

The Case of the Devious Mastermind

A Brains Benton Mystery

by James MacDonald Carson

with Mark Coomer

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The Kangaroo's Out of the Bag

Panic gripped me.

My friend's phone had been busy for the past hour.

That wasn't like him. Brains hated long calls.

Or maybe he wasn't on the phone at all. Maybe someone had attacked him as he made a desperate call for help. Maybe he was lying on the floor of his apartment, hurt, unconscious—or worse!

I gulped, trying to force the lump out of my throat.

Don't get me wrong. A busy signal doesn't always send me into a tailspin. Any other time, I would forget it and call later. But not this time. I read again the typewritten message clutched in my shaking hand.

THE KANGAROOS HAVE ESCAPED

Maybe those words don't mean anything to you, but to me they mean “Something's up. Something big! Contact me immediately!”

But I'm getting ahead of myself. Before you get the idea that I'm an Australian zookeeper, I had better explain my name is Jimmy Carson and I'm a student at Crestwood College in the small town of Crestwood, USA.

And my friend's given name isn't Brains. It's Barclay. Barclay Benton. He's a student at State University in Middlebury, forty miles north of here.

We're detectives. Or at least we were back in our junior-senior high school days. I know that sounds incredible. But if you ever met Brains, you could believe it.

I had almost talked myself into tearing up the road the sixty minutes it takes to get to his place, when I decided to give his phone one more shot.

I dialed it and someone picked up the receiver in the middle of the first ring! I tried to speak, but my breath caught in my throat.

“Jimmy! Jimmy is that you?” a voice squawked. “I've been trying to reach you for the past hour! Jimmy, are you there?”

It was Brains! He babbled on that way before I found my wits.

“Brains!” I shouted into the receiver. My relief at hearing his voice was like a balloon bursting. “Are you okay? Your phone has been busy for an hour!”

That information slowed him down.

“Most interesting,” he said. “Your phone has been busy as well.” I could almost see his sharp blue eyes gazing into space. “I’ve been trying every few minutes to call you,” he added.

Well, in no time, we figured out that whenever I had lifted the receiver to call him, he had been dialing me, or vice versa.

We had set a world record in synchronized phoning. I made a mental note to call the Guinness Book of Records.

With that mystery behind us, Brains proceeded quickly to his next question. But when I heard what he asked, I couldn’t believe my ears.

“What’s the news, Operative Three?” he demanded. His voice deepened to its normal tone. “Why did you send me the secret code phrase?”

Operative Three had been my cover name when Brains and I worked on cases during our detective agency days. Brains had been X. And despite the implication there were three of us, there had been no Operative Two.

“Me?” I yelped. “I sent you nothing.” We’d had no contact for weeks.

I automatically followed Brains’ lead by using his old code name. “X, you are the one who sent me a message!” I emphasized each pronoun.

His voice leveled to an icy calm as if he dreaded what might be revealed next. “And exactly what words did I send, Operative Three?”

Oh, boy. This situation was seriously creepy.

I backed my story into reverse to set up what had happened. “I came home from a morning class,” I said, thinking hard. “I entered the front door. No one was home because Mom and Dad are visiting Ann in California.”

I paused, recapturing the full picture in my mind. Brains waited patiently. He’s a detail guy and he wanted me to get the details straight.

“As I stepped inside, I kicked something on the floor. Someone had slipped a red envelope through the mail slot. You may remember this incident wasn’t my first experience with a red envelope.”

He maintained silence but I knew he understood. He had used that form of communication with me once before.

“I picked up the envelope,” I continued, “removed the note paper folded in quarters, and read a message typed in all capital letters: THE KANGAROOS HAVE ESCAPED. Immediately after, I began calling you.”

I heard a sharp hiss at the other end of the line. When Brains spoke again, his voice was barely audible.

“Operative Three, we may be under surveillance,” he whispered. “Therefore, listen and say nothing in reply.”

With those words, he disappeared for a moment. If I knew him, he was glancing around to make sure no spy had slipped into his apartment. That was another of his quirks.

I listened to the silence until my ears rang. When he spoke again, he dropped a bomb.

“Brace yourself for bad news,” he muttered. “I received the same message as you—in the same manner and at the same time!”

Creeps! No one knew those code words but Brains and me!

He continued. “We are to convene at your home at once. Do not under any circumstances venture abroad until I have arrived.”

Ha! He had to be kidding. With the likelihood someone had us in his sights, you couldn’t have blown me out of the house with dynamite.

“Are you leaving soon?” I asked. I felt like a kid, but I couldn’t help myself. I needed company.

He ignored my question, but his following words confirmed my fears. “Steel yourself for the worst, Operative Three.” His voice filled with doom. “The firm of Benton and Carson has been infiltrated!”

No Laughing Matter

Two hours had passed since our phone call. Still no sign of Brains. I had expected him sixty minutes earlier.

And that’s when I started worrying.

Nevertheless, I used the time to think through our situation. The KANGAROOS HAVE ESCAPED messages had been delivered to Brains and me at approximately the same time. Since we lived an hour apart, at least two people had executed the caper. Meaning the culprits could be watching both of us at the same time.

I glanced at my watch again. What if those creeps had nabbed him as he came out of his apartment? Or what if they had waited until he was traveling along the winding highway from Middlebury and forced him off the road?

Hadn’t Mikko’s parents been killed in that manner?

For that matter, Skeets’ parents had met their demise in the same way!

Mikko and Skeets were friends of Brains and mine. We had helped both kids on separate cases by recovering missing items for them. And as a byproduct, we confirmed who killed their parents as well.

With those morbid thoughts running through my mind, I made a tour of the house, peeking behind curtains, under beds, and behind furniture. I gave the closets a going over, too, before I double-checked the locks on the doors.

I grabbed a poker by the fireplace and hefted it. Heaven help the attacker who tried to break in! He’d better be a thousand-pound gorilla if he wanted to get the best of me.

My nerves were ready to pop when someone rapped at the back door. I guess I didn’t jump out of my skin. I’m still wearing it.

I crossed through the hall and entered the kitchen, poker at the ready. The shadow of a tall, lanky man lay across the curtain on the door. Brains!

But the shivers started all over. He wasn’t the only string bean in the world. How did I know the shadow was his?

I stood by the curtain. If the guy on the other side wasn't Brains, I didn't want to call out my friend's name. I cooked up a plan and got my lips working.

"Your name and business?" I stuttered.

The answer came immediately, following a procedure we had worked out years ago. "Operative X," came the clipped voice. "Official business."

I yanked open that door like I was welcoming the President of the United States.

