bunch of letters and words here that I couldn't quite get: stuff like “DNA/RNA unlocking patterns” and “synaptic threshold response speeds”, other weird stuff like that. Well, the short of it was he figured out his mistakes and tried to go back to DARPA to get more funds.

But they still wanted nothing to do with him. He knew he could convince them if he could just get the money to make his formulas. And that's where Mrs. Evansworth comes into the picture.

He remembered the ledger copies that he still had. It took some searching, but he finally traced Mrs. Evansworth back to Carmine, where he found her working accounts payable in another firm. He spent almost all of his money purchasing the Hawshorne place and rigging up the sound effects to discourage visitors.

“I once had a friend who had been a Hollywood special effects man. He told me a lot of his ideas on how to rig what he called ‘fright effects’. He'd even come up with the idea of using ultra-low frequency sounds to scare people with some years ago. Like me, however, he's never been able to raise the money to do anything with the idea. Those huge cylinders —” he jerked a thumb over in their direction, “— were there when I got here. Who knows what they were here for? But I saw right away how I could use them,

along with the pipe organ up in that weird temple Old Man Hawshorne built.” He told us that his test run with the equipment almost caused *him* to run out of the house! “That clanging and banging was just me. I recorded the sound of metal chains being dragged across some aluminum ducting while I banged away with a metal hammer on some sheet metal.”

He had just enough money to use the new formula on one animal — the Siamese cat — and so he trained the cat to use the special purse he’d rigged. Now, with the money coming in, he’s been able to start testing the formulas on other animals that he either found or purchased. He got most of them from animal shelters or zoos: broken down animals that nobody wanted. Now he was starting to see the results. “Their collective intelligence has increased considerably. But I still need more money. I need to get a camera and film the results for those pig-headed bureaucrats can see for themselves.” There was, he told them, no chance of getting the money back. “I’ve already spent most of it.”

While he was talking, Brain motioned to me and pointed in the direction of a dark area of the basement. There I could just barely make out what looked like ropes or cables, leaning against some boxes. Carefully, we made our way over to the boxes, both of us wincing at any small sounds we made. But we didn’t have to worry: the man kept droning on and on about his various successes training the animals. Seems he thought the government’s spy agencies could use the animals to spy for them or relay messages to other spies. Some he trained to kill.

“The ultimate assassins,” he boasted. “No one would ever suspect. And they can do so individually or in groups.”

Anyway, Brains and I gathered up the lengths of rope. Quietly, Brains told me his plan: “We must approach him from behind. Operative Three, I need you to create a diversion when I give you the signal.”

“What are you going to be doing?”

“I’m going to loop this rope around his legs. When you cause the diversion, I’ll pull hard on the rope, yanking him off his feet. As soon as I do, we both need to pounce on him and secure him.”

I wasn’t too certain about this plan. I well remembered what happened when we jumped the Joker. But Brains did have plenty of rope with him.

Carefully, I made my way back to the cages, taking care not to be seen. Brains went around the other way, creeping up on the man from behind. The man had just come to a halt to illustrate some point.

Brains whipped the rope around the man’s ankles and signaled to me. I stepped out from behind the cages and called out, “Hey mister, do you know where I might find a Siamese cat?”

The man stopped in mid-sentence and stared at me, dumbfounded. “Where did you —” He didn’t get any further than that, because Brains leaned backwards and pulled hard. The man flew off his feet and landed with a thud. Brains jumped on him immediately and I joined him a moment later. Tuffy and the gang began cheering us on as the man fought

to regain his feet. But Brains had been quick enough to wrap the rope around the man's legs. Then, with me holding him in an arm lock, we got his arms secured behind his back. Finally, panting, we let go of him.

At once the man twisted this way and that, trying to get free, but the ropes held up pretty well. The man yelled some very unsavory words at us, but the gist of it was that he wanted to know who we were. I guess Brains just couldn't resist:

“The name's Benton. Brains Benton.”

I'm surprised he didn't use a British accent.

CHAPTER 10: ESCAPE FROM TERROR

“*You’re Brains Benton?*” the man asked, staring at him in astonishment. Then he closed his mouth and nodded. “Yeah, I should have known. Something about that other kid —” he nodded with his head towards Tuffy “— just didn’t seem right.” He turned back to Brains. “I’d already heard something of your reputation over in Crestwood, so when these kids came snooping around last night — for what I assumed to be the second time — I figured it was you.” He turned once again to Tuffy. “So who are you kids supposed to be?”

