

A BRAINS BENTON MYSTERY

# **BRAINS BENTON #8**

## **A SCANDAL AT CRESTWOOD COLLEGE**

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**COVER AND TITLE ILLUSTRATION  
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of Brains Benton fiction.

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COLLEGE

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## CHAPTER 1: OUR NEW CLIENT

It was getting darker now. Lightning crackled nearby and rain fell in buckets. The sun had long since set, not that you could have seen it doing so; it had been overcast all day. The winds, out of the northeast, were bitterly cold. An almost freezing rain had started about two hours ago. I crept closer to my goal: Crestwood College's Physics building. I had to be careful; there weren't all that many trees or shrubs around. I could be easily spotted if someone was looking for me. And believe me, there was!

My name is Jimmy Carson. I'm the other half of the Benton and Carson Detective Agency. And tonight could easily be my last night on Earth.

I'd probably better bring you up to date. This whole mess started a few weeks ago, just after Halloween. My sister Ann, who is a sophomore at Crestwood College, was having dinner with us that night. Ordinarily, she eats with her "sisters" at her sorority hall, Phi Kappa Sigma. But she didn't like what the cafeteria was fixing that night, so she decided to eat with us. I rolled my eyes when Mom told me the news. I could just imagine what it would be like with Ann talking about clothes, handsome boys, clothes, girl gossip, clothes, handsome teachers, clothes, and other boring stuff. On the other hand, knowing Mom, she'd probably fix us a great dinner. Turns out I was right on both accounts.

During the meal, however — Mom had fixed us a

great chicken and dumplings dinner, along with a frosted blueberry cake — Ann mentioned something odd. She commented on how a lot of her sorority sisters were making surprisingly good grades.

“What’s so odd about that, dear?” Mom asked.

Ann shook her head. “It’s just that these aren’t what you’d call the most studious of girls. I mean, I’ve met some of the brainier types, and these girls definitely aren’t it. What’s worse is the way they sit around in their dorm rooms, bragging out loud about it. But you never see them so much as cracking a single book!”

I looked at her. “You think they may be cheating?”

Ann frowned at me. “I’m not accusing anyone of anything! I’m just saying it’s very strange.”

“Well, some girls are so intelligent that they hardly have to study,” Mom said, trying to calm Ann back down. I just rolled my eyes (when Ann’s around, it’s almost a constant habit). “And you needn’t make faces, Jimmy,” she said to me. Instantly, I started staring at my plate. “I’ve known a few girls in my time that never seemed to study, but aced all of their exams.”

Dad nodded. “Yes, I’ve met a few men like that too.”

Ann shook her head again. “Okay, sure, maybe one or two can be like that. But I’m talking about at least seven or eight girls. Believe me, these girls are always seeing their boyfriends or going to parties and such. I have a hard time believing that they’re natural whizzes!”

I just shrugged. “Sounds like they’re cheating to me.”

“I don’t know,” Ann replied. “Maybe. Just forget I said anything.” She looked a bit worried to me.

That was all she said about it. I wasn’t certain if I should bring this up with Brains or not. Things had been kind of slow of late, since we solved the mystery of the Railway Phantom a few weeks back. Brains was already starting to get fidgety, hoping for a new mystery.

Looking back at it, I probably should have said something. If I had, Brains might have told me to expect something to come of it. But even Brains, with all his deductive skills, could not have foreseen what happened shortly before Thanksgiving: Ann was arrested for stealing exams and selling them to her sorority sisters.

\* \* \*

Immediately after Chief Hadley booked her, she called me and told me to get ahold of Brains. On the way to the police station, I filled Brains in on what Ann had said the other night. As I expected, Brains was annoyed at me for not having mentioned this before.

“It doesn’t matter too much, though,” Brains said. “Father had already told me that the professors at Crestwood were beginning to suspect there was some sort of cheating ring going on. As your sister pointed out, there were too many girls who were passing the

exams with high marks, girls the professors thought were not the most studious they've had attending their classes. Even my father mentioned that he thought his office had been carefully searched a few weeks back. But Father tends to be absent-minded at times, and wasn't certain if he had done it himself. Not until he talked with other members of the faculty and found out that some found their offices in the same condition. And now your sister, who had suspicions of her own, finds herself accused of the crime."

"Creeps, Brains! You know Ann would never do anything like that!" I exclaimed.

Brains stopped his bike and looked at me gravely. "Yes, Jimmy, I concur. So now we must prove your sister's innocence and determine the guilty party." He began pedaling again. "Personally, I suspect a ring leader in all of this, rather than a rogue student breaking into offices and stealing. However, that's mere conjecture. For now, we must interview Ann and find out what she knows. Then I'd like to talk with other members of her sorority."

I shuddered at the thought of entering a girl's dorm. But if it meant helping Ann, I'd do it.



## CHAPTER 2: ANN'S STORY

At the police station, we asked Chief Hadley if we could talk with Ann. “What, are you her lawyers or something?” he sneered.

“No,” Brains answered. “But she did hire us to investigate the charges against her. We need to speak with her.”

The chief blinked at us. Then he laughed. “Well, aren’t you two something! Still playing detective, are we?” He continued to laugh. Then he brought himself under control and frowned. “Now beat it! She needs to talk with a lawyer, not a couple of kids.”

Brains didn’t budge. Neither did I. “Chief Hadley,” he said, and spoke in that commanding way of his, “Ann Carson specifically asked for our help. You may ask her yourself if you doubt our word. I agree that she needs to talk with a lawyer as soon as possible, but for now we need to hear her story first-hand, before the details begin to fade.”

The chief stared at us for a few moments. Then, surprisingly, he nodded. “Fine. But you can only talk to her for fifteen minutes.” He turned to one of the officers. “Take these two back to Ann Carson’s holding cell.” I think the officer looked almost as surprised as we did.

A few minutes later we were back with Ann. She was locked in a small, one-bed cell. The officer unlocked the door and let us in. She smiled when she saw us. “Brains! Jimmy! I’m so glad you got here.”

Brains held up his hand. “Ann, we have only fifteen minutes to talk with you. Please tell us as concisely as possible what led to your arrest.”

Ann stared in surprise. “Gosh, I thought Chief Hadley would give you longer than that!” She shook her head. “Never mind. I’ll tell you what I know. The problem is, it’s not very much.”

“Proceed,” Brains said.

After what she told our family a few weeks back, Ann began to do some snooping on her own. But she didn’t come up with anything. She was about ready to drop it when, while returning a sweater to one of her friends, she found on the desk of her friend’s roommate a teacher’s copy of an upcoming math test. Yes, the girl was one of the “party girls” bunch Ann had told us about.

At first, Ann wasn’t certain just what to do. Here was the proof she needed, but it wasn’t as though she’d caught the girl at her desk using it. Then, too, this didn’t tell her who was supplying the answer sheets to these girls. “I could be wrong, but I seriously doubt they were the ones doing the stealing,” Ann said.

“Appearances may be deceiving,” Brains told her. “Please continue.”

Ann ended up telling her roommate, Susan Parker. Susan told Ann that she needed to tell the sorority president. But Ann disagreed, saying that even though she saw the answer sheet on the desk, it wasn’t sufficient proof. “Besides, it would probably be long since hidden by the time we got back there.

No, I need something even more convincing.”

Ann decided to play detective. I could hear Brains mentally groaning at the thought. I did, too. She started out keeping tabs on the “party girl” bunch, but not trying to be obvious about it. Then, last week, her sleuthing paid off: she followed one of the “party girls” to a secluded location on campus, near the gym. There, she made out the silhouettes of the girl she was following and one other. “They were talking in whispers,” Ann told us. “I couldn’t overhear them, I’m afraid. But I definitely saw one of them hand over some money in exchange for some papers. I tried to see who the seller was, but it was just too dark.” Ann tried to follow the mysterious seller, but the other girl all but vanished. So she followed the “party girl” back to her dorm. “When I got a chance, I snuck into the room and checked. Yes, it was the teacher’s answer key for an upcoming history test.”

Brains nodded approvingly. “Good! You verified that this was indeed a stolen answer sheet.”

Ann shrugged. “It was all I had time for, I’m afraid. I had to get back out and away before she saw me.”

“So how’d you end up here?” I asked her.

“I’m getting to that!” she snapped. Then she went on: still trying to find out who was behind it all, she continued to go back to the same area at night. “No one was there, though,” she sighed. “I guess whoever it was changes the locations every time.”

“Yes, a logical precaution,” Brains interjected.

“So it was back to following the girls again,” Ann

went on. “I’m afraid I wasn’t doing a very good job this time. I could see them look at me now and then. And one of them even came up to me and asked me if I wanted something.”

“What did you tell them?” I asked, alarmed.

“I just said that I’d always admired their group and had wanted to join, but had been too shy about it.”

“Did that work?” Brains asked.

Ann nodded. “Well, it certainly seemed like it. They were very flattered and told me I could come with them on shopping outings when I wanted to. I thought I was making progress, and hoped that if I pretended to do badly on tests, I might be taken to the person selling the tests.”

Boy, you talk about Brains and I taking risks! Creeps!

“So that’s what I did. I deliberately failed a couple of tests, then asked the girls what I could do about it. Before I knew it, they were telling me about a person who sells answer sheets for tests. ‘They don’t come cheap, though,’ one of the girls — her name is Diana — told me. ‘But, if you want, we’ll take you to where she sells them.’ I told Diana I needed an answer sheet for next week’s trigonometry test. ‘She’ll have it for you,’ Diana said. I asked her who, but she just shrugged. ‘We don’t know who she is or what she looks like. And she likes to keep it that way.’ I decided not to push it any further. But when I went with the girls the next night, I took my small flashlight along so I could shine it into her face.

“But that’s not what happened. One of the girls — Carolyn, I think — pointed out the place where our mysterious provider was supposed to show up. I walked to a shaded part of the campus, thinking the girls were right behind me. I really should have let them go on ahead of me, but I guess I was too eager to find out who it was. Anyway, no one was there. I took out my flashlight and began shining it around, but the place was deserted, except for some folders lying on a nearby rock. I went over and examined them, and was puzzled to see that they were all answer sheets for various tests. Further, there was a shoebox nearby. When I opened it up, I was as astonished to see that it was full of money. I couldn’t help picking some of it up and riffling through it: twenties, fifties, one hundred dollar bills. There must have been at least two thousand in that shoe box. I was baffled why the girl who was supplying the stolen answer sheets had just left these lying around like this. Further, where were the rest of the party girls? I had just decided I’d better get out of there when suddenly the campus security people raced in, shining their own flashlights in my face and telling me that I was under arrest for stealing the answer sheets! I immediately denied it, but they said they had me dead to rights, with the folders and the box full of money. But the worst was yet to come.

“I told the sorority president what had happened, but she said the girls I was referring to now told her that *I* was the supplier, and had been doing so for months! Furthermore, my fingerprints were now on both the answer sheets and the money, so there’s no way for me to claim any innocence. And with the

girls testifying otherwise, I don't know what I'm going to do!" Ann ended this almost in tears. I patted her on the back and tried to cheer her up.

"Do not fear, Ann," Brains told her. "Jimmy and I are now on the case. We will not rest until we have apprehended the perpetrator who has framed you for this."

Ann looked at us. "Brains, Jimmy, I —"

But she was cut short by a voice speaking out: "Chief Hadley, I demand to know just what these children are doing in the prisoner's cell!" All of us looked up, startled. We'd been so involved in Ann's story that we hadn't even heard the footsteps coming down the corridor. We saw a very thin man, dressed in a three piece suit and carrying a briefcase, standing outside the cell, along with Chief Hadley. He looked at us through a pair of equally thin glasses, frowning with disapproval. I think he was in his late fifties.

"Okay," Chief Hadley said. "You two have been in here long enough — way too long, in fact. You were only supposed to be in here fifteen minutes, and it's been over a half-hour."

"Who are they?" the man repeated.

Before Chief Hadley could answer, Brains pulled out our card and gave it to the man. "I believe this will explain our presence."

Like many people before him, the man showed surprised as he read the card:

**THE BENTON AND CARSON  
INTERNATIONAL DETECTIVE AGENCY**

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

***Now fully computerized***

SHADOWING  
FREE CONSULTATION  
TRACING OF MISSING PERSONS  
24 HOUR SERVICE

*President:*  
Barclay "Brains" Benton

*Secretary-Treasurer:*  
James "Jimmy" Carson

"A *detective agency*?" the man all but exploded. He looked back at us, then at Chief Hadley. "Are you kidding me, Hadley? You let in some dumb kids who think they're detectives and let them talk to the prisoner? I expected much better from Crestwood's much-vaunted police department!"

The Chief looked embarrassed and angry, though whether it was at us, or at the man, was hard to say. Before he could reply, Brains spoke up. "And who are you, sir?"

The man ignored Brains. He continued to yell at the chief, "Now you get these brats out of here and never allow them to see the prisoner again, or I will not only file charges against Crestwood College, but against Crestwood's incompetent police department!"

Chief Hadley's red face turned a shade redder. Now he looked more angry at the man than at us. "Now, see here Mr. Sprawg, there's no need to be rude. And I was just telling these two that they need to leave *now!*"

Me? I was ready to clear out before we ended up in the cell permanently. But Brains refused to budge. Drawing himself up, he spoke in that official voice of his: “Mr. Sprawg, I demand to know your full name and just what you are doing here. I warn you, sir, that threats or intimidation could result in a counter-suit against yourself!”

There’s something in the way he uses that tone of voice that can make people jump, and it worked just the same this time. The man was taken aback, and stared at Brains in surprise. “Well, for your information,” he replied, “I am Mortimer Sprawg. I am the acting lawyer for the Phi Kappa Sigma sorority, and I am here to talk this young woman into coming clean about her involvement in the theft of exam answer sheets. If she answers honestly, the sorority may drop formal charges and allow her to plea to a lesser charge. I might as well tell you up front that her chances do not look good; the evidence against her is strong!”

“Mr. Sprawg,” Brains replied, “I believe you are aware that she is not legally obligated to respond to any of your questions without a lawyer being present.”

Sprawg’s face flushed angrily. “Oh, and in addition to being a detective, you’re also a lawyer?” he all but sneered.

“I am well acquainted with portions of the law that deal with crime, especially the rights of the accused,” Brains said loftily.

Chief Hadley shook his head. “I hate to agree with the kid, but he’s right, Sprawg. If her lawyers hears



that you've interrogated Miss Carson without him being present, the judge'll throw the case out of court."

Sprawg whirled on the chief. "I'm *am* a lawyer, Hadley! Don't preach to me about the law!"

"But you're not *her* lawyer," Brains pointed out.

Sprawg turned back to Brains and glared. Then he swiveled back to Chief Hadley once more and said, "Hadley, I thought I told you to get these two punks out of here!"

The chief gave Sprawg an odd look, then motioned to us. "C'mon, you two. Time for you to go. But don't worry," he said as I started to object. "No one will question Ann until her lawyer arrives." He gave Sprawg a hard look. "Isn't that right, Mr. Sprawg?"

Sprawg gave Chief Hadley another glare, then said in a choked voice. "Fine! Have it your way! But you haven't heard the last of this, Hadley! Phi Kappa Sigma is run by Howard McKinkin, who retains me. Just be aware of who you're crossing swords with!"

Brains and I exchanged glances. Howard McKinkin! One of the richest men in the state! I had no idea he had anything to do with Ann's sorority. Brains turned back to Ann. "Remember, Ann, you are not entitled to say anything without your lawyer present. Jimmy and I have to leave, but we will be devoting every minute to your case." I nodded in turn.

Ann gave us a troubled smile. "Thanks, Brains. I know I can count on you to get to the bottom of this."

Then she turned to me. “Oh, and you too, Jimmy.”

Nice to be remembered... Then we left the cell.

### CHAPTER 3: A STARTLING CLUE

On our way back to the lab, Brains asked me what I knew about Howard McKinkin. “Not much,” I answered. “Apart from the fact that he’s very rich. I think he lives in the state capitol. You hear his name in the news once in a while, when he’s concluding some business deal or other.” I shrugged. “That’s about it. I was really surprised that he’d ever invested any money in Crestwood College.”

Brains nodded. “Yes, the man keeps a low profile for the most part. I don’t know much more myself, apart from the fact that he lives in the ultra-rich community of Evergreen, which is located, as you correctly pointed out, north of our state’s capitol. The McKinkins were from old European money, much like the Hawshornes. Unlike them, however, the McKinkins prospered, even during the Great Depression. All of the successive heads of the McKinkins are said to be ruthless in their business dealings, and wield a lot of influence, even in Washington D.C. Howard McKinkin, I hear, is every bit as ruthless and cunning as his father and grandfather. You were surprised to learn that he has invested money in Crestwood College. It’s no surprise to me, Operative Three, because I know for a fact that he has money invested in colleges throughout the state. He’s put his money into a great number of fraternities and sororities. Several of his grandsons and daughters go to these colleges, though none are presently here at Crestwood.”