"X! For Pete's sake, where have you been? Are you okay?"

I didn't see any signs of violence on him. His clothes were wrinkle-free. His red hair was in place. He glided into the room packing a small satchel at his side. He set the leather case on the kitchen table before speaking.

"Calm yourself, Operative Three. I needed to make certain preparations before departing. To have mentioned my plans to you over an open telephone line would have risked our security."

How do you like that? "That's swell," I retorted. "Couldn't you have come up with a pretext to clue me you'd be late? I've been worrying my head off."

It felt good to get my gripe off my chest. But a lot of good it did. As usual, my friend bypassed my point.

"Please, lower your voice," he warned solemnly. "Our adversary displays unusual cunning. I shouldn't be surprised if he has a listening device trained on one of your windows. By the way, you may wish to secure the door."

Holy cow! In the excitement of the moment, I had left the house vulnerable. I shut the door and snapped the bolt.

"Now if you will please drop that fireplace poker and extend your hospitality, I'm in need of a drink. A cold milk will do, thanks."

As I grabbed the milk carton from the refrigerator, I spied a dish covered with aluminum foil. I knew what that meant. My stomach growled. "Hey, how about a roast beef sandwich? They say straight milk isn't good for the belly."

A smile filtered into his voice. "I shall be glad to partake of the Carson delicacy known far and wide as a roast beef sandwich. And don't spare the pickle. I'm famished."

That made two of us. Well, it didn't take long for an old pro like me to whip up two masterpieces smothered in layers of dill pickle.

"Ketchup or mayonnaise, old friend?" I asked.

"Both, please," he answered without batting an eye.

Ugh! To each his own. Give me one or the other, but not both.

By the time I had drained the milk from my glass to wash down the last bite of my sandwich, I was raring to give Brains the dope on my theory. And I did.

"So there has to be at least two of them," I finished.

He frowned.

"Not necessarily, Operative Three. Someone may have deposited the message immediately after you departed for class. You may have discovered it more than an hour after it was delivered. It may only be a coincidence we found our red envelopes at the same time."

I hadn't thought of it that way.

"Nevertheless," he continued, "I am inclined to agree with your position. More than one individual may well be involved. You see..."

He lowered his voice to a whisper. He glanced from side to side before continuing. "You see, Jimmy, someone followed me from Middlebury!"

I had expected he might get tailed. But hearing the words still rocked me. I didn't bother to ask how he knew he was followed. Not much gets by that foxy redhead.

"Did you shake him when you got to Crestwood?" I crossed my fingers on both hands.

"Indeed not," he replied nonchalantly. "Conversely, I slowed to catch a red light on Washington so as *not* to lose him. I deliberately led my shadower here, to this very domicile."

I lifted my hands. "Have you lost your mind?" I wailed. "We have no idea who this guy could be. Maybe he's a whole gang of guys, X! We don't know who we're messing with!"

"Exactly so," he said in that clinical way he has. "Therefore, Operative Three, we must flush the mystery man, or men, out of hiding. I predict a stroll from here to the Sunny Spa will accomplish our objective."

The Sunny Spa is a teen hangout located on Washington Avenue across the street from Crestwood Junior-Senior High School. The popular soda shop is located only a few blocks from my house.

"Now I know you're missing a screw," I spouted. "How do we know these kooks aren't Devlin and his counterfeiting gang, back for revenge? How do we know these guys aren't the drug cartel come to settle with us?"

"Highly unlikely," he replied airily. "Unless you divulged our secret code words to one of the many felons we placed in the penitentiary."

He had a point. And he was dangerously close to reminding me I had spilled the beans to the enemy on more than one occasion.

But who else could it be? Who?

Then it hit me. I stood up.

"The only other person who ever figured out what those words meant was my mother," I said, dishing out the sarcasm. "And I seriously doubt Mom is involved in this."

Brains spoke sternly. "What is it reporters say at the *Crestwood Daily Ledger*, Jimmy? 'If your mother says she loves you, check it out.'"

"Very funny, X." I scowled at him as he chuckled.

Profile of a Mastermind

"Okay, X, I'll give." I plopped into my chair. "If the messages aren't a revenge plot, then who's behind it?"

"I'm not certain who. But I can tell you about him."

He placed his fingertips together, forming a temple. He peered over them, preparing to speak.

Here it came. X formed all his conclusions using observation and deduction. You can understand why, for an average guy like me, waiting for Brains to speak is like waiting for an oracle to prophesy.

“Our mystery man is our age or younger,” he recited in his best Sherlock Holmes manner. “He is, however, no younger than sixteen years old. He is from out of state. He hails from a stable family of modest means. He is highly intelligent. He is methodical, yet inventive. He is manipulative, strong-willed, even belligerent at times.”

He leveled his eyes at me. “However, I cannot yet determine his motive.”

I stared at him. My old partner in detection had pulled rabbits out of his hat before, but never on such little evidence.

“Oh. Is that all you can figure?”

He observed me. “On what basis do you disparage my conclusions?”

“By what means did you reach your conclusions?” I shot back. “It is not possible to get that much information from a typewritten message! Or have you invented a crystal ball?”

“My observations are commonplace.” He removed his spectacles and cleaned the lenses with a handkerchief. “I hypothesize. Whereas an older man might take a bolder, more direct approach, this fellow’s plan is both inventive and cautious—even, if I may say, playful—indicative of a youthful mind. Hence, our stalker may be not much older than we—and probably younger. It is evident he has a driver’s license. Thus, he is no younger than sixteen.”

Psychology! How could I debate such a muddy subject? “Yeah, but, X, why do you assume he’s from out of state?”

He examined the lenses by holding them to the light and returned the glasses to his face. “An inspection sticker on our suspect’s windshield does not match our state’s. I could not, however, observe well enough by way of my rearview mirror to identify which state had issued it.

“*As for his family,*” he raised a finger before I could ask, “his automobile is not expensive. It is an older model, obviously used. On the other hand, it is not what one may call a clunker. Therefore, although he derives from a financially modest household, his parents either helped him with his payments or instilled in him an admirable work ethic. Based on the balance of the evidence, I am inclined to favor the latter.”

He opened his palms and produced a bland smile. “Elementary, Operative Three.”

I chewed on that for a minute. But I still suspected Brains had gilded the lily. And I wasn’t going to let him get away with it.

“Yeah, well, what’s the ‘intelligent and methodical’ stuff? You can’t tell that from what he drives.”

His eyebrows shot up. “Why, Jimmy! Such an obvious conclusion should not escape even you!”

I went into a slow burn.