They all stared at him in surprise, Tuffy kind of indignantly. “You mean you don’t know?” The man shook his head. “Don’t you read the papers?”

“Haven’t been able to afford one for quite some time. And it’s not like I can get deliveries to *this* place.”

“Oh,” Tuffy said, losing some of his anger. “Well, my name’s Tuffy Wagner, and these guys are part of *my* detective agency!”

“We recovered some stolen pearls just yesterday!” Stony couldn’t resist throwing in.

The man shook his head. “I never realized there were two kiddy detective agencies.”

I think all of us were pretty burned up about being called “kiddy” detectives. But Brains immediately put it aside. “Where are the keys to

these cages?” he asked.

“In my pocket,” the man replied. Brains fished them out, then set about unlocking the cages. I could hear various joints creak and pop as Tuffy and the others began stretching and yawning, getting the kinks out of their bones.

“Okay, Benton, what do we do with this creep?” Tuffy wanted to know.

“Yes,” the man said with a slight smile. “Just what *are* you going to do with me? Turn me over to the police? I doubt it. Once word of Cecelia’s latest round of embezzlement gets around, she’s going to be hauled off to jail faster than you can blink an eye!”

“Well, you’re not going to be in such good shape yourself!” I retorted. “Better say goodbye to any secret government agencies that might want you or your super-smart animals!”

“Jimmy is correct,” Brains added. “All of your work here will have been for naught if you go on trial. Would you prefer that to happen?”

The man looked at him. “No, obviously I wouldn’t. What are you proposing?”

“Nothing as of yet,” Brains replied. Then he gestured to myself and the others. We followed Brains over to a far corner of the basement.

“Well, Benton, you got something in mind?” Tuffy demanded.

“We need to figure out what to do from here,” Brains said. “We’d solved the mystery, for all intents and purposes, save for the man’s name. But we

haven't accomplished what we need to do: restore the money to Mrs. Evansworth so she can put it back in her firm's accounts and make sure that no word of her embezzlement gets out so that she won't be arrested."

"Creeps, Brains, how are we going to do that with this guy running around?" I asked.

Brains paced back and forth. "I'm not certain yet." He began gnawing on a knuckle.

"Maybe we ought to just leave him alone," Stony suggested. "I mean, he can't get any more money from Mrs. Ray's sister, can he? I mean, now that we know all about his operation here."

"He still has the ledger copies, Rhodes," Heather said.

"Correct," Brains agreed. "She would still be open to further blackmail."

"So what are we going to do?" I asked.

Brains paced back and forth a bit more. The he said, "Well, we could —" But we never found out what.

The man spoke up again: "What you're going to do," he told us with a maniacal laugh, "is to die! More victims of Old Man Hawshorne's crazy house!" We stared in dismay: the man had freed himself from our ropes. Then he started unlocking the cages, moving faster than we would have expected. For a moment we watched him do so, puzzled. Then the man's intentions became clear to Brains, if not to us, and he called out, "Stop him!"

“Too late, Benton!” the man said. He turned to the freed animals, who were milling around. “Group Alpha!” He pointed towards us. “Enemies! Attack! *Kill!*”

The animals didn’t hesitate. They raced towards us immediately. “Scatter!” Brains called out, and we did.

Brother! If you’ve never been chased by a group of dogs, cats, birds, raccoons and even a horse, let me tell that I sure don’t recommend it! We ran all over the basement, just barely managing to avoid being tackled by a dog or jumped on by a cat. The man was laughing at us, clapping as his animals nearly caught us. But our luck couldn’t hold out for long. I tripped over something and went sprawling. Moments later two dogs landed on top of me, and a cat began attacking my scalp. I saw the horse butt into Heather and send her into Tuffy and Bill. They ended up in a heap, with several of the birds dive-bombing their faces. Stony actually had a good idea: he managed to reach the cage he’d been in and crawled back inside, yanking the door shut. For the moment he was safe. I couldn’t see Brains at all. Meanwhile I was yelling in pain as one of the dogs sank its teeth into my arm and the other was trying to get to my throat. But the first dog was unintentionally blocking him. Even so, I thought I was pretty much a goner when a deep humming noise filled the air. The animals stopped their attack at once and began to back off, whimpering.

“No!” the man cried out. “Get away from there!”