“X, you don’t suppose someone as rich as Howard McKinkin has something to do with Ann being framed, do you?” I asked.

Brains frowned at me as we parked our bikes outside the carriage house where Brains had his lab. “Operative Three, you should know by now that I make no assumptions on a case that’s just been started! I understand that you are worried about your sister, but for now we must put our emotions aside and begin assimilating facts.”

“OK, fine,” I answered. We went inside the carriage house and up the main stairs to the lab. Brain’s lab always impresses me: a cross between a machine shop, chemistry lab and a space ship. Over in the corner was his newest addition: a computer terminal, connected to a small computer in their house. He had another terminal in his “inner sanctum.”

Brains flipped a switch on the side and stood by, allowing it to warm up. While he waited, I asked him, “Well, what facts do we have so far? I mean, apart from Ann obviously being innocent.”

Brains frowned at the monitor, which was showing a lot of text scrolling up it. “Looks like Father came home early and is using the terminal in his den. We’ll have to wait a bit before I can set up a new file for the case.” Then he turned back to me. “To answer your question, Operative Three, not much at the moment. At least, not as far as who the mysterious supplier of the stolen exams is.” He rubbed his rather long nose, one he claims looks like Sherlock Holmes’s nose. And it does, too. “One thing

is certain: whoever is behind this panicked when it was discovered that Ann found out about the thefts.”

“Why do you think that, X?” I asked.

“Obviously, Operative Three: setting up your sister like that, to ‘take the fall’ as criminal parlance would have it, also shut down the main operation: stealing the tests and passing them around to those who would pay for them. Now the instructors are wise and will take precautions against having their tests stolen in the future.” Brains began to pace back and forth. “Our mysterious mastermind apparently decided to cut her losses and quit the game, which will make this much harder for us. She may well go into hiding.”

“Creeps, X, that sure isn’t going to help us get Ann off the hook!” I said.

“No, indeed, it won’t.” Brains started to pace back and forth, gnawing on a knuckle. “Operative Three, we must return to the scene of the crime — the area where Ann was apprehended. There’s a good chance that the campus police have probably overlooked evidence that might be lying around.”

“And if they haven’t?” Though I thought they probably had. Brains had a good record of finding evidence overlooked by the police.

“Then our next course of action is to start interrogating members of Ann’s sorority, finding out if they know of anyone approaching them and asking if they might wish to purchase an exam answer sheet.”

The thought of going to a sorority house gave me

the shudders. “But Brains, wouldn’t they have found out from other members of the sorority? I mean, our mastermind would hardly have approached them herself, would she?”

Brains nodded, “That is true, Operative Three. But she might have at the very beginning. In any event, it is an avenue worth pursuing.”

“Okay, chief, when do we start?”

“Meet me back here after dinner. Try not to be late, Operative Three,” he said with a frown. I guess I couldn’t blame him, I have a bad habit of showing up late. But it’s not my fault! Things usually happen that end up delaying me.

Not tonight, though. Back home, Mom and Dad were in a depressed mood and just picked at their own dinners. I asked them whether Ann’s lawyer had visited her yet.

Dad nodded, but added that the lawyer — a golf buddy of his — didn’t sound too hopeful.

“It’s ridiculous!” Mom exploded. “Ann would never do anything like this!”

Dad just nodded. “We know that, honey. But how do we prove it?”

I wanted to tell them both that Brains and I were on the case. But that might make them even more worried and cause Dad to forbid it. Furthermore, Brains was a stickler about keeping cases like this a secret. I have to admit, though, I was a little disappointed that neither one of them asked for our help. I mean, it’s not as if they didn’t know the great work Brains and I did. It’s been in all the newspapers,

for Pete's sake! Finally dinner came to an end, and I was able to slip out unnoticed. I was back at the lab by seven o'clock.

I went up the secret stairs and found Brains just getting ready. He had his infra-red camera, magnifying glass, his pepper-spray flashlight and a very powerful second flashlight. Close by was a small, cylindrical-shaped thing with a metal plate at one end. I stared at it a few moments, then asked, "Brains, is this a metal detector of some kind?"

He smiled at me and said, "Glad to see your powers of observation are functioning, Operative Three. Yes, this is smaller version of the underwater metal detector we used the other summer at Lake Carmine. Though this is, of course, for above-ground use. I made it more portable by allowing sections to telescope inward, and the metal plate will fold to a small wedge as well. Here, let me show you." He twisted something on the detector's column and shoved both ends together. Then he released something on the disk and it immediately closed to a small wedge, kind of like you see when a card sharp or magician closes a fan of cards. I stared at it, amazed. It was now small enough to fit into one of our knapsacks easily.

"That's keen, Brains!" I exclaimed. He nodded, then placed in the knapsack. "You take this, Operative Three." He handed me the knapsack. It wasn't as heavy as I feared it would be. We both had our coats and gloves on, it was cold outside.

We took off on our bikes a few minutes later. All around us, leafs were falling. When we reached it, the

Crestwood College campus was spooky-looking, with bare trees here and there, others with half-empty. Leaves crunched beneath our feet. We made our way around with the help of the lampposts. But the area we needed to search, over by the gymnasium, was deep in shadow, the way Ann described. Brains turned on his flashlight but kept a hand over the lens, letting small slivers of light hit the ground.

Speaking in a whisper, he said, “Wait here, Operative Three, while I search the grounds. I’d ask you to help, but there’s only one flashlight.” I mentally kicked myself for not having brought my own. Hey, I was pretty good at finding clues too!

Brains searched the rock Ann said she found the exams and money on first, then expanded his search to the surrounding area. In the end, he didn’t find much: a lipstick case, some pieces of trash, a few coins. He used the metal detector next but only came up with a few more coins buried in the dirt, plus an earring. For my part, I could easily understand why our mysterious woman wanted her buyers to meet her here: during the whole time, no one disturbed us. Once, Brains and I hid behind the trees when we spotted someone off in the distance, but no one came near the place.

Looking at our “loot,” which we placed on the rock, I wondered if any of it could really give us a clue to the mystery woman. “Creeps, X, it sure doesn’t look like much!” I said quietly. “Most of this stuff could have been dropped by anyone.”

Brains wasn’t so downbeat. “True, but I’m intrigued by this earring. Why is it here? This is not a



place where people gather or even pass by. So how did it end up down in the dirt?"

"Who knows? Maybe it was some girl and guy and they were, you know, making out..." I blushed even saying it.

Brains frowned, but nodded. "Yes, this could be a spot for such activities, especially during the spring and summer months. It could account for the lost coins and the lipstick case as well. Nevertheless, I will examine them in the lab. And there might be another way they can aide us."

"How's that?" I asked him.

"Let's get back to the lab, Operative Three," Brains replied in his usual evasive manner. "There's nothing further to find in this area." We made our way back to our bikes and took off.

I had to return home, but Brains had me promise to meet him at the lab before school. "Just tell your mother that you'll be having breakfast here. I'll let Mrs. Ray know as well."

That perked me up. Next to my mother, Mrs. Ray, however much a nuisance, was one of the best cooks around.

Back at home, I got my homework taken care of and soon went on to bed. When I told Mom about eating breakfast at the Bentons, she just nodded and said it was fine. Frankly, she wasn't in the mood for cooking lately.

I got up about a half-hour early and rode my bike to Brain's house. Brains met me outside the carriage house and we went up to the lab.

“Find out anything on the earring and other stuff?” I asked him as we went up the stairs.

Brains shook his head. “Not much. Judging by their weathering, the coins have been around there for a few months, possibly a few years. The earring, though...” His voice trailed off.

“What about it?” I asked.

“Come take a look, Operative Three.”

We went to one of the lab benches, where Brains had one of those oversized magnifiers with the lamp built-in. Brains had bought it cheap from one of the department store jewelry counters when they were replacing them with newer ones. He made improvements to it so that it was actually better than the new ones the department store had.

Brains switched on the lamp and had me take a look. I picked up the earring and twisted it this way and that, not really seeing much. It was just an ordinary girl’s earring.

I said as much to Brains. He nodded, “Quite correct, Operative Three, but I’ve little doubt your well-trained eyes have made out the lack of any signs of decay or rust, in spite of the fact that the base the imitation pearl rests in was made from an inexpensive alloy, the kind that corrodes easily when left exposed to the elements. This, in spite of the fact that I found it a good two inches below the area’s loam.”

“Well, creeps, X!” I exclaimed. “It sounds as though someone planted it there!”

“Exactly, Operative Three!” Brains replied with a

triumphant grin. “This was obviously meant for the police to find.” He removed the earring and stuck it in his pocket. “Operative Three, after school today it is imperative that we visit your sister and see if this isn’t one of her earrings. Unless I miss my guess, she’ll probably tell us that she was missing one of them for several weeks.”

“So this was meant to be part of the frame!” I said. “Good thing we found it before the police did!”

Brains nodded. “Yes, Jimmy, it was.” He frowned for a moment, then shook his head. “But whoever planted it obviously had more faith in Crestwood’s police than we did, since it was obviously overlooked.”

Before I could reply, the intercom buzzed.

“Yes, Mrs. Ray?” Brains asked, pressing the button.

“You and Carson get down here at once, if you don’t want your breakfast to get cold!” she snapped.

“At once, Mrs. Ray. We shall sally forth into the early morning dew and partake in your excellent repast,” Brains said loftily.

“Hmmp!” Mrs. Ray replied and snapped off the intercom. I just grinned. It was always fun listening to Mrs. Ray and Brains go at each other.

After breakfast, we took off for school. As is often the case when we’re working on a new mystery, the day passed in a daze. For me, anyway. Finally, we were on our way back to police headquarters where they still had Ann. I knew that Dad’s lawyer friend had been in to see her a few times. Unfortunately, he

didn't hold up much hope.

Seems the case against Ann was almost airtight. They were going to hold a preliminary trial against Ann next week to see if she would be released on her own cognition. After all, it's not like she had a criminal record or anything.

At police headquarters, we caught a lucky break: Chief Hadley wasn't in, and Officer McKennon was on duty. Officer McKennon was a friend of our who had helped us with several of our cases. He allowed us to go see Ann, but warned us not to stay too long. "You never know when the Chief is going to return," he told us. "

We shall be brief," Brains told him. "We just need to ask Ann something."

"Go ahead," he said and we went back to the cells.

Ann was happy to see and began asking at once if we were making any progress.

"Possibly," Brains said. He removed the earring from his pocket. "Ann, is this one of your earrings?"

Ann took the earring and looked at it. A moment later, to our vast surprise, she shook her head. "No, this definitely isn't mine. Where did you get this?"

"I came across it at the location where you were arrested," Brains told her. "We thought it might be yours."

Ann shook her head again. "I wasn't even wearing earrings that night." She gave the earring a closer look. "This does seem familiar, though. I know I've seen someone wearing these."

“Can you recall who?” Brains asked, his nose all but twitching, leaning forward in his eagerness to hear.

Ann’s brow wrinkled as she tried to remember. “No, I’m afraid I don’t — oh, wait a minute!” Her face lit up. “Yes, it was Bethany Morrow! She’s the head of our sorority’s ethics committee.” Ann looked shocked as she said this. “But she’s a real nice person. I can’t imagine that she would have anything to do with stealing and selling those exams!”

Brains and I exchanged glances. In the many cases we’d solved, we’d run up against two-face people before. Yes, Brains and I could imagine such a thing only too well...

## CHAPTER 4: SINISTER CONFRONTATION

Back at the lab, Brains typed into the computer what we knew of the case so far. It didn't seem to amount to much, if you ask me: someone steals the exam answer sheets, sells them to her sorority "sisters," and when Ann snoops around, arranges for Ann to take the blame for it. A search of the area turns up a buried earring that seems to point a finger at one Bethany Morris, a member of the sorority's ethics committee. As Brains pointed out after he finished typing, there's no way of knowing if she really had anything to do with it or not; she may have just loaned the earrings to someone who did.

"It warrants further investigation," he told me. "And I want you to do it," he added.

"Creeps, Brains, why me?"

Brains gave a slight smile. "You have a natural innocence to you that should disarm the ladies, Operative Three."

"Thanks a lot," I grumbled. "What are you going to be doing in the meantime?"

"I plan to check on the backgrounds of Ann's sorority sister. Doubtless most are innocent, but a few may have very checkered histories. One of them should turn out to be the mysterious seller. At any rate, background histories can tell us a lot," he concluded.

I shook my head. "How do you plan on doing that

without getting arrested or something?”

Brains steepled his fingers and grinned. “There are ways, Operative Three, there are ways.” Then he dismissed me with a wave of his hand.

I left the lab and headed over to the Crestwood Daily Ledger and picked up the newspapers for delivery. By the time I finished my route, it was dinnertime. Back home, it didn’t take me long to finish dinner, I almost wish it had. I wasn’t looking forward to talking with a bunch of girls, especially those around Ann’s age. Fortunately, Mom and Dad were preoccupied with what Ann’s lawyer had told them, so I was able to grab my bike and sneak off. The last of the sun’s afterglow was already fading when I reached Crestwood College. Once there, I wasn’t too certain where to go, so I looked inside the administrative building for a college map. I soon found Ann’s sorority dorm and made my way over there.

Inside, I tried to find someone in authority. The place was filled with girls going this way and that. One of them stopped and smiled at me. “Say, aren’t you Ann’s little brother?”

“Uh ... yes,” I answered, not too certain just what to say. I was supposed to be undercover, after all. Or was I? Brains hadn’t really said I should be secretive about it.

“I was trying to find Bethany Morrow. Do you know where she is?”

“Yes, I do! And I think she’s in. Come with me!”

I followed her up to the second floor. As we

walked along, the girl told me how odd Bethany had been acting lately. “She’s been very secretive, too,” the girl went on.

I know girls like to gossip, but this girl was something else. I had quite an earful by the time we reached the dorm room. But it really sounded as though Bethany was the ringleader.

Inside the room, a girl was working at her desk. She had a radio on, I could hear rock and roll music playing. The girl I was with knocked on the side of the door. “Bethany?”

“Yes, Susan?” the other girl replied, turning.

“This is Jimmy, Ann’s little brother. He said he needed to see you about something.” And with that, she turned and left.

Bethany Morrow, who had dark hair and blue eyes, looked at me with suspicion.

“What do you want?” she asked.

I held out the earring. “My friend and I found this out on the campus grounds. I showed it to Ann, and she said it might belong to you.”

Bethany all but snatched the earring out of my hand. “Yes, this is mine! I’ve been looking all over for them, for weeks.” She gave me another suspicious look. “Do you always go looking for earrings?” she asked. “Why didn’t you turn it in to the lost and found department?”

I found my face growing red. “We just — we just found it there.”

“Where?” she asked in a sharp tone of voice.



I hesitated. I wasn't certain if Brains wanted me to reveal where we'd found it. But I could hardly be vague about it, either. "It was in a corner of the gymnasium," I told her. "Brains thought it might be faster if we showed it to Ann, that maybe she might know who it belonged to," I improvised.

Bethany looked slightly mollified. "Oh." Then she shot me a puzzled look. "Over by the gymnasium, you say?" she asked. I nodded. "Weird. I wonder how it ended up over there. Did you find the other one?"

I shook my head. "You're missing both of them?" I asked her.

Bethany nodded. "It's strange that you didn't find both of them together." She shook her head and turned back to her table. "Well, thanks. Tell your friend Brains I said thanks. Let me know if you run across the other one. Now, I've got to get back to work. I've got a ton of work to get done before the semester ends."

"Okay," I said and made my way out of the room.

"Was it hers?" asked Susan, coming along the hallway.

"Yes, it was," I answered.

"Did she say how it got there?" Susan continued.

"Uh, no," I replied. "I didn't ask her."

"Well, you should have!" she exclaimed. "I think it's very suspicious her earring turning up there like that."

I just shrugged as we headed down the stairs. "She seemed puzzled by that, too. Did she report them as

stolen?" I asked in return.

"Oh, how should I know?" Susan seemed impatient.

"Well, wouldn't she have said something to you girls about it?"

"I told you she can be secretive!" she replied. "I certainly didn't hear anything about a missing earring. I'll bet you she lost it on her own. I'll bet you she was up to something when she lost it!" I threw her a look. Susan's eyes were shining with excitement. "You and Brains really need to look into this!" she told me.

"Uh, yeah, we're still looking into a lot of leads," I said. Then I broke away from her and went outside.

I zipped my coat up tight and put my cap back on; it was getting pretty cold now. A north wind was blowing through the almost skeletal trees, knocking down the last of the leaves and stirring up the ones on the ground. It was very dark and eerie.