He continued, ticking off his reasons one by one. “We must divine the young man’s nature from what he has accomplished thus far. Using the information at his disposal, he departed from his home state and tracked us down. He is, therefore, quite tenacious. Furthermore, to confirm his findings, he concocted a scheme to flush us out.”

“Flush us out?”

“Yes, of course. That is why he sent the same coded message to us both. If we immediately met in conference, as we have, then we were his men. He had only to watch and see. A most ingenious solution! He played us well.”

It got my goat, the way his eyes shined with admiration.

I took a last shot. “None of what you’ve said explains how he knows the ‘kangaroos’ code words.”

He shrugged. “A mystery we shall solve.” And that was that.

“Great,” I said. “We played right into his hands. Looks as if we’re dealing with a mastermind, X.”

“Quite so, Operative Three. But come! Let us turn our feeble minds toward a plan of counteraction.”

“All right.” I gulped. “We’ll do it your way. What’s our next step?”

Brains’ idea to lure our shadow into the open started looking better. But the laugh would prove to be on us! We didn’t realize it at that time, but cornering the mastermind was much easier said than done.

Partners Again

“Excellent, Operative Three,” X’s face beamed with approval. “We simply lure our opponent into the service alley between the Sunny Spa and the Vine Street Garage. And we nab him!”

That was his great plan? I had expected a master plot to capture a mastermind. Despite what I had said, I had more kick left in me.

“Dark alleys, Brains? That’s a sure formula to get our heads knocked in! I thought we wanted to force his hand in public. You know, in broad daylight.”

“I foresee little or no danger,” he replied loftily. “Our target is, after all, not a hardened criminal. Now, let us dawdle no longer, Operative Three. The firm of Benton and Carson expects every man to perform his duty!”

It all came rushing back. We hadn’t worked a case in four years, but here he was playing the hotshot detective. The Benton and Carson International Detective Agency existed no longer. I had resigned from the firm. And Jimmy Carson didn’t take orders anymore.

I figured the time had come to take him down a peg.

“You forget yourself,” I said. “We have no organization. Remember?”

All expression drained from my friend’s face.

I continued pounding home my point. “Despite all your fancy deducting, you could be flat wrong. Did you think of that? What if this guy isn’t a kid? He may have a gun! So what do you want to do? Lure him into a dark alley, a place this maniac would love to catch us. If that’s your plan, count me out!”

As a dressing down, it was a doozy. So why did I feel like a candidate for the Heel of the Century award? I knew from our history that Brains’ maneuvers usually came through with flying colors.

He spun around in his seat and dragged the leather satchel to a position in front of him. He released a couple of snaps, flipped open the top, and dug inside.

“Say, what’s in there?” I asked suspiciously.

If his voice had drifted out of a deep freezer, it couldn’t have been more covered with frost. “The function of the object need not concern you, Jimmy. Since you are reluctant to proceed with this case, I shall handle this assignment alone.”

I went into a quick boil. There he was, being the boss of me again. Who did he think he was, excluding me?

“In a pig’s eye, you will,” I spat. “Like it or not, I’m part of this operation, too. There may be a dozen goons out there waiting to grab you. I’m coming, and that’s that!”

I groaned at my own words. Talk about flip-flops! All I needed was a towel and I was ready for the beach at Lake Carmine.

Brains shook his head. A smile tugged at his lips as he pulled a contraption out of the leather case.

“What’s with the box thing?”

He fiddled with a switch on the side of the rectangular machine. “This, Jimmy, is a portable tape recorder. The latest model, I might add.”

His voice had thawed considerably. If my friend is anything, he’s forgiving.

“You should have patented the portable tape recorder you cooked up the summer before eighth grade. You could have made a mint.”

He shrugged. “I am certain by the time I made my design marketable, new technology would have rendered it obsolete.”

He popped a tiny cassette device into place.

I took a closer look at the gadget.

“Wow. I can’t believe the size of those little reels.”

I was impressed. “Neat. Now, what’s the point?”

“We are setting a trap,” he replied proudly. “We shall record a brief conversation designed to entice our stalker to approach our position. The better to spy upon us, he will believe. We, however, will conceal ourselves in another nearby location. Then, when the spy, intent on hearing our plans, discovers the hidden tape recorder, we corner him.”

I still wasn’t buying it. “Your plan is too simple if you want to catch this sharp character.”

“I believe, in this case, simplicity is our strength. Complexity would only offer our clever opponent greater opportunities to uncover our trap for him.”

I guessed it made sense. I pictured a machine. The more moving parts it has, the more things can go wrong with it.

"I suppose so," I admitted. "Devlin wasn't an idiot, but you decoyed him and his cronies into the woods with a taped recording of your voice."

"Precisely," Brains commented with satisfaction. "And don't forget, a radio transmitter and receiver deceived Terry Dexter into believing we were hiding in your tool shed."

I rolled my eyes. "Terry was a kid. Fooling her was a piece of cake."

He frowned. "That's not how I remember her."

Come to think of it, he was right. She had been a step ahead of us more than once. But through her interference, she had nearly destroyed our case against Devlin.

Creeps! She nearly got us all killed!

"By the way," said Brains. His switch to a casual tone raised my suspicions. "I bumped into Terry on campus two weeks ago. She has set her sights on attending State U this fall."

"Is that so? If you ask me, the kid is aiming a little high."

He focused intently on the rewinding tape but continued to speak. "She asked about you."

"Yeah?" I asked uncomfortably. "Well, I'm still alive and living in Crestwood."

"She is aware of that fact. But she mentioned an unanswered card she mailed to you this past December."

Aha! I knew it. She was using Brains to get to me.

"Talk straight. You didn't bump into Terry, did you?"

He snapped the off switch on the recorder and plugged a small microphone into a receptacle on the side of the box. "You might rather say Theresa bumped into me."

"Right," I said sarcastically. "Bumped into you like a bloodhound on your tail. And what's with calling her Theresa?"

He stopped messing with the recorder and looked at me, his blue eyes wide with innocence. "Why, that is her true name, the name she uses now," he replied. "And if I must say so, James, she does fit the adult form of the name well these days, both in mind and, er..." He stammered slightly, an unusual malady for him. "And in appearance."

Good grief! My buddy was having a stellar day. First, he had pulled his commander-in-chief routine. Next, he was Brains Benton, matchmaker.

"Forget it!" I replied hotly. "For Pete's sake, Brains, she's in high school."

"Soon to graduate in three weeks. And you are a college sophomore. Not exactly a May-December romance," he observed coolly.

Suddenly, I wanted to clobber him. "There is no romance," I growled.