Holding my bleeding arm, I got up and looked

towards the console. Sure enough, there was Brains, working the controls. Brains turned a knob. “T-this will k-keep your an-animals away f-from us!” he told him, teeth starting to chatter.

Mine were, too. So were the other kids. Even the man was looking more and more nervous. “D-doesn’t m-matter,” he said. “I-I know th-that the f-fear isn’t r-real!” He picked up a metal bar from the floor. “G-get away f-from th-there, or I’ll b-bash your b-brains in!” He began to move towards Brains.

Brains punched a button, and the chain-dragging, metal-banging sound started.

“St-still n-not going to d-do you any g-good, k-kid,” he said. “The n-noise doesn’t b-bother m-me any!”

But from where I was standing, I could see a certain glint in Brain’s eye. “Who s-said it was f-for you?” Brains replied.

The man stopped, staring. So did I. For all at once the animals went from cringing to going crazy! All at once they began attacking everything in sight, including one another. They were panicked out of their minds.

“Jimmy! T-Tuffy! B-Bill & Heather! B-back to the c-cages like S-stony!” Brains cried out. And believe me, we didn’t waste any time obeying. Tuffy and I shared one cage, Bill and Heather the other. There was just one left that was large enough for Brains. “B-Brains! C-come on!” I yelled.

“B-be right th —” then he broke off. “Oh, no!” I

heard him cry. "I've g-got to s-save him!" It was hard for me to see anything from the low cage.

Then Tuffy grabbed my head and tilted it up. "J-Jimmy," he said, "l-look!"

I could just make out the top of the stairs. The man had run up them, trying to get to the basement door — and he was being pursued by nearly every freed animal there! I guess they all knew where the exit was and were trying to get to it as well. As I mentioned before, the stairs have no banister of any kind. Even as Brains tried to shut off the sound effects, the man yanked open the door just as the first of the animals collided with him. He hung on to the doorknob and was carried out over the thirty foot drop. "Help me!" he cried out. Then he slammed into the concrete wall with enough force to make him let go. I turned away and Tuffy let out a hiss as we heard a thud a moment later. By then Brains had switched off the sound effects.

The cages didn't automatically lock when closed, thank goodness, so we were able to emerge moments later. We could hear the animals going up the stairs. I wondered if the other door was open so they could get out.

We went over to the man. His head was at an unnatural angle. Brains was already there. He turned to us and shook his head. "His neck snapped when he landed," he told us in a low voice. He shook his head some more. "I'm sorry. I honestly didn't mean for that to happen. I thought if the animals went crazy, he'd be too busy trying to bring them under control and we could escape."

Tuffy just sighed. “Not your fault, Benton. And besides, he meant to kill us.” He pointed to his scratched face and bleeding skull. “Well, at least we don’t have to worry about him blabbing to anyone. Let’s destroy those ledger copies and get out of here.”

“Uh, guys.” It was Heather. “That might be a problem...”

We followed her gaze to the top of the stairs. The animals had come back down the other staircase. Obviously, the upper door was still closed. With the sound effects off, they had regained their nerve and were now looking at us, growling or hissing. It would seem that the order to “kill the enemy” was still in effect!

Brains knew what to do, though. He waited until all of the animals were down off the stairs. The rest of us picked up boards and pipes and used them to keep the birds away. Then he turned on the sound effects machine, but with the tape recorder off. Once again the fear generator made the animals crouch and whine. Brains and I searched for the ledger copies. Fortunately, the man hadn’t made any particular effort to hide them. They turned up in the nearby desk. Near as we could tell, they were all there.

The next problem came when we approached the animals, who were now huddled by the base of the stairs. Whenever we came close, the dogs would growl and bark, the cats arch and hiss. The horse whinnied, raised back and lashed out with its hooves. We backed away again. They didn’t seem eager to attack, but they sure weren’t going to let us get close to the stairs.

“We n-need a w-way to drive them away,” Brains said.

“C-can’t you inc-crease the n-noise on th-that machine?” Tuffy asked.

“It m-might j-just make it w-worse,” Brains replied. “If th-they become t-too sc-cared, they m-might attack us an-anyway.”

“And if w-we t-turn it d-down,” I added, “th-they will g-go back to attacking us!”

The fear the machine was inducing in us sure wasn’t helping us think.

“Th-there’s really only one-one thing w-we can d-do,” Brains said.

“Wh-what’s that?” I asked.