I pondered what to do next. Other than Susan's gossip about Bethany, I really hadn't discovered much. I hated to return to the lab empty-handed like that. But what else could I do? Brains and I had already scoured the area where Ann had been caught pretty thoroughly. And I could hardly snoop around the girl's dorm to any great degree.

Besides, Brains was already researching the girls' background himself. Still, I felt as though I'd be letting not only Brains but Ann down as well if I didn't try to turn up some other lead. Hmmm, maybe there was something else I could do...

I began walking towards the classroom buildings. I hoped I could discover a clue as to how the test answer sheets were stolen, though I wasn't too certain just what I was looking for. Something out of the ordinary, I guess.

Well, something out of the ordinary happened, all right. I'd just stepped into the dark shadows between two buildings when I was abruptly grabbed and thrust against a wall. Whoever was holding me didn't make a sound. Then others appeared as well, until I was surrounded by these mysterious figures. There, in the dark, it was very hard to make them out. I caught a glimpse of something shiny, and felt something very sharp press against my throat. Then something equally sharp touched my stomach.

I was scared, make no mistake about that! Creeps, what was going on here? Who were these people and what did they want? I found out a moment later.

"Jimmy Carson," a low voice spoke. Low, but unmistakably a woman's.

"Uh, what?" I answered. Then I let out a kind of ragged gasp as I felt the knife at my throat press a little deeper. It still hadn't cut the skin yet, but I could tell it was right on the verge.

The woman spoke again. "Jimmy Carson. You will drop your investigation into the test paper thefts. You will allow your sister Ann to be convicted. You and your partner will mind your own business from now on. This is the only warning you will get. Any further attempts at prying —" and here the knife dug in deeper — "and the results could become nasty. For you. And for Brains. Even for your sister. Keep in

mind, we know where all of you live. We can reach you at any time. As I said, this is your only warning. Do not forget.”

The knives were removed. But even as I reached up to finger my neck, to see if it had been cut, something hard slammed into my stomach, doubling me over. And even as I did so, something — probably a knee — hit me in the forehead, unfolding me and causing me to hit the wall in back of me. I saw stars for a long time.

When I woke up, the women and her gang — had they been women as well, or men she’d hired? I didn’t get a chance for a close look — were gone. It was hard to say which hurt worse, my head or my stomach. The pain the latter was so intense I ended up retching for a bit, which didn’t do wonders for my head, I’ll tell you! Finally, though, I was able to get back on my feet.

I staggered around a bit, then resumed my way to the campus buildings where the thefts had taken place. You might think I was scared by the threats. Instead, they made me mad! Threaten my sister and friend, will they? Now I was more determined than ever to find who was framing Ann.

I soon arrived at the math building. I tried one of the doors and was surprised to find that it was still open. I went on in.

The hallways were deserted, and the classroom doors were locked. But I wasn’t interested in them, I knew the exam answer sheets would be kept in the professors’ offices. That’s where the thief had taken them from. I went up two flights of stairs to the office

hallway. Once again, all the doors proved to be locked. I got down on my knees and looked at the locks. Some turned out to be the old-fashioned kind that you could see through to the other side, but most were fairly modern. I didn't have a flashlight or a magnifying glass with me, and the hallway lights were pretty dim. In short, there really wasn't much of anything I could tell about them. I could see some scratches, but that could have been caused by almost anything. I gave up that idea pretty fast. I really needed to come back here with a descent flashlight to see anything — or better still, Brains himself. He'd probably be able to find a clue pretty fast. I paced up and down the hallway, looking at the floor. But there was nothing to see, other than some scuffmarks.

I soon gave up and left the building. I wasn't discouraged, there were plenty of other buildings to check out.

None of the other buildings, however, came to anything either. It was really getting late, and I knew I had to be home in another half-hour. I was in my final building, the chemistry building, when I did run across something unusual by one of the third-floor offices. There, in one of the corners by the rear exit, something shiny in a small pile of dirt and lint caught my eye. I picked it up: it was the matching earring Brains had found earlier. Bethany's earring! It looked as though it might have been swept into the dirt pile by a janitor.

Right about then I heard stealthy footsteps on the stairway. I crept over to it as quietly as I could and peaked through the slats. It was definitely a woman

and her face was wrapped in a dark veil. She was muttering to herself as she walked up the stairs. I let out a kind of shaky gasp at the sight of her, then shut my mouth fast. Too late — she looked up and saw me! Immediately, I sprang to my feet and began running down the stairs. I wish the building had another staircase, but this was the only one. I kept my face covered with my arms, but I knew it was futile effort. Sure enough, she called out: “Hey! Come back here!” I ignored her and continued to run. “I see you, Jimmy Carson! You were warned to drop this case! You may escape me, but you’ll be hearing from us soon!”

That was the last I heard of her as I ran out the building’s doors. Nor did I slow down — I was in a full-blown panic! I didn’t slow down until I reached my bike. I had a stitch in my side and was gasping for breath. I was almost astonished to see that I still had the earring.

I waited there only long enough to catch my breath. Then, in spite of the ache in my legs, I high-tailed it out of there. I had to get back to the lab before Brains went on to bed.

Luck was with me there. I could make out the lights in the lab — you can see them if you know what to look for. I went to the side of the coach house and, with some difficulty, managed to punch the right nail. After stating my business and using the password, I was allowed in. I raced up the stairs and burst into the lab.

## CHAPTER 5: GRISLY WARNINGS

Brains looked up in alarm as I came in. He was still working at his desk, which was swamped with papers. “Jimmy!” He did a beautiful double-take, then asked, “What happened? Are you all right?”

I must have been a sight: bloodied, bruised, a welt on my forehead, my shirt torn, shoes muddy, and almost completely out of breath.

“I was attacked!” I told him, still panting. “By a group of women, I think. At least the ringleader certainly was. And I found this!” I placed the earring on his desk.

Brains had gotten over his surprise. “Start from the beginning, Operative Three,” he told me. “What did you find out from Ann’s sorority sisters?”

So I told him everything I’d learned from both Susan and Bethany. Brains nodded and jotted down a few notes. He was very interested in the attack on me. “Are you certain the others were women, Operative Three? Think carefully, this is very important!”

I tried to recall the scene as best I could. It had been very hard to make them out in the darkness, and yet there was something about the way they moved, even the ones holding the knives to my throat and stomach, which suggested a woman rather than a man. “And the blow to my stomach,” I concluded, “felt more like the way a woman would hit, rather than a man.” I rubbed the spot, which was still very

sore. “I think it would have hurt a whole lot worse if it had been a man’s fist.”

Brains nodded. “Agreed. Then too, a man’s fist would have been noticeably larger.” He got and began pacing. “We are definitely making progress, Operative Three. Someone is obviously disturbed by our investigations.”

“You think it was Bethany?” I asked.

Brains shook his head. “Too early to draw any conclusions, Operative Three. Yes, the speed with which you were warned could implicate Bethany Morrow — but others could have overheard your conversation as well. We need more proof.” He turned back to his desk and leafed through the various piece of paper. “So far, I haven’t come up with much that might help. As of yet, I haven’t reached the historical records of the Morrow family, though.” He turned back to me. “Come back here tomorrow, Jimmy, after school. I should have something by then.” He turned back to the desk and began reading again. I have to admit, he looked tired himself.

I made my way back home. Fortunately, I was able to get upstairs to the bathroom without anyone noticing. Stripping off my clothes, I checked myself over. I wasn’t surprised to see the nasty bruise on my stomach. The welt on my forehead was still there, plus another lump on the back of my head as well. Fortunately, neither of the knives had drawn any blood. I got a hot shower, which helped me feel better. After that, I went on to bed. If I had any nightmares, I didn’t remember them.



The next morning my stomach was one big mass of pain. It hurt to even lay on it. Just putting my undershirt on caused me to let out a hiss of pain. So did my regular shirt.

And not just because of my stomach — it hurt to pull them past the bruises on both sides of my head! I looked outside and groaned yet again. It was overcast and a strong north wind was blowing. That meant I'd have to put on my coat and cap as well. I wondered how my poor head and stomach was going to take that. Not well, I imagined.

Ordinarily, eating a hot breakfast before going out into a cold day was a treat. But not this time. It wasn't just the pain in my stomach; I was very worried about what the mysterious woman had yelled at me last night. Were Mom and Dad in danger? Was Ann? Was Brains? She said she knew where we lived. Did she have some sort of revenge planned, even now?

Of course, that was just meant to be a rhetorical question. I certainly wasn't expecting an immediate answer. But we received one all the same: as we were finishing up breakfast — I didn't eat very much — there came a knock at the front door. A single knock. Actually, more like a *thud*. All of us looked at the front door, expecting to hear a few more raps. But there was only one. Curious, Mom got up to see who it was. A moment later we heard her let out a gasp of horror. Both Dad and I were on our feet in a moment. We raced to the front hall to see what had scared Mom. We both skidded to a halt, stunned to see the tip of a knife blade sticking through the thinner part

of the door — and the tip of it was dripping with what looked like blood.

Dad wasted no time yanking the front door open. But there was no signs of anyone. Mom let out a scream nonetheless and I could hardly blame her: the knife, a long, thick kind with a serrated edge, was stuck through the body of a small black and white cat. There was a note attached to the body of the cat as well. The message was short and to the point:

*TELL YOUR SON TO DROP THIS CASE,  
OR THE NEXT TIME THIS MIGHT BE ONE  
OF YOU.*

*THIS IS YOUR FINAL WARNING.*

As Dad worked to remove the knife and cat from the front door, Mom noticed that the cat had a collar on it.

“Why, this is Fiona, the Sullivans’ cat!” she said. The Sullivans were neighbors who lived down the street, a few houses from us. “What a horrible thing to do! Fiona was always a well-behaved cat who never bothered anyone.”

Dad nodded grimly. He turned to me and said, “Case? Are you and Brains trying to help Ann?” And before I could answer, he looked at me closely. “And just how did you get that lump on your forehead? I meant to ask you that earlier.”

I really wasn’t certain just how to respond. Brains would have a conniption if I said yes, we were trying to prove Ann’s innocence. But with the note worded the way it was, how could I flat-out lie? Not that I was

very good at fibbing anyway. So I opened my mouth and stammered out “Dad, we —”

To my surprise, Dad cut me off before I could even begin to explain. “I don’t know about this, son. Whoever is framing Ann really means business. I think you’d better leave this for the police.”

I was horrified, and for a moment forgot all about keeping silent about the case. “Dad, we can’t! You know as well as I do about how well the police would handle this case! They still think Ann was responsible anyway. And Brains and I don’t have enough evidence yet to clear her!” Then I clapped my hands over my mouth to prevent me from blabbing further. Oh, man, Brains was going to kill me when he found out I’d shot my mouth off again!

Dad put his hand on my shoulder. “I know you want to help your sister, son, and I appreciate that. We both do. But this is starting to get out of hand. The Sullivans aren’t going to look kindly on us when they find out why their cat was killed. I wonder if something like this happened to the Bentons as well.” I let out a gasp — that hadn’t occurred to me. Now that Dad mentioned it, though, I wondered as well.

I didn’t have to wonder for long. The phone rang. Before either Mom or Dad could reach it, I snatched it right up. I had a pretty good guess it was Brains, and I was right: “Satellite Zeta is in orbit!” I heard. Mom and Dad looked at me. “It was Brains,” I told him. “He needs to see me.” Before they could say anything to me, I raced off to the bathroom, got through in there, grabbed my books and took off.

Over at the Bentons, things were in an uproar as

well. I didn't even have to go into the crime lab, Brains met me outside.

"Brains!" I cried out. "Did you find a...?" I was going to say "dead animal," but Brains was already nodding before I finished the sentence. He led me to the front porch, where Brain's dad was looking at the body of a dead dog. I caught my breath — it was an Airedale. Brains had once owned one a few years ago before it died of old age. This one also had a knife through it.

"I have the message that was stuck on the knife's hilt," he told me. "I was about to take it up to the lab when you arrived."

"We're going to have to get on to school, Brains," I said.

"I know. We won't take long."

Up in the lab, Brains carefully dusted the piece of paper while I told him what had happened at our house. "Were you able to obtain the note, Operative Three?" he asked me.

"Of course, X," I replied, handing it over. I'd sort of palmed it when Mom was telling Dad who the cat had belonged to. I don't think either of them noticed. "Good work, Operative Three," he said. He dusted that note as well, then examined them, one after the other, under a microscope. Moments later he shook his head. "No, whoever did this was careful. There's no trace of fingerprints. I'll see if Father will let me examine the knife before he turns it over to the police, but I seriously doubt there are any fingerprints on it, either."

“Creeps! So now what?” I asked him.

“We need to see your sister once school is out. I’ve little doubt something similar has happened to her as well.”

“But Brains,” I objected, “how could anyone sneak a dead animal into the police building?”

“I don’t know either, Jimmy, but rest assured whoever did this had it planned out. I’ll bet they found a way to do so.” Brains shook his head sadly. “That poor dog. Unlike the cat at your house, this one didn’t have a collar on it. It must have been a stray.” For a few moments he just stood there, staring at the wall. Then he turned to me, and for the first time I saw some real anger in his eyes. “Jimmy, whoever did this knows a lot about us — way too much. The choice of a neighbor’s cat, and an Airedale who resembled Curly, wasn’t arbitrary by any means. This unknown girl wanted to hit us hard. Well, she’s made a big mistake! We’re going to bring her to justice, Operative Three, if that’s the last thing I do!” There was grim determination in Brain’s voice, much like the time Chief Hadley had come down on us when the car with the dummy was pulled up out of Boiling Pond. I said it then, and I’ll say it again: when you tangle with Brains, you tangle with a buzz saw! Whoever this woman was, she was in for a nasty shock. Brains was about to go on the offensive...

The day, which hadn’t been off to a good start, didn’t get any better. It was overcast and cold, with rain coming down off and on. By the time we got out of school, the winds were out of the northeast and the

rain was coming down hard. Brains and I fought our way over to the police station, our umbrellas almost pushed to the point of collapse.

Inside, Officer McKennon showed us back to Ann's cell. She let out a glad cry when she saw us: "Jimmy! Brains!" She took one look at our rain-splattered raincoats and dripping umbrellas and gave us a lopsided grin. "Wow, for once I'm glad I'm in here, and not out there!"

We smiled in return, then Brains asked, "Ann, did you receive any sort of box today?"

Ann gave him a startled look, then nodded. "I sure did! How did you know?"

"What was in it?"

"A dead rat! I about screamed my head off when I saw it!" Ann exclaimed.

"Was there a note with it?" asked Brains.

Ann really looked baffled. "Yes! It was a warning, telling me to tell you two to back off from helping me. But how did you know that?"

"Because we got something like that ourselves," I answered her. I explained what had happened that morning.

As you might expect, Ann positively gushed over the dead cat, and the dog as well. Hey, I was kinda sorry for them too, but you didn't see me going on and on the way Ann did. We finally got her to tell us what happened.

The package came in that morning. It was addressed to Ann, but had no return address. Chief

Hadley thought it was from my family, so he let her open it up. That's when she found the dead rat and the note. She let out a shriek and Chief Hadley came running back, along with a bunch of other officers. They removed the package at once.

Ann told us that Chief Hadley almost looked pleased by the note. "Figures," I muttered and Brains nodded. "Go on," he told Ann, but she just shook her head. "That's really all there is. Like I said, they have the package, and haven't told me any more about it."

"Do you think we should try to get a look at it," I asked Brains in a quiet voice.

Brains shook his head. "Ordinarily I would want to see, but it's unlikely to have any sort of evidence on it, any more than the first two did — and that's assuming we could get to see it in the first place. No, we've found out what we needed to know. It's time to get back to the lab."

We made our farewells to Ann and left. Before we did, she reminded us that her hearing would take place next week. We assured her that we should have something that might clear her by then.

Getting back the lab was a nightmare battle of rain, wind, and cars with drivers that couldn't see too well. We had to walk as well, so it was close to dinnertime before we arrived. Brains suggested that I just stay for dinner, then return home. I called Mom, who quickly agreed, and said she'd pick me up in the car by 9:00.

In the lab, Brains began to make a list of all the evidence we'd collected so far.

It still didn't amount to much: a mystery woman who made a lot of money selling stolen exam answer sheets to the richer sorority girls, who then framed Ann for it when she was caught, who lost her earrings in two different places, and who was utterly ruthless when cornered.

"There's a little more, however," Brains said. "I haven't had a chance to tell you about the histories of the girls in Ann's sorority. While most, like Ann, have little to indicate any sort of criminal background, some were shown to have been involved in bike gangs, shoplifting, truancy and other petty crimes."

I stared at him, amazed. "Creeps, Brains, how in the world did they get accepted to a sorority like Phi Kappa Sigma?"