"Anger, Jimmy? An odd reaction to the attentions of a beautiful girl. However," he interjected as my fingers twitched at the prospect of strangling him, "let us give the matter no more thought. We have a dialogue to tape."

I wanted to tell him I hadn't given Terry a single thought until he forced me to do so. Then I realized she did cross my mind, occasionally. What I mean is, I hadn't tossed away her Christmas card. It was still in my room somewhere. Like on top of the chest, I think. She had written that it would be nice to see me again.

Brains had called her beautiful. Had she changed that much? She was visiting colleges. Brains said she had developed both in mind and....

Brains said, Brains said, Brains said! I didn't care! My girl, Cindy, and I were getting along fine, thanks.

Then I remembered Terry's father, Jeremy Dexter. The last time I had seen him, he had looked so frail, popping those nitro pills and all. But he must have been doing better lately if he planned to help her through college.

I had always meant to drop by and visit him again.

I decided I would. And soon.

Nothing wrong with that.

"Jimmy? Jimmy?" Brains' voice caught my attention like a light appearing through a fog.

"Wha—what?" I stuttered.

"I was saying it doesn't matter what we say so long as it has to do with us receiving the 'KANGAROOS HAVE ESCAPED' messages."

"Right." I gazed at the microphone set on the table between my partner and me. "Right," I repeated. "I'm ready."

He nodded, and pressed the record button, giving me the go sign. We adlibbed for twenty minutes, an easy task for either one of us. We acted our parts with enthusiasm, but I doubt if we will wind up in a Hollywood movie any time soon. The melodramatic stuff we said would have made a swell script for an old-time radio show.

Brains snapped off the tape recorder and called it a wrap.

"Commendable work, Jimmy. I foresee an Oscar in your future."

My chest expanded a few inches, though I knew he was buttering me up to follow him through the next step of his plan.

That step, as it turned out, was through my back door.

Did I have cold feet? No, but the little man running up and down my spine sure did.

My partner led the way, moving around the sunny side of the house and cutting across our front lawn toward Maple Street.

"Act naturally," warned Brains under his breath. "We must appear unaware of our stalker's presence."

He began to whistle an aimless tune.

Be natural, he'd said. The thought of hidden eyes watching our every move—eyes belonging to someone who had breached our secret lives—made my legs wobble like jelly.

Every tree along Maple Street was a hiding place. Every wall, every fence was a place of ambush. The sun was shining but the world turned dark and scary.

Deep down, I didn't have confidence in my friend's theory. If it proved wrong concerning any angle of this case, we could forfeit our lives!

My Theory

My knees quaked as we headed down Maple Street. Take a deep breath, Carson, I ordered myself. If our follower smells a rat, he might bolt. And we might never catch him.

I had found my gait when Brains cornered south onto Franklin Avenue.

"X, what gives? I thought we were going to the Sunny Spa!"

"Patience, Operative Three. We shall achieve our goal. First, we must run several errands downtown, however."

"Errands? What could be more important than our mission? Is your mom late on her electricity bill?"

"Speak quietly," he hissed. "We must not appear agitated."

He regained his composure, and said, "We must assess the challenge we face before we attempt the trap. We must force our stalker into view for a moment, however briefly. Only then can we commit ourselves to a plan of operation."

I thought we had committed. But leave it to Brains to test his hypothesis first.

Our first stop was the public library on the corner of Taylor Street. You can't miss it with those two stone lions guarding the entrance. We bounded up the wide, stone steps and into the cool, dark foyer. The building had been erected sometime back in the Twenties or Thirties. The interior was done in a style they call Art Deco. The polished floors and metal chandeliers are neat to see.

We didn't waste time. Brains grabbed the nearest book on the new non-fiction shelves, and we headed straight to the desk to check it out.

"Interesting choice, Barclay," giggled Miss Blanch, the librarian.

Brains gulped. I snatched a look at the title and shuddered.

"UFOs: The Project Blue Book Coverup."

He smiled wanly at Miss Blanch, and we hustled for the door.

"Little green men, X?" I asked.

"Don't be an idiot," he snapped. "I didn't examine the title any more than you did."

We halted in the dark foyer to spy through a narrow window into the bright street.

"No sign of our shadow," said Brains. "But, of course, we wouldn't expect him to sit on the steps and wait for us."

"No," I agreed. "But he might be hovering in his saucer above the library."

He shot me a withering glance and led the way outside.

Out on the steps, I caught a glance up and down Franklin Avenue. Not a soul lurked anywhere.

As we set our feet toward Crestwood's main business district, I relaxed. Maybe no one had followed us, after all. Maybe we had blown this whole case

out of proportion. Maybe the person who sent those messages to us was a prankster.

I cheered up. For some reason, my thoughts drifted to the Christmas card I got from Terry. And somewhere in my flux of thought, an uninvited idea, a terrible idea, entered my mind. My heart thumped harder as the concept grew.

“X, I have a theory,” I stammered. “A theory about who sent those messages.”

Brains likes my theories. They’re fun to poke holes in. But I guess something in my voice made him take notice. He fixed me with his eye as we walked side by side.

“Speak, Operative Three.”

I paused for a moment as I figured out my best approach.

“When did you say you spoke to Terry at State U?”

“Two weeks ago.”

“Did she take the bus from Bleeker City?”

“No, she traveled with her father.”

“He drove?”

“She drove. Jeremy Dexter is restricted by his health.”

The thought of Terry Dexter behind the wheel of an automobile froze me to the marrow.

I had one more question. “The guy who followed you from Middlebury to Crestwood today. Can you describe him?”

He shook his head. “He wore a ballcap, but he maintained a distance well behind me and I perceived only his form behind the wheel. I can’t even say with full surety he was a—”

Brains braked so suddenly that I continued three steps beyond him. I almost stepped off the curb onto Main Street.

I turned toward him. This time, he didn’t dismiss me with a wave of his hand. The detective stood on the corner, running his fingers through his red hair.

“It can’t be,” he murmured. “It simply cannot be.”

“I think it can be.” My gut twisted at the thought. “She did track you down, X. She did ask you about me. And now here we are.”

My partner looked positively sick.

“I think it may be her, X,” I said. “I think our stalker may be Terry Dexter.”

That Creeping Sensation

Brains stopped tearing at his hair.

A triumphant smile spread across his face.

“Theresa couldn’t have sent us those messages,” Operative Three,” he declared with obvious relief.

“It’s not as if I want it to be her, X. But why not?”

“Think! Bleeker City is in this state. The automobile that tailed me had an out-of-state inspection sticker.”