Brains went back to the control console and turned off the sound. Once again the fear promptly evaporated. The animals got up and began to approach us once more.

“Lead them away!” Brains shouted at us. “Then circle back to the staircase!” Brains started to run to the far wall. We didn’t waste any time joining him.

We ran a full circle around the basement, the animals hard on our heels. The animals must have sensed what we were planning on doing — after all, they were a lot smarter now! — so some of them, including the horse, tried cutting back across to the staircase. Fortunately for us, they were hindered by the various cages and the control console, though the horse leaped that. But we still beat them to the stairs, but only by a few seconds.

We scrambled up as fast as we could, still swinging our boards and pipes to keep the birds away. In some ways, they were worse than the other animals. The birds were able to scratch most of us, no matter what we did. The door at the top had rebounded from the basement wall. With me holding on, Brains was able to reach over and pull it back as Tuffy and the rest scrambled up the stairs. I used my board and bashed back one bird as Brains yanked the door shut. For a short time we sat in the darkness, panting. Behind the door we could hear the animals scratching at the door, whining. They were pretty put out about not being able to reach us! Finally, we got to our feet and began trudging the rest of the way up the stairs.

I heard the doorknob rattle, then Heather said, “Uh-oh.” She rattled the door some more. “Guys, it’s locked!”

CHAPTER 11: THE SURPRISING DONATION

Stony groaned. “Now what?”

Bill joined him, “We’re trapped! Trapped!”

“We’re all gonna die here!” That was Tuffy.

“We can’t go any further, and we don’t dare go back down.” And that was Heather.

Brains sighed. “Let me get up there, Heather. I can get us out.”

“And just how are you gonna do that, Benton?” Tuffy demanded.

“Simple,” Brains replied, an island of calm in the midst of all our panic. “I’ll use my lock pick.”

Brains pulled out his pocket flashlight and switched it on. He made his way to the top of the stairs, the rest of us crouching to one side or the other to let him by. Since Brains had opened this door before, though from the other side, it didn’t take him long. A few minutes later we were outside. I was surprised to see the sky still full of stars. It seemed like we’d been trapped in that basement all night!

Looking back at the old place, I felt like I could go the rest of my life without ever seeing it again. Just then Heather spoke up. “Guys, what are we going to do about those poor animals? We can’t just leave them down there to starve to death.”

“Or worse,” Brains put in. I knew what he was

thinking: that dead body down there.

Tuffy nodded. “Yeah, we’d got to let someone know about whatisname’s death.”

Once more Brains paced back and forth. “We’re going to need an adult’s help for this.” The others, including myself, began to protest. Brains held up his hands. “Sorry, but there’s really no way around it. We’d only be able to do so much by ourselves. But, I think I know just who to contact to help us.”

“Who, Brains?” I asked.

“Lew Jarmin,” was Brain’s answer.

“Jarmin?” Tuffy asked. “The reporter? I thought he’d be the *last* person we’d want in on this!”

Brains shook his head. “No, I think we can trust Lew to be discreet on this. In fact, if we slant this right, we can tell the truth in such a way that it draws attention away from Mrs. Evansworth.”

This was the first time I’ve ever heard Brains want to tell anything other than the truth. But at least I understood why.

“Let’s get back to Mrs. Evansworth’s house,” Brains said. “We need inform her of the events as well.”

We made our way back to her house. By now we’ve gone over this route so many times that it hardly took us twenty minutes.

Mrs. Evansworth was surprised at all the extra guests, but she soon got everyone refreshments.

We took turns filling her in on the night’s events,

but Brains did most of the talking. She seemed very relieved to hear that her blackmailer was dead. When Brains gave her the photocopies of the ledger pages, she gave him a big hug, much to his embarrassment! Then Brains asked her if she knew the man. As usual, he gave a very detailed description of the man.

Mrs. Evansworth blinked her eyes a few times, cocked her head, and said, “You know, I wonder if that was Mark Stanton. He worked in the accounting department at the previous firm. I remember some of my friends telling me how they’d often overheard him muttering to himself, often naming chemicals and things like that. One time, one of my friends came into his office and found on the desk papers covered with what looked like chemistry equations and formulas. Mark about had a fit when he caught her in there looking at them, and ordered her out of the office in no uncertain terms.” She paused for a moment. “It’s very possible that he found out what I’d been up to. I’d been careless a few times with the doctored ledger book pages, so if he knew what to look for, he could have stolen them and made copies without my knowing.” She shook her head. “But without really seeing him, there’s no way I can say that it was him. It sure sounds like him, though.”