Brains nodded. "The very question I pondered as well, Operative Three." Brains reached down under the pile of papers and pulled out a folder. "Guess who ends up having the final say about their acceptance." He put the folder down so I could see the name written on it: *Bethany Morrow!*

"Ann told me she was on the ethics committee, but I had no idea she also gave approval for new sorority members," I told him.

"Jimmy, that's one of the functions of the ethics committee," Brains replied. "They screen new members as well as watchdog the morals of the sorority members. And apparently, Bethany has the final say. And there's more, Operative Three. I found something in her file that was very disturbing."

"What?"



“She, too, has a criminal record — one for torturing and killing small animals.”

I gulped. “Guess she hasn’t changed much then.”

“And it would seem she’s added theft, cheating and lying to it as well.”

I sighed. “Okay, it seems we found out who framed Ann. How do we go about proving it? You don’t have to tell me that this would probably be considered circumstantial evidence.”

“Quite correct, Operative Three. Yes, we need something conclusive.” Brains gnawed a knuckle and paced back and forth.

“Is there any way we could search her dorm room?” I wondered. “Maybe we could create a diversion or something to get all the girls out of the dorm. Let loose some mice, or maybe snakes.”

Brains chuckled. “Interesting notions, Jimmy, but even could we somehow succeed in doing so, I doubt seriously that she would leave anything incriminating in her —” Brains was cut short by the intercom buzzing. “Yes, Mrs. Ray?”

“Your dinner is ready!” she told us. “And wipe your feet before you come into the house! I don’t want you dripping all over!”

“We shall endeavor to leave the floor dry, Mrs. Ray,” Brains told her in a lofty voice. “No accretion of hydrogen and oxygen atoms shall stain your floorboards and carpets.”

“Hmmp!” I heard her snort. “Be sure that they don’t!” There was an underlying tone of puzzlement

as she said that, though. Brains and I exchanged grins. We could just see her trying to figure out what Brains had been talking about.

We put on our galoshes and grabbed our umbrellas. Outside, the rain had slacked off a bit, but it was still pretty windy. There were deep pools of water, most of which were half-choked with fallen leaves. Brains led me across one of the stone paths that led from the coach house to the main house. We went in a side entrance; there was a mud room for our wet weather gear.

Inside, the Bentons had a cheerful fire going in the fireplace. Mr. and Mrs. Benton were seated around it, talking. They greeted us as we went into the bathroom to get cleaned up.

During dinner, it was the usual history lesson from Professor Benton. As I've mentioned before, he teaches history at Crestwood College. This time it had something to do with the Civil War. I don't think even Brains was paying it much attention until Professor Benton brought up the Morrow family.

"They're planning on throwing a huge Thanksgiving party next week," he was telling us. Brains and I exchanged looks.

I should stop right here and tell you that the Morrrows, though originally from Massachusetts, had made a lot of money right after the Civil War, having helped in the Reconstruction period. They later moved to our area, though they lived in the ritzy area of Greenborough, about twenty miles from here. It's where a lot of rich people live.

Much like the McKinkins, the Morrows didn't have any real money problems and even rode out the Depression pretty easily. They made even more money during the Second World War. From what I've heard, they had a huge mansion in Greenborough and threw a lot of parties. So I really wasn't very surprised to hear about them having a Thanksgiving party. I just wondered if there was some way for Brains and me to attend it.

Evidently, Brains was thinking the same thing. "Father, doesn't the faculty often get invited to the Morrow's parties?" he asked.

Professor Benton looked at Brains. "Why, yes, son, they do. I received my invitation just yesterday, in fact. But you know I never care to attend those fancy affairs. Thanksgiving is a time when we should be home with our families, not someplace else."

Brains nodded. "I understand, sir, but I was wondering if just this once we might attend this particular party."

Even Mrs. Benton gave Brains a startled look. "Why Barclay! Why would you wish to do so? Mrs. Ray always fixes us a wonderful meal."

"Yes, Mother, she does," Brains said. "But I believe an appearance at the party would do wonders for Father's upcoming tenure review." He turned quickly to Professor Benton. "I know you have avoided such parties in the past, Father, and I'm not saying we can't have our traditional repast right here before attending the party. But I think this year it might be wise to put in an appearance at the Morrow's."

Professor Benton gave Brains a calculating look. “I see your point, son, but why would you and Jimmy wish to attend such a stuffy affair? Bethany Morrow may have some of her friends there, but they would be of an older crowd, and not likely to allow you to join in their activities.”

Brains nodded. “That is true, Father, but just the other day Jimmy expressed interest in seeing what a party like that would be like. And I admit to a certain amount of curiosity myself. We needn’t stay long, perhaps an hour or so.”

“Well...” Professor Benton rubbed his chin. He turned to Mrs. Benton. “Barclay does make an interesting case for attending the Morrow’s party. What do you think, dear?”

Mrs. Benton seemed a bit more mellow on the subject. “Well, it could be fun at that. I have been curious myself about the interior of the Morrow’s house. And it could be interesting to hear some of their conversations.”

Well, before you knew it, it was all agreed that we’d attend the Morrow’s party after we had our own dinners. “Eat light if you can, Operative Three,” Brains told me, while we waited for Professor Benton to take me back home. “There’s no telling how much we may be required to ingest at the party.”

“Creeps, Brains!” I replied. “I can hardly turn down more offers of more pumpkin pie or cranberry salad!”

Brains just gave me a look. “I suggest you do so anyway. Tell your parents that without Ann there, you

don't have much of an appetite. They'll understand."

I didn't like the idea of fibbing, but as it turned out, Brain's idea was what actually happened.

But I'd better not get ahead of myself. Thanksgiving week brought another startling development.

## CHAPTER 6: THE THANKSGIVING PARTY

The skies were clear once again, but only for a brief time. Weather forecasters were already talking about another rainy cold front moving in by the weekend. At least things looked clear for Thanksgiving itself.

The day before Thanksgiving, Brains told me to meet him at the lab right after classes. Fortunately, today was only a half-day at school. So, after lunch, I hurried over to the lab. After being let in, Brains gave me the news: Bethany Morrow killed another animal!

“What?” I asked. “Was she going to send us another warning?”

Brains shook his head. “Unknown, Operative Three, though that seems likely. This is something I overheard from Mrs. Ray, when she was on the phone with one of her friends. Seems she, in turn, overheard some girls talking in supermarket a few days earlier, and one of them mentioned that Bethany Morrow had been caught by her family at the scene of the crime. A small dog lay at her feet, stabbed several times, and she was holding a bloody knife in her hands. Her family immediately covered it up — they made sure the police didn’t catch a word of this. But some of the servants gossiped about it, which is how the girls heard about it.”

“Creeps, Brains, I thought you didn’t place much stock in gossip,” I said.

“Ordinarily, Jimmy, I wouldn’t. But in this case, given what we know about Bethany and her callous

attitude towards animals, I think these rumors may have a greater shade of truth to them. Still, there's no question that they need to be substantiated. It's one more job we will have to attend to when we're at the party."

Oh, great. What we were supposed to do, go up to the Morrrows and ask them if their daughter really did kill another animal? We'd probably be tossed out the front door!

I said as much to Brains, who merely shrugged. "We'll improvise as always, Operative Three. Above all, we must keep our ears as well as our eyes open for any clues there may be."

The next day we visited Ann in her cell. Mom was able to smuggle in some food: turkey that she'd cooked the day before, cranberry salad, homemade cornbread and honey, mashed potatoes and gravy, and pumpkin pie with whipped cream. Of course, she could hardly do this without Chief Hadley noticing it, but Mom came prepared: she had fixed enough for the Chief and the rest of the holiday shift crew. Believe me, one sniff of Mom's cooking was all it took: we were allowed to take back the rest of the food for Ann. So, in the most unlikely of places — a jail cell — we had a great Thanksgiving dinner! We kept the conversation light, but during the short times when both Mom and Dad weren't there, I was able to bring Ann up to date about what we'd found out. She was really shocked to hear what Bethany had done. "It's so strange, Jimmy," Ann said. "I always thought she liked animals. I heard she had some schnauzers for pets, and even has a horse." She shook her head.

“I guess you just never really know about people.”

Mom and Dad were on their way back to the jail cell, so I quickly told her about our plan to look for evidence at the Morrow’s Thanksgiving party. “That will lock her up and finally get you out of here,” I said.

“Oh, I hope it will!” she cried, and to my embarrassment, gave me a big hug and a kiss on the cheek.

“Okay, all right, enough of the mush!” I said and wiped my cheek off. Ann just laughed, and I found I was grinning as well.

Back at home, though, we definitely felt her absence. Mom puttered around the house without much to do. Dad and I watched the football game, but neither of us really enjoyed it, even though our team made some clever plays and eventually won the game.

Finally, though, it was time to get ready for the Morrow’s party. I put on my church suit.

Both Mom and Dad told me I looked great and told me to have a great time. I just hoped it would be a fruitful one.

The Bentons soon showed up, and I got in the back seat with Brains. The Bentons asked me what I had done during the day, and after telling them a few things I asked them in turn. It seems they spent the day at the park, playing games and having a picnic rather than a large dinner. I grinned at Brains, picturing his rather gawky frame playing football and baseball. As I’ve mentioned before, Brains can come



up with some ingenious plays for both sports, and even enjoyed pitching a baseball for scientific reasons, but on the whole wasn't much of an athlete. He just gave me a dark look, probably well aware of what I was thinking. But later on I got a chance to whisper what Ann had told me about Bethany Morrow.

Brains frowned. "Curious, Operative Three," he told me quietly. "She was allowed to own animals. Not what I would have expected from someone with her murderous inclinations. Curious indeed..." That was he said about it. We arrived at the Morrow's estate a few minutes later.

You've seen those movies or TV shows where they show cars pulling up in front of some palatial mansion? Well, the Morrow's was just that kind of place. Even Brains was impressed. I'm afraid the Benton's Ford looked a little out of place among all the Cadillacs, Rolls-Royces and Bentleys. I even got to see some sleek Italian and German sports cars. And even one those weird-looking bubble-shaped German cars, the ones they call a "Beetle." I could see why they called it that, I can tell you. It did kind of look like an oversized bug. Both Brains and I couldn't resist getting a closer look at it before the Bentons called to us to follow them inside; it was the first time either of us had ever seen one.

Inside, Mr. and Mrs. Morrow shook hands with us. Bethany was there as well. She shook hands and greeted us, but she also shot us a puzzled look. Both Brains and I kept a neutral look on our faces, though.

Brains was eager to start sleuthing and wanted to

leave the party as soon as possible. He pulled me aside and said in a low voice, “We need to get upstairs to Bethany’s room, Operative Three.”

“Creeps, Brains, how will we know which one is hers?”

“Oh, I think it will be rather obvious, Operative Three,” he with a hint of disgust in his voice. “A college girl’s room won’t be hard to overlook.”

I nodded, mentally kicking myself for that one. After all, Ann’s room was filled with football pennants and sorority stuff. No doubt Bethany’s was the same.

For a while we just mingled with the guests, ate some *hors’ d’oeuvres* (I had to look that word up — it sure isn’t spelled the way it sounds!) at the buffet table. I saw Brains making his way towards the dining room exit and kind of nod his head at me. I finished my cheese snack, drank the last of the punch and put my cup down. Then I began making my way towards the exit as well. All around me conversations were going on; I doubt seriously anyone saw me leave.

In the outer hall, Brains indicated for me to follow him. I thought he was going to go back to the entry hall and go up the main staircase, but I should have realized it would have been too easy for people to see us. Instead, Brains had us follow one of the servants back to the kitchen. We didn’t go inside, but began looking around for a servants’ staircase. It didn’t take us long to find it. Quietly as we could, we made our way upstairs and emerged in a long hallway.

“Now, Operative Three,” Brains said, “start opening doors. I advise listening before you do so — there’s no telling who may be behind them and what they may be up to.”

I gulped and blushed, just imagining it. “What do we say if someone sees us up here?” Which I considered a more than likely possibility. “That we’re looking for the bathroom?”

Brains nodded. “A trifle cliché, but it should suffice.”

So we began our search. Fortunately for us, the upper hall rooms were deserted, some of them locked. I was working my way down one side, Brains the other. Then, as I was about to reach the final door, Brains called out to me. “Jimmy! I think this is her room!”

I ran down to join him and looked inside. Sure enough, the room had college pennants, stuffed animals, a record player and records in one corner, and, as expected, sorority pictures and awards. Insofar as some of those awards had Bethany’s name on them, that pretty much settled whose room this was! “Come, Operative Three,” Brains said. “We’d better start searching before —”

Suddenly we heard a gong sound somewhere and a faint voice cry out, “Time for dinner. Everyone grab a chair!”

“ — dinner starts,” he finished with a sigh. “Blast!” Brains snarled. “If only they’d waited five more minutes!” He sighed again and shrugged. Then he reached in and pulled the door shut. “Come on,

Jimmy, we'd better get back down there before someone notices that we're gone. We'll try to get back up here immediately afterwards."

We went back to the servants' stairs and made our way back down. We had to wait several minutes before the corridor the stairs led to was clear of people — servants were hurrying in and out of the kitchen in two and threes. Finally there came a moment when no one was in the corridor, so we hurried out of the mansion's back areas and made our way back to the dining room.

By now, most of the people were seated. Luck was still with us though: several other people came into the dining room from other areas of the house. I was a bit surprised to see that some of Bethany's sorority sisters were here as well, and one of them was Susan. She gave me a kind of strange look, as though wondering what I was doing here. Guess I couldn't blame her for that. I just gave her a sheepish smile and a wave. She gave me a little wave in return, her eyes not leaving my face. I was relieved when Brains and I found our places by the Bentons.

We were just in time; several servants brought out five immense, shiny dome-covered platters. When they removed the tops, steaming turkeys, stuffed with stuffing and with lots of carrots, onions, garnishes of every kind on the side. Before they started carving the turkeys and passing the meat around, the Morricks welcomed everyone to their Thanksgiving party, which was now in its 10<sup>th</sup> year. After a rather lengthy speech, one of their friends, a minister, gave an equally lengthy table blessing.

I could feel Brains fidgeting beside me. I was kind of anxious myself to get this over with. Finally, though, he sat down and the passing of the plates began. Given all of the people here, that, in itself, took a while as well. The one piece of good fortune out of all of this was the food was really good. Having eaten earlier, though, I couldn't eat too much, and neither could Brains. Dessert was, of course, pumpkin pie, but also a chocolate "mousse" of some sort that really wasn't half bad.

Even after we finished, we could hardly jump up and race back upstairs. We had to wait for others to start leaving the table before we could. A lot of them stayed where they were and talked. Bethany and her friends began getting up as well, which caused both Brains and me to worry. Now it was more than likely one or more of them would go upstairs to Bethany's room for one reason or another. Somehow, we had to get up there before that happened. Then fate seemed to step in. "Hey Bethany!" I heard Susan cry out. "Show us this marvy rec room you keep telling us about!"

"Can I, Daddy?" I heard Bethany ask her father in turn.

"Certainly" he replied. "I may join you girls in there later on. By all means try the ping pong table. It's a great way to work off some of this dessert!" They all laughed at that and said they probably wouldn't need it.

Brains, however, gave me a nod and whispered, "This is perfect, Operative Three! That should keep them occupied long enough for us to search her

room. Now carefully start to make your way towards the exit.”

We did so and soon blended in with other people who were doing the same. Some used the main staircase, but we made our way back to the servants’ stairs. The few servants we passed paid us no attention, they were busy hauling used plates back to the kitchen. In another few moments we were back upstairs once again.

This time we had to be more careful. Several people were came and went along the hallway. We stayed behind the door, leaving it open only a crack. I was very nervous, expecting a servant to come up the stairs any moment. Thankfully that didn’t happen, and we were soon able to come out of the stairway.

We hurried back to Bethany’s room and let ourselves in. Brains was careful to shut the door behind us. I didn’t need to ask Brains what we were looking for — I already knew: anything that would show her to be the brains behind the theft of the test paper answer sheets and the framing of Ann.

As we had in the art room when we were searching for the pearl necklace, Brains took one side of the room and I the other. Unlike that night, however, there wasn’t a great deal to search. Brains was the one who scored, too.

“Operative Three! I think I’ve found what we’re looking for!”

I hurried over to him. Brains was at Bethany’s desk. He’d removed the lowermost drawer, which had been filled with books and notebooks. “Listen,”

he told me, and tapped what should have been the back of the desk. I expected to hear a hollow “bonk” sound. Instead, it was a dull thud, as though Brains were striking something very solid. Brains examined the back panel a moment, then pressed against one side. Nothing happened. So he tried the other side — and the panel popped open, revealing a small safe.

“Seems she has a few secrets after all,” Brains muttered.

“Okay, so how do we get it open?” I asked him.