We stood on the street corner by the First National Bank. And for a few seconds, we both forgot we could be under observation.

“Yeah, but X. Jeremy Dexter once told us he buys his cars from his brother’s car lot across the state line. That used car could have an old inspection sticker on the windshield.”

The dark cloud settled over his head again.

It hit me that we had reversed roles. For once in my life, I had stumped Brains Benton.

He tugged at his earlobe and thought.

He had already pinned the caper on someone besides Terry, I realized. Not as if he had shared his suspicions with me. No, Brains likes his solutions neatly tied with a bow before he presents them to anyone. Even his best friend.

I felt a sense of guilty pride. I sure had upset his apple cart. At the same time, I felt plain awful. If Terry had sent those messages, it revealed a side of her I found disturbing. And disappointing.

And it finally got through my thick skull: Brains genuinely liked her—another reason she hadn’t entered his mind as a suspect.

He straightened quickly as if brushing aside the question like cobwebs. “We must not loiter. We may arouse suspicion. Come, follow me.”

I hoped he would say Bennett’s Drugstore was a good place to begin. I was in dire need of a Cherry Fizz. Instead, he headed the other way down Main Street. I followed, breaking into a trot to keep up with his long-legged stride.

“Slow it down, X,” I muttered. “We’re supposed to be running errands, not competing in the space race.”

If he heard me, he gave no sign. He did slow, but only to turn in at the door of the post office. Once inside, he paused, hands on his hips, and sighed. I think he’d lost confidence in his theory—whatever it was.

He took a deep, shuddering breath to simmer down. We drifted over to one of the tables at the front of the long room.

He lifted a pen chained to the table. He randomly plucked a blank form from a tray and started filling it out. That action was a cover.

We faced the broad front windows, a great place from which to see up and down Main Street.

My eyes scoured every passing face. I noted each car. I examined every street corner, every doorway, and every window. The view was clear part way down Lafayette and Jefferson streets. Plenty of people were out and about this sunny afternoon. Some were taking a lunch break. Some were shopping. Most were familiar. None looked suspicious.

Brains searched, too, his eyes darting this way and that. I knew he was recording everything with his eidetic memory. A week later, he’d be able to describe to a T everything happening on Main Street that day.

Five minutes passed.

Five more slid by.

“X,” I whispered, “I don’t think we’re being followed. It’s just another day in Crestwood out there.”

“Perhaps you are correct, Operative Three,” he answered forlornly. “Unless our opponent is highly trained in the techniques of surveillance.”

That’s when we felt it—that creeping sensation you get when someone stands too close behind you, outside your range of vision.

My partner and I both tensed. But before we could whirl around, a voice laughed in our ears.

“A fine pair of detectives you two are,” she said.

We turned, and Brains’ jaw hit the floor. His blue eyes popped behind his glasses.

I knew I didn’t look any cooler than he did.

How could I? Because there stood Terry Dexter!

But she wasn’t the Terry I knew. The freckle-faced tornado had long ago vanished, of course. But gone, too, was the gangly teenager who had entered high school my junior year.

She was tall, lean, and brown, Crestwood High’s favorite track star, according to the *Crestwood Daily Ledger*. Her dark hair was gathered in a long ponytail. Her hazel eyes gleamed with amusement.

“Theresa!” gasped Brains. An expression of disaster covered his face. His mouth worked like a fish out of water.

Terry giggled. “If I was following you two,” she bragged, “I could have stabbed you both in the back.”

That sealed it for me. Of all the stunts! I went into a fast burn.

“Maybe,” I growled, “you already have.”

A Perfect Epithet for Myself

Long hair, thick lashes, miniskirt.

Terry was pretty, but our encounter sure turned ugly.

“You’d better be kidding,” she said. And she meant it. “What do you mean by saying I stabbed you in the back?”

“Jimmy and I are working undercover, Theresa,” explained Brains, moving to smooth her ruffled feathers. The post office was busy, so he lowered his voice. “Jimmy simply overstated his concern. You know how excitable he is.”

She stared at me as if I’d crawled out from under a rock. “*Overstatement* is an understatement.”

“Thanks a lot, old pal,” I said to him. I was heavy on the sarcasm.

He ignored my remark, but I was going to have my say. I knew she was mixed up in this mess somehow.

“And what are you doing here?” I shot at her.

“Wasting my precious time, apparently.” The scorn ran deep. She made a big display of turning away from me and focusing all her attention on my partner. “What case are you working on, Brains?” she asked, smiling.

I could almost see the gears turning in his head as he calculated the risk he would take by blabbing about our business.

Then he spilled the works.

“We have reason to believe we are being followed,” he answered using his official voice. “An unknown person has contacted Jimmy and me using classified language privy only to the officers of the Benton and Carson International Detective Agency.”

Anyone overhearing might have thought we had offices in New York, London, and Paris.

Terry was processing what he said when I added, “Yeah. And we are so sure you couldn’t possibly have anything to do with that.”

Her head snapped around as if it was mounted on a spring. Her eyes darkened with thunderclouds. “What are you implying?”

Maybe it was because I thought she had let us down. Maybe that’s why I couldn’t keep my yapper shut. To tell you the truth, I don’t know what drove me. But I do know I let her have it.

“Put it together, sister,” I blurted. “A couple of weeks ago, you tracked down Brains at State U, asking questions about me. Today, he and I received messages using a code known only to us. But we didn’t send them to each other. Now, I wonder who did.”

Terry recoiled as if she had found a worm in her spaghetti.

“I cannot believe I wanted to see you again, Jimmy Carson! You are still the same arrogant, condescending...”

She sputtered, searching for the right epithet. I was cringing at the prospect when Brains butted in.

“Theresa, permit me to explain. You are no longer on our list of suspects. Jimmy is only—”

“So I was on your *list*! Is that what you think of me? I’m tired of you explaining Jimmy to me, Brains Benton. He can speak for himself. And, believe me, he’s said quite enough.”

She turned to leave.

Brains had put his foot in it. But my foot wasn’t finished.

“You never told us how you happened to be here in the post office,” I demanded.

My words brought her back. She reached into her bag and whipped out a flat package wrapped in cellophane and shoved it under my nose.

“The Project Gemini stamps I ordered from Yemen arrived. Is that okay with you creeps?” She hurled the last word like a javelin.

Terry often acted as a buyer for her dad’s coin and stamp exchange business in Bleeker City.

Brains shook his head. “Theresa, I assure you—”

“Why aren’t you in school?” I persisted.

That was the moment her anger turned into pure hurt. Her eyes misted and she stared me down.