After filling in Mrs. Evansworth, Brains wasted no time calling Lew Jarmin. Lew wasn’t exactly thrilled at being woken up close to midnight, but he became a lot happier when Brains let him know that he could be in for the scoop of a lifetime if he were to come to Mrs. Evansworth’s house in Carmine. Lew knew that Brains never exaggerated, especially when

he made statements like that.

While we waited for Lew to arrive, Mrs. Evansworth treated our wounds. Even Tuffy was in awe of the bite on my arm. Most of the others just had bruises or scratches from the birds and cats. Mrs. Evansworth treated it with one of those disinfectants that sting like crazy. Even so, she advised me to get it looked at by a doctor when we got back to Crestwood. I winced at the thought of that. Mom wasn't going to like it, either.

When Lew arrived, he was very surprised to see that it was more than just Brains and myself. Brains didn't waste any time bringing Lew up to date. After he finished, Lew let out a whistle. "So the body of the presumed Mr. Stanton is still down in the basement with a bunch of half-starved animals?"

Brains nodded. "Though it's hard to say whether the animals have been fed recently or not. We can only hope that they have. So whatever we decide to do, we'd better do it fast."

Lew agreed. "Well, you've dropped a bomb in my lap and no mistake, Brains. But if I report this, I'll have to write about Mrs. Evansworth being blackmailed and for what reason."

Brains looked at him. "Do you? This is where I was hoping you could help us." He paused a moment, then went on. "Consider, sir. You already have a remarkable story in your hands: an almost literal mad scientist who found a way to increase the intelligence in animals in order to be used by a secret government agency. He is found dead in the basement of a house

reputed to be haunted, having apparently fallen to his death, his animals still on the loose. There is apparatus suggesting that he was deliberately trying to scare away any unwanted visitors. Granted, those running a thorough investigation may well wonder just where he got the money to fund it all. Yet, in the long run, that part is going to be considered of little importance to the fact that of *what* he was doing. And now that we've retrieved the ledger photocopies, there is nothing that would lead them back to Mrs. Evansworth. I've even removed the trick pouch rigged up for the cat." He pointed to where it lay on one of the end tables. Lew picked it up and examined a moment, then set it aside. "In his own way, the possible Mr. Stanton has laid down most of the groundwork for keeping Mrs. Evansworth's secret."

Lew held up a hand. "Okay, Brains, I'll grant you that. I can see nothing but harm from revealing the source of his money. Although," he rubbed his chin, "the whole idea of enhancing a cat's intelligence and turning him into a courier would make for newsworthy item! Especially that trick purse or satchel. But," here he gave us all a wink, "without any proof to back it up, I could hardly report on it now, can I?"

Brains grinned. "I thought you might see it that way, sir."

"But how are we going to let the authorities know about the body and the animals in the basement?" Lew asked.

"I've thought of a solution to that. Tell me what you think of this."

Hardly a half-hour later, Carmine's police were swarming the area around the Hawshorne mansion. News crews, even TV crews, were there as well. Brains, Tuffy, Bill, Stony, Heather and I were giving each of the reporters an earful about how we'd come across the body and the animals. It was all part of the story Brains had worked out.

According to Brains, Tuffy and the others were dared by Heather's friend to go out to the Hawshorne place and explore it at night. In light of their recent success recovering the stolen pearls, Tuffy agrees. They go out to the place and explore it the way Brains and I did. And are scared off the same way.

But Tuffy decides to go back and investigate a second time. This time there's no feeling of fear, and Tuffy wonders why. So he goes down into the basement, the one area he hadn't explored the previous night. He's captured by Stanton and put into a cage. The others worry about him, so Heather contacts Brains and me. We talk Mrs. Ray into taking us out here, since this is where her sister lives anyway. That's the just about the only mention of Mrs. Evansworth in the whole narrative. Anyway, after dropping us off, we meet up with Heather, Bill and Stony, and make our way to the mansion. Inside, we become subjected to the feeling of fear and run out. However, in our panic, we run down into the basement by mistake.