Brains didn’t answer, but started hunting through other drawers in the desk. He felt along the upper part of the top drawer, the long kind you usually stuff your pens and pencils in. Moments later he grinned and pulled out a small card. “This is how, Operative Three.” Written on it was a combination.

Brains wasted no time twisting the safe’s dial. A moment later he yanked the lever and the safe opened. Brains reached in and pulled out a lot of items: small boxes, money, some jewelry, and various sheets of paper.

“Brains, look!” I cried out. I hardly needed to, Brains could read them as well as I could: they were the test answer sheets from various Crestwood College departments. And that wasn’t all: there was a black mask, a rag bundle that turned out to have a bloody carving knife, a set of skeleton keys, brass knuckles, and bundles of money. There was even a small notebook which contained names and amounts of money. The size of the notebook paper was exactly the same as the notes that had been stuck on the poor animals that had been killed, and the note in the box

given to Ann.

“Jackpot!” Brains whispered excitedly.

“Brains, we need to turn this over to the police as soon as possible!” I cried. “Ann could be released from jail as soon as tomorrow.”

Brains rubbed his chin. “Hold on a moment. Let’s confirm that. Operative Three, search through her desk, see if you can find something she’s printed on. We’ll see if it matches —”

Brains never got a chance to finish his order, for a moment later the door opened, and we heard Bethany saying, “ — get that from my room; I’ll be just a moment!” She switched the light on and gasped. “What — what are you two doing in here? In my *personal vault!*?” Bethany suddenly turned and ran out into the hallway. “DADDY, I CAUGHT SOME THIEVES IN MY ROOM!!” she bellowed at the top of her lungs.

Brains and I continued to crouch by the desk, mortified. I suddenly had a vision of Brains, Ann and I, all in prison garb, sharing a cell at the state pen. I wondered if I’d be stuck in stir.

But Brains didn’t stay paralyzed for long. Bethany had hardly finished shouting when he bounced back on his feet. As she turned back to us, still angry, Brains gave her a cold look. “Yes, Bethany, by all means call your parents up here,” he said. “I’d like to see you explain the items we found in your vault — the ones you used to incriminate Jimmy’s sister!”



## CHAPTER 7: ACCUSED!

“*What??*” Bethany yelled, looking shocked. “How dare you —” But she was cut short by the arrival of her parents — and practically all the other guests as well. The Bentons, once they saw it was Brains and me in here, had to muscle their way through the crowd.

By the time they got here, there was already a three-way argument going on between Brains, Bethany, and Mr. Morrow, all of them trying to get in shouts of outrage, demands, and explanations. I wisely kept quiet, not that I could have contributed much anyway.

It was Professor Benton who finally raised his voice loud enough to shut everyone up. “Please! Let us have some quiet in here!” Then he gave Brains a, well, not exactly an angry look, but certainly a serious one. “Barclay, please explain what you are doing in this young lady’s room.”

Brains wasted no time in doing so. He told the whole audience of people about the stolen exam answer sheets, the framing of Ann, our investigations into the backgrounds of the sorority girls (Brains didn’t say anything about the gossip Susan had told me, for which I was grateful. I was afraid Susan would have been very embarrassed, had she been dragged into this), my investigations at Crestwood and the results, the dead animals and the warnings, and finally what we found in Susan’s safe.

The Morrows kept looking between Brains and Bethany, their eyes growing wider with each revelation. So was Bethany's; her face was nearly white. By the end of it she was shaking her head so hard that her hair was flying in all directions. "No, no, no, *no!*" she almost shouted. "None of this is true! This is a lie! It has to be!" Then she pointed a finger at us. "These two. They're making it up! They're planting this — this stuff on me, putting it in my safe to make me look guilty. *They're the ones!*" she shrieked. She stopped when Professor Benton looked in her direction.

He gave her as cold a look as I've ever seen. Even though it wasn't directed at me, it still gave me shivers. "My son may have been in the wrong to have broken into your safe, but a liar, a thief, and a killer of animals he most certainly isn't! And I can vouch for the dead dog we found on our front porch, as can James Carson's parents for the dead cat they found knifed to their front door."

"Father," Brains spoke up. "Jimmy and I were about to check the printing in the notebook against some of Bethany's printing to see if they match."

"There's no need," Mr. Morrow said before Professor Benton could answer. "Let me examine it. I would know Bethany's printing anywhere."

Brains looked questioningly at his father, who nodded. Brains gave Mr. Morrow the notebook. The man carefully leafed through the notebook. Then, without a word, handed it to his wife. She did the same, then startled us all by breaking down and crying. "Oh, Bethany, how could you. After

everything we —” Then she put her head in her hands and really began to cry.

Mr. Morrow began to try and comfort her, and Bethany approached her, fumbling with her words: “Mother, I — this can’t be — but I didn’t — there must be some —”

And then Mrs. Morrow shot to her feet, screamed at the top of her lungs, “*HOW COULD YOU?*” slapped Bethany hard across the face and bolted from the room.

Mr. Morrow went after her. Down the hallway we heard a door open, then slam shut.

By now, all of us were just standing there, not knowing exactly what we should do next. I shot a glance at Brains, even he was blushing. We certainly hadn’t meant for this kind of scene to occur. I was wondering just what we ought to be doing now when Brains spoke up.

“Father, I think we’d better contact the police and show them this evidence. If nothing else, it should indicate to them that they have arrested the wrong person.” Brains was careful not to look at Bethany when he said that.

Bethany was still rubbing the side of her face, which had a nasty hand-shaped red mark on it. She whirled on Brains, her face livid with anger. “I didn’t —” she started to yell, but Professor Benton cut her off.

“Yes, son, I think we’d better. You two stay here while I make the call.”

We stayed and waited. And believe me, that room

was the *last* place I wanted to be at that moment! Mr. Morrow returned a few minutes later, looking grim. He said nothing to us, but started glaring at his daughter, who was in turn firing daggers from her eyes at us. Then she'd try once again to tell her father that she had nothing to do with this. But he just pointed to the notebook we found. "But I didn't write this! None of it!"

"But it's your printing, Bethany. I would recognize it anywhere."

"I don't understand! I don't understand," she wailed. I kept hoping the guests would go back to the dining room or someplace, but none of them wanted to miss any of this! After what seemed like an eternity, we finally heard a car pull up outside, and voices in the entry hall. A short time later two police officers appeared in the doorway.

"Are you Mr. Morrow?" one of them asked.

"Yes, I am," he replied.

"I'm afraid we're going to have to take your daughter in for questioning, regarding the theft of property belonging to several Crestwood College professors, extortion and false incrimination, and finally, cruelty to animals."

Mr. Morrow just nodded. "Go with them, Bethany," he told her. "We will contact our lawyer regarding this."

There was little more to add to this, I'm afraid. Once Bethany was led to the police car — in cuffs, no less — the party soon broke up. I was so relieved to be out of that room, I really didn't pay the rest of

the night much attention. At one point, though, as we headed back downstairs, using the regular stairway this time, I noticed Brains looking intently at something. By the time it occurred to me to see what it was he was staring at, it was gone. At least, I sure didn't see anything.

As we went outside to the Bentons' car, though, Brains didn't seem particularly jubilant, or even pleased that the case was over with. Of course, after the scene upstairs, I was kind of quiet myself. But I knew that would fade once Ann came back home. Funny, I'm usually rather happy when she's away and out of my hair. But this time even I'll be glad to see her again. For a while, anyway.

We remained quiet on the way back to my house, where they dropped me off. "I'll see you tomorrow," I told Brains. He just nodded, lost in thought.

Then he turned to me before I closed the car door: "Yes, Jimmy, report to the lab as soon as you can." Then I thanked the Bentons for their hospitality and made my way inside.

## CHAPTER 8: A CONSPIRACY UNVEILED

Inside, I didn't waste any time telling Mom and Dad about the night's events. They were astonished to hear what Bethany had been up to.

“Why, that little two-faced... brat!” Mom exclaimed. I had a feeling that if I wasn't present, she'd probably have used a stronger word. “To think she was the one behind all of this and was using our daughter to take the blame. Believe me, if I'd been there, I would have given her more than just a slap across the face!”

Dad was also angry, but he praised both Brains and me for pursuing the investigation in spite of the obstacles (I'd told them about being threatened, but had said nothing about the knives or the punch to the stomach. I had a feeling, though, that Dad pretty much figured that part out). “You two did a fine job,” he said, and for once even Mom agreed. “There have been times when I seriously questioned you two being in this detective business of yours, but this time you really justified your detective agency.” He patted me on the back and Mom gave me a hug. So I went to bed in a pretty good mood overall.

But I had bad nightmare that night: I was on the Crestwood Campus grounds, searching for something. I wasn't too certain what it was, but it was important. Then the wind began to blow. It had been early evening, but in the blink of an eye it was night time. Fierce-looking clouds covered up the sky and it

began to rain and thunder. The rain was bitterly cold, though, this being a dream, I didn't really feel it so much as I simply knew it was cold. And I was being pursued by someone.

I couldn't tell who it was at first. Every time I turned around, the person would duck behind a building. But I became more and more convinced it was a girl. And that girl was Bethany. Before long I turned into a blind alley and found it was a dead end.

There was nowhere left to go. Lightning flashed and the rain continued to pour as the girl came closer and closer. In one hand she held a blood-covered knife. Her other hand was clenched around a pair of brass knuckles.

"You framed me, Jimmy Carson," Bethany spoke in a low voice. "You and your friend, Brains. Well, I've dealt with Brains," she held up the bloody knife. "And now it's your turn. Just like that dog and cat, Jimmy, just like that dog and cat!" She let out a nasty laugh, and as she got closer, her face began to change. So was her hair. She was changing into someone else. Before I could find out who, though, she thrust the knife towards my stomach and I woke up with a gasp. There was a flash of light from the window, followed moments later by a huge *CRUMP!* of thunder. Rain began lashing against the window. When I got my breathing under control, I picked up my alarm clock.

It was just about 3:00 AM. I was glad I could sleep late; I had a hard time falling back to sleep. I finally did, though. I even slept through the alarm; Mom had to call me to wake me up. I don't recall what else I

dreamed that night, but I don't think any of it was particularly pleasant.

After breakfast, I got my bike out of the garage and took off. It had stopped raining, but the sky remained overcast and a chilly north wind was blowing. I wore my coat, hat and gloves. When I reached the coach house and pressed the nail, I got a recorded message from Brains saying he was out and would return later. He said he'd contact me when he returned.

With nothing else to do, I returned home. It sprinkled rain off and on, but nothing heavy. Back at home, Mom let me know that we would be going to the police building after lunch to pick up Ann. "They've dropped all charges against her!" she told me in a happy voice and gave me another hug. I endured it with a slight grimace, but smiled anyway. Upstairs, I found some comic books to read to pass the time. There really isn't much else to do on the day after Thanksgiving. Even so, I didn't enjoy them as much as I normally would have: I kept recalling last night's nightmare. It was kind of hazy by now, but I kept seeing the knife being shoved towards my stomach. And her changing face: who was she going to turn into? Was it important? After all, it was only a dream. But it kept interrupting my reading, making it hard for me to concentrate. Finally it was time for lunch.

As might be expected, we had turkey sandwiches. But as the turkey was still fresh, they tasted fine. I knew that would change by the end of next week. Mom kept one in the refrigerator for Ann. "Heaven



knows she must tired of that miserable jail fare!” she told us. Soon we were ready to go. Outside, it was drizzling.

The ride down to the police building was more cheerful than the ones before.

Inside, Ann had already been released from her cell and was at the front desk, filling out some paperwork. But when she saw us, she dropped her pen and rushed towards us, giving everyone a hug, even me. “Thank you, Jimmy,” she whispered into my ear. “And tell Brains I said thank you, too.”

“Okay, okay,” I said, trying to be grouchy and not succeeding too well. “Don’t get mushy on me again!” She just laughed.

Ann finished the paperwork, got her things, and we left. She talked to us most of the way back, telling us how she endured the boredom of each day, wondering what was going to happen. Then she wanted to hear what happened with Bethany.

You know, it’s strange. Even though we caught the leader of the exam-theft ring, I still felt embarrassed as I told Ann what happened last night. Ann was surprised as well, and kept telling us how shocked she was that Bethany could have been behind it all.

I was glad when we finally reached home and I could shut up about it.

I was just about to go upstairs when the phone rang. This time I got it, and a good thing, too: It was Brains.

“Operative Three,” he began, making me wary. Why the need for our code names now? “Is Ann back

with you?”

“Yes, she’s here,” I said in surprise. “Mom’s fixing her lunch. Did you need to talk with her?”

“No, but as soon as she’s through eating, tell her that you need her to drive you over to my house.”

“X, I can always use my bike,” I told him.

“First, the rain is going to be coming back soon. But more importantly than that, the three of us are going to visit Bethany at the police office in Lakeshore, where she’s currently incarcerated.”

“Visit Bethany?” I almost shouted, but remembered at the last minute to keep my voice down. “Why?”

“Later, Operative Three.” There he goes again, using that word. “When we get a chance to talk with her alone, I will explain all. For now, impress upon her the urgency for us to go to Lakeshore.”

“Okay, X, I will,” and we hung up.

Well, I had to wait a bit for Ann to finish her lunch and get through in the bathroom — she indulged in a long bath — but I finally got to tell her what Brains said.

I thought she might object, but she surprised me by agreeing at once. “I also wanted to talk with Bethany,” she told me. “I just have to see for myself that this is the girl who framed me.”

It was pouring down rain again, so Mom and Dad made no objections to Ann taking me over to Brains. We didn’t tell them what we had planned for afterwards, though. I’m not too certain what they

would have thought about Ann seeing Bethany.

It was slow going, the streets were fairly flooded. We found Brains waiting for us on the front porch, dressed in his yellow raincoat and carrying a folded umbrella. He wasted no time getting inside the car.

“Hello, Ann, glad to see you out of prison,” he greeted her.

“It’s thanks to you two that I’m out!” she declared. “But you say you want to go see Bethany?”

“Yes, it’s vital that I talk with her,” Brains replied.

“About what?” I asked.

“Several things,” he said, and no more.

I shook my head. “I don’t know, Brains. After last night, I doubt she’s going to want to talk with us.”

“Not at first, perhaps,” he agreed. “But she will after she hears what I have to say.”

“And what is that, Brains?” Ann asked.

“That she might not be guilty of this after all,” he said, startling us both. We both tried to pry out more information, but Brains just shook his head and told Ann to get going. “Due to the rain, it’s going to be late before we reach Lakeshore, and we’re going to need every minute we have.”

So we headed for Lakeshore. As I’ve noted before, Ann is a careful driver, and really had to be on her toes today. Brains was almost a nervous wreck, not because of Ann’s driving, but worried that a bridge or road might be washed out, thus delaying or canceling our trip. Thankfully, while some of the streams and rivers were running high, none of them had overrun

the bridges. We reached Lakeshore about an hour later. Ann parked in a parking garage and we made our way to the police station.

Inside, Ann asked if the three of us could speak with Bethany. The officer at the desk asked who we were, and when Ann told him, his attitude underwent an abrupt change. He became very surly. He told us that Bethany wasn't seeing anyone right now, and probably wouldn't for days. Then he told us to scram.

But Ann didn't back off. "She's going to want to see us, officer!" she told him. "You go back there and tell her that Ann Carson is here, along with her brother and his friend, and she needs to speak with us *now!*" Ann put a snap of command in her voice that would have done proud a drill sergeant.

The officer stared at her in surprise, then glared back. "Now see here, missy, don't you take —"

But Brains cut him off. "We are not here to gloat, officer, if that is what you are thinking. Quite the contrary. Allow us to visit with Bethany a short while, and she may be reunited with her family within the next forty-eight hours!"

The officer looked at Brains in astonishment. As I've said before, it's always a shock when people come up against Brains for the first time. The officer gulped, nodded, then said, "I'll — I'll see what I can do." He left the room, probably to go to the holding cells. He returned a short time later and said we could go see her. "But I don't think she's going to be happy about this," he said, shaking his head.

We made our way back to the cell Bethany was in.

Hers wasn't much bigger than Ann's had been. Fortunately, there weren't very many people in other cells, so we had some privacy.

Bethany was sitting on her bed, glaring daggers at us once again. The officer opened the door and let us in, telling us that we had only a half-hour.

"What do you want?" Bethany asked, the anger in her voice very apparent.

"To get you out of here," Brains replied before any of us could speak.

"To get me out of here?" she kind of sneered. "You were the ones who put me in here to begin with!"

"I'm aware of that," Brains said. "I can well understand your anger, but if you will calm down, Bethany, I will tell you what I know. And how I plan to catch the real criminal in all of this and get you released." When Brains uses that official tone of his, it always gets results. This time was no different. Bethany looked so shocked that I think she lost a lot of anger. She just stared at Brains, her mouth opening and closing without saying anything. And the look in her eyes was different: for the first time, there was a look of hope.