“We had a half day,” she whispered. Her voice had gone husky. “Teachers conferences.”

She spun around and marched away on long legs.

We watched her leave. I called her name as she put her hand to the door. Then she was gone.

You’ve turned on the defroster in your car and watched the mist on the windshield disappear in seconds, right? That’s the way the fog lifted from my mind by the time Terry hit the street. Suddenly, I could think of a perfect epithet for myself to complete her unfinished sentence.

Brains let out his breath like a tire with a fast leak.

Why did I feel as if I had made the biggest mistake of my life?

We stood, gazing at the door.

“Why?” he asked.

I shook my head and sent my shoulders into a slow-motion shrug.

“She sure is mad at me,” I mumbled.

“Not as angry with you as I’ve seen her before.” He made the situation sound hopeful.

I understood the point he was making. She was almost eleven the first time I met her. She had decked me with a hard right. Come to think of it, she had knocked the wind out of my partner in detection the next day.

Brains led the way outside. As he held the door for me, he said, “I cannot fathom what it is about Theresa that frightens you so.”

I blinked in the bright sunshine. Me? Scared? “Why would I be afraid of that kid?”

But the word “kid” rang as flat as a counterfeit coin. She had shot down two college men quicker than the Bloody Red Baron.

I saw no sign of her either up or down Main Street.

“Nothing can be done for it,” Brains said resignedly. “Let us carry on with our mission.”

After our encounter with Terry, I was prepared for anything.

Enough Hostility for One Day

“Where to, Chief?” After my boneheaded performance, I was ready for anybody but me to take the lead.”

“A visit to Pruett’s stationery store is in order,” he answered.

“Creeps! Don’t you think we’ve faced enough hostility for one day?” I begged. The owner of the store, Sarah Pruett, had despised us since the day we disproved her testimony in the trial of Will Parslow years ago.

“Keep your mind focused and your eyes open,” he said, ignoring my remark. “We may yet uncover our pursuer. We must, however, appear nonchalant. So saunter.”

I figured the guy who was after us had lost interest by this time. He was a teenager with too much time on his hands. He had pulled off those kangaroo messages, thrown a little scare into us, got his laughs, and it was over for him.

So off we strolled down Main Street. Brains shuffled his big feet, humming under his breath as if he hadn’t a care in the world.

We cut through the big parking lot behind City Hall, crossing the block to Pruett’s stationery store. I understood Brains’ plan. He was leading our shadow around corners and through open spaces, trying to force him into our view.

After we rounded the corner to the street side of Pruett’s building, we halted. With his back to the brick wall, Brains craned his head around the corner, peering across the parking lot. He ducked back.

I knew he had seen something! The butterflies in my stomach revved their wings.

“For Pete’s sake, X, what is it?”

“A boy, winding his way through the automobiles,” he hissed. “I can see only his head and shoulders. But he corresponds to the age I predicted. And he is moving quickly in our direction!”

I stepped toward the corner for a look, but he raised his hand.

“Don’t risk it!” he squeaked.

“Me? You’re the one with hair like a red light.”

He didn’t argue. He motioned with his arm, and we slipped along the front of the store until we were under the large awning. He led the way inside.

The door closed behind us with a jangle of bells. The stench of potpourri assaulted my nostrils. I detest the stuff.

I squinted as my eyes adjusted to the dim lighting. Old Sarah Pruett was the queen mother of this castle and, believe you me, I would have rather faced a hundred crazed pursuers than deal with her.

She wasn’t seated at the old wooden counter, but that didn’t mean she wasn’t lurking behind the racks of gifts or trees of greeting cards filling her floor space. I could imagine us running smack into her as we made our way through the maze of merchandise.

“Have pity, X,” I whimpered. “Let’s beat it out of here while we still can.”

“We have nothing to fear, Operative Three. A dime is worth more than a grudge to Sarah. And I intend to make a purchase. Please keep your eyes on the front. Our follower may show himself.”

Nothing ever bothered the guy. I swear he enjoys danger and confrontation.

He wandered over to a rack of birthday cards and lost himself in choosing the right one. I knew his mother’s birthday was coming, so I didn’t ask.

And me? I was wishing my eyes grew on stalks like a caterpillar so I could see in two directions at once. I would glance out the wide window to see if someone

was spying on us. Then I would scan the store, expecting old lady Pruett to jump out from behind a display.

Presently, the creaking of an old wooden stairway informed me Sarah had been upstairs in her living quarters. She descended carefully, one slow step at a time. My teeth chattered like castanets. The scene was straight out of a horror show. First, her slippered feet appeared, then her skinny legs, then her rounded, stooped torso draped over with a shawl. By the time her wrinkled face materialized, I was ready to zoom out of that building, screeching like a banshee.

"Brains," I moaned, plucking at his sleeve. "Brains, she's here!"

"Calm yourself, Operative Three." He reached forward as cool as a mortician and tugged on a card and envelope. "I have selected my purchase."

We stayed put, however, waiting an eternity until she ensconced herself behind the counter. When she finally settled in, we rushed over, and he bought the greeting card.

She wasted no words as she rang up the purchase on the ancient cash register. None of us spoke any words at all. She *hmphed* as she handed Brains his change, and we made tracks for the door.

"Brother!" I said as we lingered in the shade of the awning. I gulped two deep breaths of fresh air. "I don't get how anyone can breathe that perfumy stuff all day."

"It is decidedly nasty," he agreed. "A substance belonging solely to the domain of femininity."

His eyes flicked around. So did mine. No sign of the boy he had described. Only the sounds of traffic rising in the heat of the early afternoon.

"Are you sure, X"? I asked with more apology than question. He hates to be doubted.

"I saw what I saw. The boy was making a line for our position."

"Tell me again why Terry can't be involved. She did get upset at the post office. But maybe she's angry she got caught. My sister knows how to stir up her emotions when she's acting on stage."

"Look at the big picture." He was patience personified. "If Theresa is behind this, I can discern no rational reason for her behavior."

"Maybe she isn't rational, X. Remember those Kate Durward Mysteries she showed us when she was a kid? She must have had forty of those books on the shelf in her room. Maybe reading all that stuff made her bananas."

He chuckled. "It stands to reason Kate Durward could not possibly solve forty cases in the short span of a high school career. And I've detected no sign from Theresa that she is mixing fiction with reality."

I chewed on that as the muffled sounds of downtown filled my ears.

"You are making too much of a coincidence," said Brains. "Theresa presented solid reasons for her presence at the post office."

She had. But the chain of events involving her: was it all coincidence?

"Maybe. But if it's someone else, what is the rationale for the game he's playing? Why doesn't he approach us directly?"