There we meet Mark Stanton. He turns off the fear machine and we soon find out what he was up to — after Brains manages to deduce most of it. Stanton

then uses his animals to herd us all into cages. But before Brains goes in, he manages to switch the machine back on again. The fear, with the loud banging, causes the animals to go berserk. While we hide in the cages, they chase Stanton up the stairs. As in real life, he ends up swinging out on the door and banging against the wall, then plunging to his death. Brains manages to get free of the cage and switch off the machine. This causes the animals to calm back down. But — according to Brains — the animals had been given an order to attack us if we tried to escape. Brains turns the machine back on, leaving the banging sound effects off. The fear effect cowers the animals, but, as in reality, they do so by the stairs. So Brains has to shut the machine off yet again and we lead the animals on a merry chase around the basement and back to the stairs again, where we race up to the basement door, but not without further attacks, which is how I got mauled by the dogs and scratched by the birds and cats.

Once we were outside, we raced to Mrs. Evansworth's house to call the police. Brains contacted Lew Jarmin so that we would have a reliable adult to as well to affirm our story so the police wouldn't think we'd dreamed up the whole thing. As if our wounds wouldn't be enough!

I have to hand it to Brains: it was the cleverest mixing of truth and fiction I'd ever heard. And once Lew vouched for us — plus the fact that the Carmine police had read about our past adventures — they bought the story without any trouble. And from what we found out later, the US government paid the

Hawshorne place a visit as well. Things get a bit hazy after that.

Lew tried to find out what was going to be done with the animals, and a friend of his who works for Carmine's local newspaper told him that the animals, the "fear machine", all of the chemicals and formulas, all of the papers Stanton had written, were gone. Vanished. No trace was ever found. That's not all: both the police and the newspapers were told "not to make too much out of it" unless they'd like to have the IRS do a thorough investigation of their respective businesses. So the one-day wonder of the Hawshorne mansion incident was very quickly replaced with other stories. "The government's covering the whole thing up," Lew told us in disgust.

"They confiscated all of Stanton's hard work and are probably continuing his experiments in a top-secret facility someplace."

Brains agreed. "Yes, that's likely." He shrugged. "But there's little if anything we can do about it."

I nodded as well. But for me, though interesting, it really wasn't as important as what happened with Mrs. Evansworth.

The blackmailer had been stopped, but she still needed to replace all of the money taken from the firm she worked at. And that's where this gets surprising!

That same night, Heather took Mrs. Evansworth aside and asked her how much money she needed to put back in the accounts. After Mrs. Evansworth told her, she met in a kind of huddle with Tuffy, Bill and

Stony. Brains and I looked on, puzzled, as whispered argument broke out, then ended with Heather threatening to bash all their heads in if they didn't agree with her! The whole group went back to Mrs. Evansworth and told her that they would use the reward money for the stolen pearls to help her reimburse the company accounts.

"It's not as if," Heather said with a kind of glare at the others, "it's going to use up *all* the reward."

"Just most of it," I thought I heard her brother Bill mutter, but I could have misunderstood him.

Anyway, Mrs. Evansworth was moved to tears and gave them all a big hug, kissed each one, thanking them over and over. Tuffy turned several shades of red at being kissed like that and kept asking her not to make a big deal out of it. It was all Brains and I could do to keep from laughing. Still, both of us were very surprised by Heather's generosity. I guess there was more to her than either of us thought. But our surprises didn't end there.

"You can count me out of your detective agency, Tuffy," Heather told him. "I have better things to do with my time than being locked up in cages and pursued by deadly animals."

"Same here," Bill said. "I've had enough of this."

"Me, too," Stony put in. He turned to us and said, "I'm just as glad you never took me on at your detective agency, Brains!" He shook his head. "If this is what you guys go through, you can keep it!"

Tuffy turned on them angrily. "Ah, you bunch of

lilly-livered cowards! We get two successful cases under our belts and now you want to quit? Fine! G'wan, scram! Who needs ya? I can always find others!" They went out Mrs. Evansworth's front door and began trudging towards Heather's friend's house. Tuffy looked after them, a despondent look on his face. "I don't know, maybe it's just as well," he muttered to himself. "I don't think I was cut out to be a detective anyway."

"You needn't be so hard on yourself, Tuffy," Brains said. I looked at him in surprise. "All things considered, you did pretty well on your first case. And you showed some initiative in following us to the Hawshorne mansion, let alone going inside in spite of all the rumors and stories about the place."