"Go on," she said at last, quietly.

"I'm now convinced that you were as much a victim of incrimination as Ann," he began.

"But Brains!" I interrupted. "Everything pointed to her being the mastermind!"

Brains nodded. "Correct, Jimmy, and that alone

should have tipped me off. It was too convenient. Someone as intelligent as our mastermind would hardly have been so sloppy, leaving clues like the earrings lying around for us to find.”

“I’d hardly call finding them easy,” I muttered.

“No, not easy,” Brains agreed. “But not precisely difficult either. You and I were lead down a pre-planned path, one which we followed all too eagerly. I’m afraid my own arrogance blinded me as well. I should have been more cautious when approaching a case like this.”

“Brains, what did you find out that changed your mind?” Ann asked.

“One of the first things that stood out was you, Bethany,” he told us.

“Me?” she said, pointing to herself.

“Yes. Last night, when confronted, I kept looking for some signs of you feeling guilty. And there was nothing. Mad, confused, startled. But not guilty, or even nervous. Even when confronted with what appeared to be your printing in the notebook, you still looked more startled than guilty. I kept wondering why. A real mastermind would, of course, want to keep up appearances. But inevitably, something would have slipped out. Further, most masterminds can’t resist gloating some, even if it ends up implicating them.

“But there was nothing there. And when you mother slapped you, there was a tremendous look of sadness in your eyes — but not guilt. By the time your mother had left the room, I was wondering if I’d

made a serious mistake.”

“I thought you seemed odd when you asked your father to get ahold of the police,” I said to Brains.

Brains nodded. “But that was still circumstantial. As you stated, Jimmy, everything still pointed to Bethany. However, after we left the room and started down the stairs, I saw something else, something that really made me realize that you and I had been used to convict Bethany.”

“What?”

“Susan Parker.”

“My roommate?” Ann asked in surprise.

“Just so. I caught a glimpse of her face as the police were escorting you out of the house. She had one of the most smug looks I had ever seen on a person. Talk about gloating! Then I knew who the mastermind behind all of this was.”

“Susan Parker,” Bethany said in a marveling tone of voice. Then she nodded. “Yes. Yes, it all fits. Why on earth didn’t I see that?”

“See what?” Both Ann and I asked it, almost in unison. Before I could add anything further, Ann said, “How on earth is Susan involved in any of this?”

“Susan has been wanting to get elected the president of the Phi Kappa Sigma sorority — not just the Crestwood chapter, but for the entire country! She mentioned that to me one time and immediately regretted it. She tried to pass it off as a joke, but I could tell she was quite serious.”

“How odd!” Ann exclaimed. “She sure never

mentioned that to me.”

“No, she wouldn’t,” Bethany said. “She kept that to herself. But I’ve picked up rumors of her recruiting other girls in our chapter to her side. I’ve been at a loss as to how she convinced them, but now I know: it must have been with the stolen answer sheets.”

“But they had to pay for them as well,” I objected.

“Wouldn’t matter, Jimmy,” Brains put in. He looked at Bethany. “I’m correct in assuming those that rallied around Susan were probably very rich themselves.” Bethany nodded. He turned back to me. “The money would mean little to them, Jimmy. Believe me, they would be very grateful to someone who helped them keep their grades up so they could continue to engage in frivolous activities.” I nodded, and I could see what else he was thinking: some of them were probably part of the gang that attacked me that night.

“Yes, they would,” Bethany confirmed.

I shook my head. “There’s one thing I don’t get, Brains.”

“What’s that?”

“Why the attacks on us? I mean, Susan went out of the way to try and discourage us from our investigation. How was that going to help her to frame Bethany?”

Brains gave me a wry grin. “And what was the result of that, Jimmy? You told me how you felt after the — uh, incident — the other night. Didn’t you say you were more determined than ever to find out who had incriminated Ann?”



“Oh, so I did,” I said a bit lamely.

“And I was as well,” he added. “Susan knew she couldn’t make this too easy for us; that she had to set up some obstacles. But she made sure they were emotionally charged ones, like using a dead Airedale that reminded me of Corky. She was going for the proverbial ‘gut punch’ hoping we would react in anger instead of using our intellect.” Brains let out a sigh. “And in that, unfortunately, she succeeded only too well.”

“But why did she plant Bethany’s earrings like that, if she wanted it to look as though Bethany was the real mastermind?” Ann asked.

Brains turned to her and replied, “Essentially, it was an attempt at misdirection.” He looked at Bethany. “By doing so, it would look as though you were trying to throw off suspicion by making yourself appear to be a suspect.”

“What about the notebook with Bethany’s printing?” I asked.

Brains shrugged. “A forgery, of course. Susan has a background in art, so imitating Bethany’s printing probably wasn’t too much trouble.”

“So all of this was to help get Susan elected sorority president?” Ann asked. She turned to Bethany. “Beth, were you planning on running as well? I’m afraid I haven’t been keeping up with all the political things going on in Phi Kappa.”

Bethany was nodding. “Yes, I was. And with my record of achievement with the ethics committee, and our family name, I thought was a shoe-in to win.”

“Which is what was worrying Susan,” Brains said. “So this was the heart of all these manipulations: you were knocked out of the running for good, allowing Susan to win the presidency.”

“And if know Susan,” Bethany said, “that was probably just for starters. Let’s face it: presidency of a sorority chapter is nice, but it’s not such a big deal in the greater scheme of things. More than likely, this was just a first step to something even bigger.”

Brains nodded. “That’s how I see it as well.”

“By the way, Brains,” I asked him. “Apart from Susan’s expression, what really convinced you that Bethany was innocent?”

Brains turned towards Ann. “Ann, you were the one first started me wondering about that.”

“Me?” Ann asked, surprised. “What did I do?”

“You told me that Bethany actually liked animals.”

“I do!” Bethany stated.

Brains nodded. “So, this morning I paid a visit to your house and talked with your servants. I knew that talking to your parents might be, well, confrontational. But servants tend to hear things the owners don’t. Once I arrived, I asked several of them how you got along with animals, and they confirmed that you had never hurt an animal in your life. And then there was this other animal you were said to have killed.”

“I didn’t!” Bethany exclaimed. “I just found that poor thing lying there with the knife in it. It wasn’t dead, so I tried to remove the knife and stop the

bleeding. Everyone came running up to me as I was doing so. But no one believed for a moment that I'd killed it — not until last night, anyway.”

Brains nodded. “I’ve little doubt it was Susan who did that and arranged for you to be found beside it with the knife. She was also the one who used her own criminal record as a template to create a false criminal record for you and plant it in the sorority files I checked. That, if nothing else, confirmed your innocence and that Jimmy and I had been manipulated every inch of the way. After that, I knew I had to arrange this meeting between the four of us.”

Bethany nodded her head. “All right, we’ve all laid our cards on the table and know where we stand. So, what do we do now?”

“Yeah, how are we going to catch someone like Susan?” I asked. “If she’s really this smart, she probably has some sort of plan to make sure she’s not caught.”

“You’re referring to a contingency plan,” Brains said, showing off as usual. “Correct, Jimmy. Susan has shown extraordinary cunning, except that one time when she let her guard down for a moment. Obviously, we can’t confront her about this; we have no proof. Fortunately, I’ve been thinking about this all the way back to Crestwood and have developed a plan. Rather than trying to implicate her, we’re going to let her do that herself...”

## CHAPTER 9: A CORNERED ANIMAL

So there I was, creeping carefully among the trees and shrubs outside of Crestwood College's Physics building. I had my rain gear on, of course, but I was still getting wet from all the rain; the rain still found a way to get in. Even though I wanted to get inside as soon as possible, I had to make it look good. Brains had emphasized again and again that had to look real, and that if I just bolted for the Physics building without checking, Susan would get suspicious.

I crept up to some bushes by the basement windows of the Physics building. That was my destination. I wrapped on the window, hoping the person inside would see me and let me in. And sure enough, a few moments later a red-haired girl appeared at the window. Both of us looked around furtively, then she opened the window and gestured. "Hurry!" she said. "Get inside quick before she sees you!"

I turned myself around a sort of half-slid into the basement. Fortunately, the girl had thought to put a classroom desk right under the window, so I just had a short drop of a few inches or so. Then I hastily yanked the window closed before more rain and wind could get in.

Down on the classroom floor, I removed my raincoat and hat, then my galoshes. I grimaces, parts of my clothing were still pretty soaked. Brains soon appeared, carrying a tape recorder and microphones.

The girl who had let me in said nothing, but glanced towards the window. I nodded my head. Brains saw our gestures and said, “Yes, she will be here soon. We’d best get this underway before she arrives.”

The girl said, “I thought we deceived her, that she won’t know where we are.” She looked worried.

“It’s a possibility, of course,” Brains answered. “We’ll soon find out.” He finished setting up the equipment. “Come, let’s get started.” I also looked at the other side of the classroom, which was partitioned off with a heavy black curtain. Brains caught my look and shook his head. I sighed. This could be a long night.

The girl sat in a chair by the table, where the recording equipment was. A microphone faced her. Brains pressed the recording buttons and said, “State your name, please.”

“Rita Cantrell.”

“And you were one of the girls whom Susan Parker approached to let you know you could buy test answer sheets from her?”

“Yes, that’s correct.”

“And when did this happen?”

“It was near the end of September, just after I got my first test back.”

“How did you do on it?”

“Awful! I was almost in tears!”

“And many of your other sorority sisters felt the same way?”

“Oh, yes! A bunch of us did.”

And so it went, with Brains asking questions and Rita giving the answers about the whole scheme. When asked what made her want to turn against Susan, she said, “It — it was the way she just let poor Ann take the fall like that! I mean, even though she was cleared later on, I really thought that was kind of mean, you know?”

I was beginning to wonder just how much longer this would continue when we heard the classroom door slam behind us.

“Oh, *mean* was it?” snarled a voice. We turned around even as Rita let out a gasp. It was Susan. And she was carrying a very large, very sharp knife.

“Don’t move, any of you!” she commanded. “Just sit there.” Susan threw Brains a look. “Seriously, boy genius, did you really think I wouldn’t find out that one of my girls was going to spill her guts? Nice try, too, having her give her confession on campus rather than at a police station. That really would have been too obvious. And rest assured, I would have found a way to get to her and shut her up.”

“You don’t dare trying that here, Susan,” Brains said. “You’ll never have an alibi, with Bethany locked up.”

Susan laughed, a very harsh laugh. Made my hair about stand on end. “What, you’ve never heard of having accomplices? Seems Bethany sent one of her girls — why, the very one who punched you in the stomach with the brass knuckles, Jimmy! — and managed to kill you all. And don’t worry, I’ll make

sure the tape is suitably doctored to make it sound that way.”

Brains nodded, and, to my surprise, gave her a look of admiration. “You really have all the bases covered, as the expression goes. In spite of our predicament, I must confess a certain amount of admiration for your plan. You had all the details worked out to the last detail.”

Susan was nodding her head, looking more smug than ever. “You’d better believe that, genius boy! Hah! The way I had all of you running in circles! It was beautiful!” I think Brains was going to ask her for the details. But he didn’t have to.

A moment later she slapped her knee and said, “It was so easy! Almost effortless! Though I must admit,” she turned to me, “having your sister as my roommate really clinched the deal.”

“How do you mean?” I asked her.

“Sister of the famous Benton and Carson detective agency?” Gosh, we were famous now? “What could be more perfect! All along, I’d planned to steal the test answers and frame someone for them, then use that in turn to frame Bethany so that she’d be forced to drop from the race for sorority president. Then Ann turns up as my roommate! I knew right then and there I could use her as bait to make the two of you my pawns in framing Bethany. And if you became discouraged, or suspicious, I knew of some methods to use — like threatening you and your family, Jimmy, or killing the animals — to make you redouble your efforts.”

“How did you plant the evidence in Bethany’s safe?” Brains asked her.

“Bethany invited me over a few times last year,” Susan replied. “During the times she was out of the room, I checked her room over. Didn’t take me long to find the safe, and where she kept the combination. I planted that in the desk drawer, incidentally, just so you would find it. In fact, I had just finished planting the evidence in her safe when you two opened the door the first time, just before dinner. I admit that was the one time I was very worried — I hadn’t expected you up in her room quite so soon. I was just behind the door. Thank heavens for dinner! And the fact that you used the servant’s stairs, but I expected that. Truth be told, the one thing I didn’t expect was you, Jimmy.” She turned and gave me a glare. “I really thought it would just be Brains and his family.” She shrugged. “Still, no matter. It worked out anyway. In fact, probably even better than I could have hoped for. Now, I think it’s time to get rid of a few loose ends.” Susan raised her knife and began to approach.

“Wait!” I said. “How did you manage to find out that one of the sorority girls was going to spill the beans?”

“Hah!” she laughed. “Do you think I’m deaf or something? Rumors began spreading like wildfire this afternoon that one of them was going to meet you two someplace and have a little stool pigeon session. That had me almost in a panic, before I realized I could turn that to my advantage. I figured you wouldn’t go to the police until you heard what



she had to say — she could be a phony, for all you know. Anyway, I realized all I had to do was to follow one of you. And of the two, I figured that you, Jimmy, would be the easiest to follow. And you were! While you went in through the basement window, I just picked a lock and came in through the main entrance. I very quietly opened the door and stood there, listening while Rita here shot her mouth off. But I had no intentions of letting her finish.”

Once more she approached, waving the knife. “And now it’s time to finish this one and for all. And you know, I think I’ll keep this part of the recording! I love listening to my own cleverness!”

“Why am I not surprised?” Rita asked, her voice oddly different.

That stopped Susan for a moment. Her knife was still raised, but she was looking more closely at Rita. “You seem different somehow,” she said, a note of suspicion in her voice. “What happened to the mole on your cheek, Rita? Didn’t it used to be closer to your left eye?” Suddenly she reached out to grab Rita’s hair.

But “Rita” jerked back. “Let me save you the trouble,” Ann said with a laugh, and yanked her wig off. Then she reached up and removed the small brown speck — a tiny piece from a label sticker — from her cheek. “Thanks for telling us everything, Susan. We’ll be sure you get a copy of it to hear in your jail cell!”

Susan snarled, then laughed. “In case you idiots have forgotten, I’m the one with the knife here! And the only thing you’re going to do is to hand that tape

reel over to me. You'd better, or one of you is going to be carried out of here on a stretcher."

"You'd actually kill one of us?" I asked. "In cold blood?"

Susan shrugged. "Hey, I've had no problems killing animals. And while I've never killed a person before, I don't see that there'd be much of a difference. So, which one of you wants to go first? Of course, you could avoid it altogether by just giving me the tape reel."

"And where do you think you're going to go, Susan?" Brains asked.

"Who says I have to go anywhere? Without the tape, it's just your word against mine. You try to tell anyone about this, and I'll make sure you're sued for slander! The Crestwood police certainly wouldn't care. Chief Hadley would probably give me a medal for finally giving him something to hit you two with." I grimaced — she had a definite point. "You have absolutely nothing to gain by refusing, and a lot to lose if you do."

"Well, you do make an excellent point, Susan," Brains admitted. He stopped the tape and switched it to rewind. "Very well, the tape is yours."

She laughed. "Well, you do have some brains after all! Glad to see it." The tape soon reached its beginning and began flapping on the full reel. Brains hastily stopped it, then removed the tape and tossed it to Susan, who caught it easily. She tucked it into a shirt pocket.

"Now, I suggest you just go on about your own

lives and forget about poor little Bethany. Knowing how many political connections her family has, she probably won't be in jail for very long, but more than long enough for me to become president of the chapter, and later the whole sorority. And that's just the start. Once I marry the right man, I'll be climbing up the social ladder not just in this state, but in Washington D.C. as well before long. I'll soon be the real power behind the throne of some Senator or Representative, and maybe even the President! Oh, I'm sure it will make you gnash your teeth and tear your hair a little because you know what kind of girl I was and how you almost stopped me once, but on the other hand, at least you can boast of knowing me before I became a Somebody!" Susan began backing towards the door, not taking her eyes off of us. She didn't notice the partition behind her suddenly drop. "Ta ta, kiddies!"

"Going someplace, Susan?" Bethany asked wryly.

I couldn't help but grin as Susan let out a startled screech and whirled around, her jaw all but hitting the floor.

"Wha — wha — where...?" was all she could manage to ask.

"Where did we come from?" Bethany's father finished for her.

For you see, they were all there: Bethany, her mother and father, Professor and Mrs. Benton, the president of the Phi Kappa Sigma sorority, the lawyer Mortimer Sprawg, Lew Jarmin and several other reporters, even Chief Hadley. I let out a quiet sigh of relief at the sight; I'd been worried sick that the storm

had delayed them. But somehow Bethany had led them all in through the doorway at the opposite side of the room, and managed to keep them quiet throughout Susan's unintentional confession.