Some friends from our high school days drove by, honking and calling. We smiled and waved back.

“Good questions, Operative Three. Perhaps he fears Benton and Carson, if confronted, would simply deny his findings,” he mused. “Or perhaps....”

His voice trailed off. I didn’t like the sound of that.

“Perhaps what?” My anxiety began to rise.

“I cannot say with certainty.” He pulled on his earlobe and frowned. “But perhaps our mystery man—or men—feels some risk involved in contacting us directly.”

“Risk? A risk to who?”

“To him. Or to you and me. Perhaps to all.” He stared over the rooftops as if the answer might be written on a distant cloud.

“Hey, don’t leave me here,” I kidded.

But he was gone.

As you can tell, Brains can be a real tonic for the nerves. In his mind, the plot had widened to include a prospective third party who had only bad intentions for everyone concerned.

I checked my watch and casually examined the streets. Nothing.

“Come,” said Brains, catching me off guard. He must have arrived at some conclusion. He was ready to move.

We started down Capital Street, heading for Main again.

“What’s next?” I asked.

“Spark plugs.”

That meant a stop at the Acme Garage on the next corner.

“Yipes. You’re spending a fortune flushing out this guy.”

“The time has come for me to change them anyway.”

We stopped at the garage and headed back out onto Main, Brains carrying his packages with the library book under his arm. The portable tape recorder hung by a strap around his neck. Anyone seeing it would imagine it was a camera.

We passed the businesses on Main without incident, taking the Liberty Square side of the street. We were waiting for the light at the corner of Main and Franklin when Brains stiffened.

“Steady, Operative Three,” he cautioned. “We are being followed.”

The butterflies in my stomach had settled. But they began warming up their wings again. I resisted the temptation to look around.

“Who and where?” I muttered.

“We have been tailed two blocks since we left the Acme Garage. However, I could not be certain of my observations until now.”

“What does he look like?”

“You mean ‘they.’ There are at least three of them.”

Three! My heart thumped in my chest like a bongo drum.

“That’s great,” I moaned. “We’re outnumbered.”

“They are employing a textbook tactic. The second fellow waited ahead of us in the park. He picked us up as we passed by. He took the lead as the first man

fell behind. The third man, across the street, lounged against the corner of the post office reading a newspaper. Now he's on the move, too."

We had used similar techniques when we shadowed subjects. These guys moved like real pros.

My theories went out the window. Our stalker wasn't Terry Dexter after all. And it wasn't some loner with a screw loose, either. Who knew how many guys there could be? We might be facing an army!

The traffic light turned green. As we stepped off the curb, I sneaked a quick look across the street to my left. A young guy was passing the front of the bank and making for the corner to catch the light.

It registered in my mind he was dressed oddly, but I didn't risk giving him the once-over. Midway across Franklin, approaching traffic gave me an excuse to glance to my right. Several pedestrians were scattered along the sidewalk behind us. Two of them were young men. The nearest one was fifty feet away and the other was trailing behind him.

They, too, were strangely outfitted.

Then it hit me. An army wasn't following us after all.

No wonder my partner had so easily identified all three.

"X!" I gulped. "These guys are sailors!"

Sailors never visit Crestwood! Not only are we landlocked, but we're way above sea level!

I had registered with the draft board. Had Brains?

Maybe the U.S. Navy was out to shanghai Benton and Carson!

Plan B

There we were, walking through downtown Crestwood with three sinister strangers shadowing us for reasons unknown and Brains Benton laughed.

Laughed!

"Are you crazy, X?" I said as we crossed Franklin. We stepped onto the curb and halted. The two guys behind us melted into the park. The one across the street slipped into Bennett's Drugstore.

"They are not sailors, Operative Three," he chuckled. "When did the Navy adopt Hawaiian shirts or fringed leather vests for their uniforms?"

"Okay, but what's the deal with those bell-bottomed trousers?"

"Bell bottom jeans are the latest fad on the West Coast. A few people are already wearing them at State U."

I curled my lip. "They'll never catch on in Crestwood."

"Stranger things have happened, Operative Three. Now, come."

He started off down Main, but I grabbed his arm. "Hold it, X! These guys may have murder on their minds. The police station is down the block. We'll be safe there!"

“Ah, yes, the police station,” he said cynically. “Where we would be welcomed into the protective arms of our greatest admirer, Chief Hadley.”

He was right. I could imagine us unloading our story on heap big Chief of Police Hadley. If he didn’t toss us in the tank as crackpots, he would throw us out on our ears.

Even more, he had never forgiven us for exposing those dirty cops on his police force. Our contest with Hadley wasn’t a cute game of one-upmanship, anymore. The Chief had become a man to fear.

We couldn’t even count on the help of our friend, the late, great Officer “Mac” McKeon.

Brother! Were we in a jam! And I mean up to our necks!

Brains shook his head. “No, Operative Three. If we call in the authorities on this case, we will only succeed in alerting our pursuers. We will have given them the power to reappear at a time of their own choosing.”

Looking over my shoulder for the rest of my life didn’t sound like much of a plan. I turned the thinking back over to the firm’s president.

“We must move boldly to bring this moment to a confrontation,” he continued. “We must, at all costs, identify our pursuers today.” Brains smiled as if he had delivered the punch line to a joke. I knew he was aping for the guys watching us. “But, come, we must linger no longer.”

I pretended to laugh as he led the way down Main. We strolled along the face of the McCurdy Hotel until we stood in front of one of the two large windows flanking an arched awning. The awning is the long kind stretching clear to the curb.

The McCurdy is one of the oldest buildings in Crestwood, and the town’s most notable landmark. The brick-and-stone structure rises four stories high, which had made it a veritable skyscraper in its time.

“Pretend to be interested in these advertisements,” murmured Brains. He extended his hand toward the window as if pointing out something to me.

The lobby of the hotel doubles as Crestwood’s tourist information center. The window we faced displayed neatly framed brochures touting the natural wonders of our area, such as the Green Mountains to the east and Lake Carmine to the north. Right smack in the middle of the window hung a splashy advance poster announcing the annual coming of the Fenton Circus to Middlebury in July.

“Okay, Chief, what’s our next step?”

“We must abandon Plan A,” he said. “Baiting three men with our tape recording is too risky.”

“You can say that again.”

Brains winced. He hates clichés. But right then, I was more worried about how we could identify these characters without getting our heads bashed in.

“You didn’t mention a Plan B.”

He didn’t answer. His deadpan expression told me he was cooking up Plan B on the spot. At last, he spoke.