Tuffy gave Brains a feeble grin. "Appreciate the nice words, Benton, but you can't save them. We didn't solve that first case with anything other than blind luck — and we almost didn't solve it at all. It was only thanks to Heather being so insistent. And in the Hawshorne place, it was dumb luck again that we ended up down in the basement and not outside — and only because Stanton thought he'd captured you guys. Actually, it was you two who really showed guts in coming back to the place after having been scared like that. Have to say I admire that. Don't worry about me picking on either one of you any more — you guys are aces in my book." He turned to go.

"All right, Tuffy, fair enough," Brains replied. "Still, I might need you for, shall we say, off-the-record information. You seem to know how to keep

your ear to the ground, as it were.”

“You mean, like an informant?” Tuffy asked.

Brains shrugged. “If you prefer.”

Tuffy snorted. “Informants get paid, you know.”

“That depends on the value of the information,” Brains said in turn. “In any event, it’s just a thought.”

Tuffy hesitated. “Well, I won’t say no. Just: we’ll see.”

Brains nodded. “Good enough.”

Tuffy went out the front door and headed after his friends.

Before long Mrs. Ray showed up as well. Her sister took her aside and began filling her in on all that had happened, including getting the money back. Mrs. Ray was very pleased and chatted happily with her sister. On the way back home, though, she said to us, rather angrily, “Well, it took you two long enough! I expected much faster results from the *esteemed* agency of Benton and Carson! Nor did you two get the money back, either. It took Martin’s group to do that.”

Oh, brother! It’s a wonder she didn’t accuse of us being in cahoots with Stanton as well! I glanced at Brains. He was just rolling his eyes. Catching my look, though, he gave a wink. I grinned back. Yeah, things were back to normal again.

Once we arrived back home, she rummaged through her purse. “Well, I’d better give you a check for your services.”

“No need for that, Mrs. Ray,” Brains said. I gaped at him in surprise. I have to say, Mrs. Ray did as well. “It was an honor to serve you and your sister. You’ve always been like family to us. It would be rude to accept any money from you.” Brains nudged me and I opened the car door. We both slid out.

“But — but...” Mrs. Ray sputtered, her purse still open.

“It’s been a long night, Mrs. Ray, and we’d better get some sleep. Jimmy and I look forward to one of your large breakfasts in the morning.” Which wasn’t that far off: it was already three A.M. Brains closed the door and we went on into his house.

I wanted to ask Brains why he was being so generous, but I was just too tired. My arm was hurting as well. We barely had time to put on our pajamas before we conked out on the beds. We didn’t wake up until around two in the afternoon.

By then, Lew’s story had made the morning headlines. Lew told us later it was a real “stop the presses!” moment. Whatever the government did to the Carmine news agencies, they overlooked Crestwood’s. And the Crestwood *Clarion* played it to the hilt! All of us, Tuffy’s “detective” agency and ours, were paraded as local heroes for stumbling on Mark Stanton’s sinister animal-intelligence-boosting scheme. But, not one word about Mrs. Evansworth or the courier cat.

I ended up having to come home and have a long talk with Mom and Dad about the whole thing. As usual, Mom wanted to ban me from ever having

anything to do with Brains, especially after she saw my arm. Ann just gave me a grin. I nodded back to her in return. She knew Brains and I had patched things up before the night's events took place. She was even concerned about my arm. Speaking of which: yes, I had to go to the doctor's and get some shots and some stitches. Frankly, they hurt more than the dog bite itself. Finally, near sundown, I managed to get back to Brain's lab. Inside, Brains let me type in some of the details of the case into the computer. But he did most of that himself.

At last, I got to ask Brains about his curious generosity to Mrs. Ray.

"Isn't it obvious, Operative Three?" he asked.

"Would I be asking if it was?" I retorted.

Brains put his hands behind his head and whistled a few bars of "Farmer in the Dell." Then he turned to me with a grin. "Don't you see? I didn't accept any money from Mrs. Ray for one very good reason: now she owes us a favor. A *big* favor! One I plan to collect some day..."

I could only shake my head in wonder. That Brains! Always thinking ahead.

I could hear the police scanner in the background. Even as Brains was talking, there was something about a theft of a valuable book on loan to the Crestwood library: a first edition, signed copy by some author or other. When Brains finished speaking, he cocked an ear towards it. Then he turned back to me and nodded. "Got some time, Operative Three?"

I nodded back.

“Then let’s get our gear and head over to the library. The game’s afoot!”