"Bethany told us," her father continued. "It seems that Barclay and his friend, Ann and my daughter all got together the other weekend at the police station and talked things out. Rather than try to convince us of the truth, they planned this whole affair to lure you here and have you reveal your plans so we could hear for ourselves."

"And we've heard plenty," Chief Hadley said with a growl. "Enough to have you locked up for years, young lady!"

"You can keep the tape, by the way," Lew said with a grin. He held up a portable tape recorder. "I've got one of my own."

I saw an odd thing then: Susan's face had been almost ashen-white, and she looked on the verge of fainting. Then she began to grin. Susan whirled around and faced Brains. "Well, aren't we the clever one?" she sneered. She began to back towards the far wall still holding the knife, and I remembered what Brains had once told me about how dangerous a cornered animal can become. "But I've always got an ace or two up my sleeve..." Saying that, she gave her purse a couple of squeezes. I heard a kind of static-like sound.

"Susan, what are you —" Bethany started to ask when the lights in the classroom went out. All at once Brains yelled out, "Get her, she's escaping!" Then I heard Ann let out a scream of pain. And a moment

later I did so too, as something sharp scraped across my back. It took me a moment to realize that it must have been Susan's knife. We all heard a door open and close, but the lights in the hallway must have been out as well.

Lightning flickered through the basement windows, lighting up the room for a few moments. That gave Brains time to reach into his bag and pull out a flashlight — a regular one this time. He later told me he'd brought it in case the storm knocked out the power. He shown the light around the room. Ann was clutching her side, blood on her fingers. I raced over to her at once, yelling. But, to my surprise, she held up her hand. "I'm all right, Jimmy. She didn't stab me. Just ran the blade of her knife across my side." Brains kept the light steady as Ann carefully lifted up the left side of her sweater and shirt. Bethany handed Ann some tissues and she wiped away the blood. I let out a sigh of relief when I saw the cut was very superficial.

"Jimmy, we've got to go track down Susan!" Brains said quietly to me as Bethany began dressing Ann's wound. I looked at Brains in surprise. "How, Brains? She could have gone anywhere by now." But Brains shook his head. "No, she can't see in the dark anymore than we can, though I suspect she has a flashlight in her purse. Her accomplice will be getting away as well, but that can't be helped."

"Huh?" was all I could manage. "Accomplice?"

Brains snorted with disgust. "Obviously an accomplice, Operative Three. That must have been a walkie-talkie in her purse. When she squeezed the

purse, she signaled her accomplice to cut the power for the basement. Then Susan injured Ann as a diversion to slow us down and allow her to escape. Now, I memorized all of the possible exits and have a pretty good idea which one she would have chose. But we need to go now.”

So, before I knew it, I was off in hot pursuit with Brains, ignoring the stinging sensation along my shoulders. I just hoped the cuts weren't any worse than Ann's. I scarcely paid them any attention, though. Brains cut down one corridor, then another. Then we ran up a flight of stairs. We'd hardly reached the top when we heard a door closing nearby.

Brains and I raced out into a raging thunderstorm. Further, to my surprise there was even flakes of snow mixed in with the freezing rain. All around us bolts of lightning could be seen, followed by almost deafening claps of thunder. But Brains and I were focused on the beam of light from Susan's flashlight about three hundred feet ahead of us. It soon came to a stop and I could see part of a car outlined by it. Susan was stayed where she was. As we got closer — Brains had switched off his flashlight — I could see her fumbling in her purse, then pulling out her keys. She was further delayed as she hunted through them as well.

We crept up closer, then Brains pulled me aside and we hid behind a tall tree near the parking lot. Brains started to say something, but there followed several flashes of lightning, then the thunder drowned him out. Brains tried again, but he was stopped again — this time by the sound of a gun being cocked.

## CHAPTER 10: THE NOT-SO-GREAT ESCAPE

“On your feet, you two!” barked a voice. We turned around and saw another girl with a small gun pointed at us. She looked vaguely familiar, but I couldn’t call her face to mind. I probably saw her at the sorority. She was short and stocky with muscular arms and a pockmarked face. Her hair was a kind of dirty gray.

“You must be Susan’s accomplice,” Brains said as he rose to his feet.

“Shut up!” she barked, then gestured with the gun. “March!” She led us over to Susan, who was just opening her car.

“Miriam?” Susan asked, clearly puzzled. “What are you doing with these two? Why haven’t you taken off?”

“I found them behind a tree over there,” Miriam answered. “Clearly, they were planning to stop you somehow.”

Thunder cracked again and Susan flinched. She shook her head. “You should have just left them. I was about to get out of here and there was nothing they could have done.” She shook her head, sending water flying. The rain was starting to come down even heavier. Yet the snowflakes continued as well. All of us were shivering, too. “Well, there’s no help for it now. Toss them in the back and keep them covered with your gun.”

“What are you planning to do with them?” Miriam

asked. I was kind of curious about that myself.

Susan motioned for Miriam to step closer. Without taking her eyes or gun off of us, she did so. Susan whispered something into her ear that made Miriam smile. “Yeah,” she said softly, nodding. That made me shiver even worse than the rain.

While Miriam kept her gun on us, Susan opened the back door of her car and motioned for us to get in. Not having any choice, we did so. Miriam got in the passenger side while Susan went around to the driver’s side. She made sure all of the doors were locked. Moments later we took off.

What struck me as being very odd was that although he had been in on the attempted capture of Susan, Chief Hadley was missing. I honestly expected to hear his gruff voice sound out as numerous spotlights hit the car and Susan was forced into stopping.

Little did I know that after Brains and I ran from the room in pursuit, the Chief had paused to make a radio call for additional officers. Then, not knowing which way we had gone, he took off in absolutely the wrong direction. Both he and the three responding patrol cars raced off and away from where we had been forced into the car.

It felt good to be out of the freezing rain and Susan turned on the defroster, which helped warm up the car. I kept hoping Brains would figure a way out of this, but Miriam watched us like a hawk, and kept saying, “Shut up!” every time Brains tried to talk with her.



Susan laughed at one point and said, “Don’t try engaging Miriam in conversation, Brains. She isn’t one for small talk. And she loves using her gun, so don’t be giving her any excuses. That’s one of the reasons I made her my right-hand man, so to speak.” Susan turned and looked at me. “She was the one who held the knives to your throat and stomach, Jimmy. And the one who hit you in the stomach with the brass knuckles.” Miriam gave me a pleased grin, obviously relishing the memory.

We were heading out of town. I could tell that by the direction we were going and what I could see of the countryside when the lightning flashed. I realized we were heading in the direction of Boiling Pond. I looked at Brains and could see that he knew it as well.

Susan must have caught our exchange of glances, because she spoke up again. “Yes, I’m taking you to Boiling Pond, the place where you once found a dummy stuffed in a car and thought it was a body. Well, history’s about to repeat itself, only this time it’s gonna be a pair of dummies!” she laughed, and Miriam grinned once more. I could see why Susan chose Miriam to be her accomplice; there was a look in her eyes that scared me to death. Yeah, I know: poor choice of words.

We were starting to climb up through the hills now, not all that far from where Brains had spent the day tracking me, the day we found Ben’s car in Boiling Pond.

The closer we got to the place, the more I kept glancing at Brains, hoping he was going to come up

with some brilliant plan to save our hides.

“How are you going to escape without a car?” Brains abruptly asked Susan.

“Oh, I have another car, don’t you worry!” Susan said with a laugh. “See, I’d planned on ditching this car anyway and switching to another one. Yes, walking back to town and getting it is going to be a pain, especially in this weather. But it’s a minor inconvenience at worst. Anyway, you’ve got other things to worry about.”

We soon reached the pond. The rain had swollen it to overflowing, so Susan had to drive carefully around to the far side, the place that would make it easiest to push the car in and have it sink. The nearer sides didn’t slope steeply enough. She pulled right up to the edge of the pond and shut off the lights.

“What do you want me to do with them” Miriam asked.

“Shoot them in the foreheads, then remove the bodies. We’re going to strip them and put our clothes on them. Don’t worry, I’ve got more clothes in the trunk — I always carry replacement clothing with me, just in case. Anyway, we might as well make it look as though we’re dead,” Susan replied in a pleased voice.

“That won’t fool the police for long,” Miriam pointed out.

Susan shrugged. “It will long enough for us to escape. It’s going to be some time before this car is even found.”

I was almost paralyzed with fear, thinking my

number had finally come up. But not Brains! While they were talking oh-so-casually about our upcoming deaths, Brains was putting a plan of escape together. All at once he nudged me. I looked at him and he whispered to me: “Act afraid. Beg for your life. Ham it up!”

I caught on at once. Much like that time in Chief Hadley’s office, when Brains needed to take a picture of some evidence, he needed me to be a distraction. Well, acting afraid was one thing I really didn’t have to try very hard at.

“Oh, please please please don’t kill me!” I burst out. That got their attention. “Please I’ll do anything you want just don’t kill me I’ll do anything anything *anything!!*” I had my hands clasped in prayer, tears running down my face, running my words together. Oh, I was pouring it on! Both Susan and Miriam looked at me in disgust.

“You little coward!” Miriam sneered. “Sit back down there and shut the —” As she was saying this, she’d raised her gun to slap me across the face. And that’s all the break Brains needed. Miriam raised the gun up and started it down towards my face.

As she did so, Brains slammed it with his right foot, hitting her directly in the fist. As I’ve mentioned before, Brains has long legs, so his thrust rammed Miriam’s hand right against the ceiling. With a squeal of pain, she let go of the gun. It fell to the floor on her side.

At once Brains and I both lunged for the gun. So did Susan and Miriam. All four of us were jammed into that small space, reaching, gouging, poking,

fingers going this way and that, trying to grab the gun. There was all sorts of swearing and “Get your nose out of my eye!” stuff like that.

I’d just heard Susan cry out, “I got it!” when the car gave a sudden lurch — downwards. We froze. The car lurched again, tilting downwards even sharper.

“Everybody out!” Brains commanded. “The edge of the pond is giving way!”

Believe me, getting out of that tight space wasn’t nearly as easy as getting in was.

The car continued to slide downwards as we thrashed, grabbed, and tried to push our way back out. I felt a blast of cold air and wondered what caused it. I found out a moment later when Susan cried out, “Miriam, you idiot, you’re using the window lever!” I finally extracted myself from the pile, only to see the surface of the pond roll up over the windshield. Water started pouring in moments later. Miriam started to roll the window back up when Brains emerged from the space, struggling with Susan for the gun. Miriam ignored the window and tried to help Susan by attacking Brains. Then I attacked her in turn.

Things really got confused after that. We slid below the surface of the lake, water pouring in relentlessly. It was pitch dark inside the car, the interior lights weren’t on. Moments later, though, I heard — even felt — the unmistakable sounds of the gun firing. Someone screamed. It fired three times, then stopped. I froze, wondering who had fired the gun and who had been hit. Then the water rose up

and over my head. I took a deep breath before it did and felt myself rise up to the car ceiling as it continued downward. I kept searching for any signs of Brains until my lungs felt on fire. I let out a little air and kept looking, but couldn't tell one person from another. Then my site began to grow dim and I knew I had to get out of there. But I was getting weaker by the moment. I felt something grab the collar of my shirt and then I was being dragged somewhere. My head banged against the car, causing me to lose the last of my air, and I felt a line of fire across my shoulder blades. It was the only thing that really kept me awake. A good thing, as I could feel myself moving upwards. Even then, a ring of darkness was closing around my eyes. Then, just as I was about to open my mouth and breath pond water, we burst through the surface of the pond.

It was pouring buckets, but never had breathing felt so wonderful. I gasped and sucked in air, taking in a lot of rainwater with it. At once my vision cleared and I felt some strength returning. I heard someone else gasping for breath. I wasn't surprised when I turned around and saw Brains there. When he finally regained his breath a bit, he motioned to me. "C-c-c'mon, J-Jimmy! Sw-swim for sh-shore!"

Well, I had enough strength by then to do so. Just barely, anyway. We made it back to the former lip of the lake. It was still a struggle to pull ourselves out of the pond; the lip was soft and slick from all the recent rain. We were a muddy mess when we finally got back up on land again.

Both of us were shivering from both fright and the

near-freezing rain. Snow was still intermingled in it, and we even got hailed on from time to time.

“Brains, are you all right? Who got shot?” I had to yell to be heard above the storm.

Brains shook his head, sending water flying. “I don’t know for certain, though it seems likely it was Miriam. Susan still had the gun when it went off.”

I looked back at Boiling Pond which, with all the rain that was hitting it, was really living up to its name. “Are they still down there?”

Brains nodded. “I would presume so, Operative Three. I wish I could have gotten them out, but by now it’s too late.”

“What do we do now, Brains?” I asked.

“Return to Crestwood College,” he answered with a shrug. “It’s the only thing we can do.”

“But Brains, that’s almost five miles away!”

“We’ll try to hitchhike if we can,” Brains said. I saw him turn to stare at something for a moment. I was about to ask what had caught his attention when he motioned for me to start walking. So, supporting one another, we staggered off.

It was hard going at first. Then it got harder. First off, the mud around Boiling Pond alone was almost like quicksand. At one point I stepped on what looked like a very shallow mud puddle and almost sank up to my hips! Brains grabbed a branch and shoved it at me. It was so slick with rain I had a hard time gripping it. That, and my hands being almost frozen. We managed to make it back to the dirt road Susan

had driven up on, but that really wasn't all that much better. Our shoes picked up thick clumps of mud which slowed us down, in spite of it falling off after a few steps. At least the rain made it hard for the mud to pack firmly.

The rain/snow mix continued, along with occasional bouts of hail. The winds were blowing hard as well, and in the wrong direction, almost forcing us to a standstill. Forks of lightning flickered all around us, thunder crashed over us.

Finally we made it back to the main road and started to head back to Crestwood. We had to stay right on the road's thin asphalt shoulder to keep out of the mud. This put us in danger should a car come our way, but there wasn't much we could do about it. We got a bad scare when a bolt of lightning hit a tree about ten yards ahead of us, causing a large branch to fall on the road. The clap of thunder made my ears ring! Brains had us move the branch to the side of the road so no unsuspecting drivers might run into it. It took considerable effort on our part to shove it over, that thing was heavy. By the time we finished, we were almost drained. Then Brains started sniffing and wheezing.

"Brains, are you all right?" I asked in alarm.

He sneezed a few times, then shook his head. "The physical effort," he panted, "plus being immersed in the pond," he sneezed again, "has weakened me, Jimmy. I feel so weak..." Brains almost collapsed, but I caught him. I wasn't feeling all that great myself. My shoulder blades were really burning, for one thing. But I draped one of Brains' arms around

my shoulders anyway and propped him up. “C’mon, Brains!” I said. “This is definitely no place to be taking a nap!” He gave me a weak grin and nodded. He pulled himself upright and we staggered off down the road.

You know, right at this point we would have been so glad to have seen a car or a truck coming down the road. But would you believe we didn’t see a single one? I sure couldn’t. We had to march all the way back to Crestwood College. Even when we reached Crestwood itself, there was hardly a car to be seen. The few that were out all seemed to be heading away from us.

The walk back was becoming a nightmare. We’d barely reached the Crestwood City Limits when Brains collapsed completely on me. I could hear him muttering that I should just leave him there. The heck I would! I picked him up in a fireman’s carry, which really made my shoulders scream. I was tired enough as it was, and this wasn’t helping any. Then both the rain and the wind increased, sending me backwards. Fortunately, the pain from my shoulder blades kept me awake and kind of made me mad as well. So I staggered on towards the Crestwood Campus.

It probably didn’t take as long as I thought it did, maybe twenty minutes or so. Sure seemed like forever before I reached the parking lot where we’d originally been kidnapped. From there, I walked in almost zombie-like fashion towards the doors we’d run out of. My hands were so cold I could barely grasp the handle and latch lever, let alone squeeze them. Finally I had to let go of Brains and use both



hands. The door opened and I staggered in, Brains still draped across my shoulders.

You can't even begin to imagine how good it felt as the door closed behind me, shutting out the wind, rain and cold. I continued putting one foot in front of the other, not even sure just where I was going. Then I heard someone yell, "*Jimmy!*"

I looked up in a daze, saw a pretty, blond-haired girl running towards me. "It's Jimmy! And he's got Brains!" That sounded funny the way she said it, and I cracked a little smile.

Then, as she got closer, I recognized her. "Oh, hi Ann," I said. I felt it was kind of strange of her to be tilting to one side the way she and the rest of the corridor was. Then the floor rudely slapped me across the face and it got dark in a hurry.

## CHAPTER 11: A DUBIOUS CHRISTMAS PRESENT

Things were hazy for a while. I drifted in and out dreams and reality, hardly able to tell one from the other. I heard voices all around me, saw blurry faces, footsteps going this way and that. I thought I saw some enemies of old, like the Joker, Blackie, Borkin, and Devlin all looking and jeering at me. I felt myself being placed on a soft bed and groaned at the pain in my shoulder blades. Bright lights were flashing all around me and I felt myself getting wet from rain again.

Soon all that faded. I was back at the Hawthorne mansion for a bit, wandering around unafraid, but also without purpose. Then I went into a parlor and saw Skeets, Bimbo and the Queen there. She alone looked at me and put some cards on the table, muttering something in a language I couldn't understand. She pointed her finger at me and now I found myself in a room filled with strange machines and blinking lights. A man at a table was there. I began walking towards him. The table he was at was a weird one: it had a glass top filled with glowing pictures. To my surprise, the man was using one of his fingers to move the images around. He could even make them shrink or grow just by dragging his finger across them. He was also holding a small rectangle gadget to his ear. It, too, seemed to glow. He was speaking out loud, but I had no idea who he was talking to, he was all alone. Then he turned to me and

I saw that it was Brains! But he looked so much older, like he was in his sixties or something. His fiery red hair was now almost completely white.

“Jimmy?” I heard him say, his voice was rather faint. He continued to drag one of the images across the glass desk.

“That’s pretty neat!” I told him. “Is that some sort of magic trick?”

He shook his head. “I can barely hear you,” he told me. “Listen, you’ve got to remember this! It’s important. When you get back, I need you to go to...” And wouldn’t you know it: right about then, the room and Brains suddenly became faint and misty. Brains’ voice became so low I could no longer hear what he was trying to tell me.

A moment later the room was gone. I floated in a kind of gray mist. Then, one part of the mist began to grow light. Slowly, the mist started to recede. I thought I heard a gasp, and the sounds of feet on the floor. Something dark got in the way of the bright light.

“Jimmy?” I heard. My vision began to clear and I realized I was looking up at Brains. I tried to answer and heard a croaking sound from my throat. I had to clear it a few times. Then Brains gave me a cup with a straw in it. “Here, sip some of this.” It was just water, but it felt good going down my throat.

I had to clear my throat a few more times before I could make my voice work. “Hey Brains,” I finally got out. I was trying to remember what had happened to us as well as figure out where I was. “What is this

place?”

He smiled. “You’re in a hospital, Operative Three.”

That made me blink. “A hospital? What am I doing in a hospital?” Then I noticed that Brains was wearing a hospital gown as well. I also realized I had plastic tubes going into my right arm. I gasped when I saw them. “Brains, what is this? What’s going on?”

“Calm down, Jimmy,” he advised. “Everything’s going to be fine. Do you remember what happened?”

I continued to mull it over. “Kind of. I remember our plan to trap Susan. And — wasn’t there some sort of commotion? Didn’t Ann get hurt?”

Brains nodded. “Yes, but don’t worry, Ann is fine. She hadn’t been cut very bad — unlike yourself.”

I looked at him in surprise. “What cut? I don’t remember any—” then stopped: I suddenly realized that my back itching like crazy! I hadn’t even noticed it moments before. “Oh, that’s right, she did cut me!” Brains nodded once more. I kept thinking. “Let’s see — didn’t Susan escape? We followed her...” It was so hard to remember! “We were outside ... oh, yeah, that other girl, whatshername? She pulled a gun on us. And forced us into a car. Then we were driven off to...” The rest of it was a jumbled blur. “There was some sort of fight in the car, lots of water, I think I almost drowned ... lots of mud, thunder, lightning rain ... didn’t we move a tree branch off the road, or did I dream that? ... I seem to remember endless walking, and that’s about it, except I vaguely recall seeing Ann, but that might have been a dream as

well.”

Brains smiled at me again. “You’ve just about got it all correct, Jimmy. Considering the circumstances, I’d say your recollection is pretty accurate.” Brains suddenly doubled over, coughing — a harsh, thick sound.

“Brains?” I asked in alarm. He coughed some more, then waved a hand at me. “Don’t be concerned, Operative Three. It sounds worse than it is — mostly thanks to you.”

“To me?”

“Indeed, Jimmy.” He gave me a very sobering look, and I almost thought I saw tears in his eyes. “Indeed, my friend, I might have died had it not been for you.”

“Huh?” I asked.

“Let me explain.” So Brains started filling in the gaps, from the moment Susan was exposed to the others on up to the journey back to Crestwood. As he did so, it all began to come back. I was saying, “Oh, yeah, I remember that!” quite a lot. When we reached the part where Susan fired the gun, I interrupted him and asked, “Brains, why would Susan want to kill Miriam? I thought they were partners.”

Brains shook his head. “I don’t think she meant to. I believe I was her target. But we were grappling for the gun and it discharged. She kept firing it, hoping to hit me with one of the bullets. She must have heard Miriam scream, but was so angry at me that she simply didn’t care. Which stands to reason: from what I could tell, life didn’t mean all that much to

Susan anyway. She was ruthless to the point of being psychopathic.”

“Psycho-what?” I asked.

“That means she is a killer without any feelings of remorse. ‘Stone-cold,’ as the expression goes. In fact, many psychopaths very much enjoy killing.” Brains continued, telling how he managed to grab hold of the window crank and lower it all the way. “I heard Susan blame Miriam for that, but it was actually me. Miriam tried to roll it back up again, though. By then, I was trying to get the gun from Susan.”

After the car sank beneath the surface and Susan had fired the gun, Brains let go of the gun and managed to make his way to the window. He started to swim towards the surface, then realized I wasn’t following him. So he managed to make it back to the car — a slightly lighter dark blur against pitch-black background — grab hold of me and yank me out, banging my head in the process. “My apologies for that, Jimmy, but I needed to get you out of there as fast as possible.” I just nodded, hardly arguing. I noticed that my head did have another lump on it at that. Well, it would match the earlier one. Brains went on to tell me about our walk back, how we supported each other like a couple of drunks, the way the weather got worse, and that yes, we’d moved a lightning-struck tree limb out of the road.

“And that’s really about as much as I can tell you, Jimmy. We walked on a little further, then I abruptly fainted. The next thing I could recall was looking up at Mother and Father from a gurney as it was being loaded into an ambulance. I could hardly talk, but I

did tell them a little of what happened, and about Susan's car being in Boiling Pond, along with Miriam."

I frowned at him. "You mean, with Susan and Miriam, don't you?"

He shook his head. "No, Jimmy. I didn't get a chance to tell you this, but just after we reached the edge of Boiling Pond and pulled ourselves out, I caught a glimpse of someone moving in the bushes nearby — the very bushes you and I hid behind that time we watched Chief Hadley have Ben Carlton's car pulled out of the pond. I have a hunch that Susan managed to escape out the other window, even as I was swimming back to rescue you."

I sighed. "Great. Then she did get away after all."

Brains nodded. "True, Operative Three, but she didn't get away with her plan. And for now, that's the important thing." He bent over, coughing again. I shook my head, then winced at the pain. "Sounds like you caught a bad cold, Brains."

Brains continued coughing a few more moments, then shook his head. "More than that, Jimmy. I came this close —" he held his middle finger and thumb very close together " — to coming down with pneumonia. If you hadn't carried me back to Crestwood and out of the storm, I might have died."

I looked embarrassed. "Well, you pulled me out of the car, so I think we came out even on that one."

He patted me on the arm. "Perhaps so, Operative Three."

That made me look at my arm. "Oh, and what

about these tubes? Why am I hooked up to those bottles up there?"

"Because the cuts in your back were infected, Jimmy," Brains told me. "Most likely due to the pond water. In spite of your shoulder blades protecting you, the slash from Susan's knife was deep. The doctors told me it came dangerously close to your spinal cord." I blanched at that, and Brains nodded. "Thankfully, though, the spinal cord wasn't hit. Anyway, they're pumping antibiotics into you now, and they stitched up the cut. Does it itch?"

I nodded. "Like a million ants biting me," I added.

"Good! That means its healing."

I knew that, of course, and just rolled my eyes. Then I shook my head. "I guess with the storm and everything, its going to be a while before they get to the car."

"They pulled it up just yesterday, Jimmy," Brains said.

I gave him a puzzled look. "What do you mean, just yesterday? We only escaped from the car last night, Brains!"

He shook his head with a grin. "You've been out of it longer than you think, Jimmy. It was a week ago last night that we escaped from Susan and Miriam."

"*A week?*" I gasped.

"A whole week, Operative Three," Brains told me, still grinning. "I'm afraid you were in a comatose state for a bit. We've all been in here at one point or another, waiting for you to wake up: Your parents,



Ann, my parents and myself. I hadn't been sitting in here for long — about eleven minutes, in fact — when you finally decided to stop imitating Rip van Winkle.”

I sighed yet again. “I guess that explains why I feel so weak.” It was true: I felt like the proverbial truck had run over me.

Brains nodded. “That, plus the antibiotics. They’ll keep you in a sleepy state as well.”

“So now what, Brains?” I asked him. “Susan’s still at large and could come back for us, or Bethany, at any moment!”

“Not likely, Operative Three,” he replied. “Keep in mind that Susan’s secrets are now out in the open, so there’s no reason for her to want to inflict violence on us to keep us quiet. And there’s an all-points bulletin out on her, so she could be caught pretty easy if she returns. No, she’s far more likely to flee the state, and very possibly the country too. I’m not saying that maybe one day she might not want to exact revenge on us for foiling her plans. In the years to come we should keep our eyes open. But for now she’s going to be too busy avoiding capture to worry about revenge.”

I nodded. “Well, that’s something anyway.”

“Meanwhile, we have other things to worry about.”

I looked at him sharply. “Like what?”

“Like our parents wanting to shut down the Benton and Carson International Detective Agency.”

“*What???*” I almost shouted in outrage.

“Why are you so surprised, Jimmy?” Brains asked with a wry look. “Here we came close to being shot, drowned, or dead from infection. All in one night! Even as I was being placed into the ambulance, and was still mostly out of it, I had a feeling that this was coming. Even Mother, who is often on our side, is now saying that enough is enough, that we’re children playing a grown-up’s game and were almost killed because of it.” I stiffened at what he said, but Brains held up a hand. “Not to worry, Jimmy. I felt the same way. Your parents were even more harsh, I might add.”

“You shouldn’t have said anything about us being shot at,” I told him.

He nodded. “I was still half out of my mind with delirium when I told my parents and Chief Hadley what had happened to us. So I’m afraid I wasn’t able to control my babbling very well.”

I just nodded. “So, I guess this is the end of Benton and Carson,” I said sadly.

Brains just looked at me, and I swear I saw a twinkle in his eye. And a hint of a grin as well. “Maybe not, Operative Three.”

Before I could ask him what sort of scheme he had in mind, Ann suddenly burst in. “Jimmy!” she yelled, ran over and gave me a big kiss on the cheek.

“Ugh!” I said and immediately wiped it off. Ann just laughed.

“When did you wake up?” she asked, and before I could even answer, she turned to Brains. “Brains,

why didn't you tell us Jimmy was awake?"

"So he and I could have a private talk," Brains replied. "He's been awake about twenty minutes, Ann. Rest assured, I would have soon alerted you of the fact. I just told him how your parents reacted when they learned what happened at Boiling Pond."

Ann turned back to me. "Yes, they were furious at how close the both of you came to being killed. But they were also very proud of you, Jimmy, for carrying Brains all the way back to the campus, in spite of your injuries. Why, even Chief Hadley said," and here she tried to imitate Chief Hadley's gruff voice "— that kid's got guts!"

I laughed at the way she said that, but sobered up fast. "But it sounds as though Mom, Dad, and the Bentons are going to bring our detective agency to an end."

"Not if I can help it!" she cried, rather to my surprise. "And Brains. And Bethany, plus her parents, too! We're not going to let it come to an end!"

I perked up at that. "So what are we going to do to prevent it?"

Brains reached over and patted me carefully on the shoulder. A moment later, Ann did too. "Just wait and see, Jimmy, just wait and see."

And wait is just what I had to do. Nothing further was said about it. Ann talked with a bit longer, then a nurse came in and had them leave the room while I got examined by a doctor. More doctors looked at me, then Mom and Dad came in. So I was prodded, poked, hugged, kissed, and patted for a while.

Brains and I were in the hospital for almost another week before we were released. And back at home, we had almost a ton of homework to catch up on. Brains and I worked together on that, which helped to cut the time down. Then we had to help with one of the lower grade's Christmas pageant: as usual, I did the carpentry work while Brains rigged the lights and sound system. Benton and Carson wasn't out of business, but it was certainly "out to lunch" for a while.

Anyway, we continued to improve. The stitches came out of my back by the second week in December, and Brains's cough improved to the point where he hardly coughed any more, and very shallow coughs at that. Crestwood had another snow storm just in time for Christmas Eve. Ann sang in the church choir once again. But this Christmas Eve passed without incident.

A few days after Christmas, though, we got a call from the Morrows, inviting us to dinner, along with our parents. At the mansion, we were showered with even more presents, and the Morrows gave a toast to us during dinner. Then Mr. Morrow spoke:

"I've heard, Mr. and Mrs. Carson, Mr. and Mrs. Benton, that you feel your children should no longer be, as you put it to me, 'playing detective.'"

Our parents exchanged glances, then Mom said, "Well, we haven't come to any definite conclusions, but surely we can't be blamed for wanting to put an end to this."

Dad spoke up. "Yes. As proud as we are about how both Jimmy and Br— uh, I mean, Barclay have

acted during this whole affair, we can't have them risking their lives like this all the time. They've been in some close shaves before, but this last time was almost the death of them both! No, I think its time they started acting more like kids their age and leave crime to the police."

Mr. Morrow shook his head. "I beg to differ, Mr. Carson. Had I witnessed otherwise, I might have been inclined to agree with you. But after seeing the way they helped clear our daughter's name, after having been tricked into incriminating her, I can see that detective work is something they were meant to do. This is their calling, as it were. I can't say whether they will join the police force, the FBI, or become private investigators when they get old enough, but they should make any law enforcement agency they join proud to have them." Dad looked as though he were going to say something, but Mr. Morrow held his hand up. "And I think that even if you tried to stop them, they would find a way to go back to sleuthing anyway." He smiled at both of us. "The urge to solve a puzzle is very hard to resist, regardless of the obstacles."

I have to admit, Brains and I were very pleased at the way Mr. Morrow stood up for us. Even better, Ann, Bethany and her mother agreed as well. I think that was the clincher: both Mom and Dad were so happy to have Ann out of prison and her name cleared that, in the end, and with some reluctance, both our parents agreed to let The Benton and Carson International Detective agency continue. It was good thing, too, as you'll see in a moment.

For now, Mr. Morrow had one final Christmas present to give us: a full week at his beachfront house near Miami, Florida! Our parents and Ann included, of course. All of them loved that.

“The boys could do with some relaxation in the warm sun,” Mom said. Brains just looked at me and rolled his eyes. I knew what he was thinking: he’d rather be sleuthing than reading a book in the sand or trying to surf (as you may recall, Brains never cared much for being in the water). Anyway, our parents gratefully accepted the offer, and we soon began making plans. What helped was that fact that right after New Year’s, there was some sort of teacher’s training conference going on, so we didn’t have to worry about going back to school until January 5<sup>th</sup>. That gave us practically a whole week.

We soon got ready to go. Before we did, though, I saw Mr. Morrow pull Brains aside and talk to him a few minutes. I didn’t miss the alert look Brains gave him, or the nods I saw. I gave a mental gulp, wondering if something was going to interfere with our vacation plans. Brains might not want to lie around in the sand, but I sure did. I even hoped to get some surfing lessons as well.

Brains didn’t say anything to me as we went out the door, but there was no mistaking the pleased look on his face. I fretted all the way back.

Brains had me come up to the lab, saying that I’d be down in a few minutes. Once we were up there, I said, “Okay, Brains, spill. What were you and Mr. Morrow talking about?”

Brains nodded, still looking pleased. “Only that he

wants me to keep our eyes open for boat thieves, Operative Three. It seems that several have been stolen for a nearby marina. And these aren't ordinary boats, but expensive yachts owned by some of Mr. Morrow's friends."

I sighed. "Well, there goes our vacation!"

Brains grinned at my expression. "Perhaps, Operative Three. But I look at it as an opportunity to rescue you from the excessive boredom a beach vacation can cause. After all, how many times can you look at a seascape without yawning?"

"Guess I won't have the chance to find out!" I griped. I sulked a moment or two, then broke into a grin. "Oh, well, maybe we can find a pirate treasure or two while we hunt for the boat thieves..."