“When you operated your newspaper route, you delivered the *Daily Ledger* to the McCurdy, did you not?”

“You bet. The hotel was my largest customer. It was my first drop-off. I carried two bundles across the parking lot between the *Ledger* and the McCurdy before starting my bike route.”

I may have been looking in the direction of the poster as we spoke, but my eyes were glued to the reflection of the drugstore across the street. As I finished speaking, a bell-bottomed guy slipped out of the door and slumped in the shadow of the recessed entryway. I couldn’t make out his face. He was on the hefty side. Something about him signaled he wasn’t the sharpest knife in the drawer.

I glanced at Brains, and he gave me the high sign. He’d seen him, too!

“Feign excitement at the prospect of the circus’ advent while we discuss our plans,” he ordered. And so we did, gesturing and grinning like a pair of loons while we talked.

“I assume,” he continued, waving his arm at the poster, “that you, an investigator trained in the art of observation, are aware of all entrances and exits to this edifice?”

I nodded. “We have the main entrance here.” I ticked them off as I pointed at a tiger jumping through a hoop of fire. “There’s an emergency exit on the Franklin Avenue side. And two customer entrances on the side sharing the parking lot with the *Ledger* building.”

“What about service access?”

“Let me think. Yes, the loading dock is in the back, in the service alley between the hotel and the police station.”

“Excellent.” he slapped my back and cut loose with a stage laugh. “Now, think again, Operative Three. If we entered the building through the front, here, could you lead us directly to that loading dock?”

“Sure, I know the way. We’d have to cut through the kitchen. But we won’t have any problem with the kitchen staff. I’m pals with the day chef. I used to talk to him as he smoked on the dock.”

Brains beamed, this time in earnest.

“What’s the scoop, X? Are we going to shake them?” I asked hopefully. “Is that Plan B?”

“This is my plan. We must divide and conquer these scoundrels. We must separate them from each other’s view. If we enter this building and do not leave within a short time, they will become suspicious. They will find it necessary to split up to watch all exits.

“With any luck, one of them will investigate the service alley where we shall be lying in wait to accost him. Perhaps we will be able to conduct a brief interrogation. At the very least, we may see his face, enabling us to identify him.”

Dark alleys, again!

“Why don’t we save ourselves the trouble and ask them for their autographs?” I groaned. He was counting on too many factors going right when anything could go wrong.

I shook my head. "There's nowhere to hide in the alley, X. No matter on which end of the loading dock we stand, chances are fifty-fifty one of those men will enter the alley from the same end and spot us."

"Fear not, Operative Three. We shall find perfect concealment under the food service truck parked in the alley."

By then, I had forgotten to grin. "And what makes you think there's a truck in the alley?"

"I watched the vehicle back into the alley as we stood conversing on the corner."

It's a rare moment when anything gets by Brains. He can pull any circumstance out of the air and turn it into a cogwheel in one of his machines.

"Pretend to examine your wallet," he said. "We will make them think we intend to inquire within about advance tickets to the circus."

We made a show of checking our wallets. But I was all for putting the brakes on this operation, and I said so.

And I had more to say. I told him if these bad guys trapped us in the alley, they could liquidate us, and no one would know the difference for hours. Creeps! They might drag our bodies to someplace they would never be found!

The Advantage of Surprise

I told Brains I wanted no more to do with it. I'm out of this, I said.

But I might as well have spouted off to one of the stone lions on the steps of the public library.

"We may never get another chance," he said sternly. "Follow me."

He headed for the brass and glass double doors.

Follow him? Did he think I would stay out there by myself? And so right behind him, muttering and growling, tagged good old faithful Operative Three, as I had in days of yore. I still don't understand what power that guy has over me.

As we strode into the lobby, he grabbed my arm.

"Time is of the essence, Operative Three! We must gain our position before our pursuers can react!"

We rushed across the lobby, me in the lead this time, whooshing by the desk before the clerk could ask questions. We entered the main hallway, turned left, shot down another passageway, and into the deserted dining room. We trotted across the big room with its drooping chandeliers and burst through the swinging doors into the kitchen.

The kitchen is long, running the width of the building. Everything is made of tile and aluminum. Half a dozen guys manned huge pots steaming atop commercial stoves. Thick tables and butcher blocks cut the room into islands. The chefs had piled vegetables on the counters, chopped and ready to cook.

"Hey, Jimmy Carson!" shouted a rough voice. My heart almost stopped. But when I looked, I saw it was my friend, Vladimir, the head chef.

“Hey, Vlad!” I yelled back. I kept on walking fast. “Can’t stop to chat. We’re taking the shortcut!”

“Why the hurry?” he laughed. “You guys dodging the draft?”

“How did you ever guess?” I asked, acting amazed.

Vlad smiled and tapped his head as if his skull contained all knowledge. We used to kid around a lot that way.

Brains waved to Vlad, but he didn’t speak. He didn’t know him, and I knew he didn’t want to risk initiating a conversation.

We hustled for the wide loading dock door. It was open, rolled up all the way. A couple of guys in food company uniforms were wheeling dollies stacked with crates into the kitchen’s big freezer. The food service truck—a cab and trailer—was parked parallel to the dock, its side door gaping open.

We slid across that dock as if we were skating on bacon grease and dropped over the side, landing with a teeth-rattling jar in the brick-paved alley.

Brains took the lead, beckoning me to follow him around the back of the truck and into the narrow space between the long semi-trailer and the blank wall of the police station.

We were in no danger of being disturbed by the police: they parked in the small lot on the other side of the building, between the police station and the courthouse.

“Split up,” Brains hissed. “You know where to hide.”

Sure I did. Behind the wheels, where no one on the other side who looked under the trailer could see us.

Or shoot us.

Brains crouched behind the set of wheels near the cab. I hunkered down behind the rear wheels. From my position, I could observe the end of the alley that opened into the parking lot between the hotel and the *Ledger* building. But anyone entering the alley wouldn’t spot me in my dark hiding place. Brains had his Franklin Avenue end of the alley covered, too.

The driver had left the refrigerated truck running. The big rumble of the motor masked all other sounds. I couldn’t count on my ears. I had to keep my eyes fastened on the end of the alley.

I don’t remember how long we stooped behind those wheels. It may have been twenty minutes, but it seemed like hours. My legs lost all feeling. The truck exhaust threatened to overwhelm me.

I glanced down the length of the trailer to the place where Brains waited as patiently as a spider. Even as scared as I was, I hoped one of our adversaries would appear soon.

The food service guys had kept themselves busy unloading the McCurdy’s supplies. I figured they had to be nearly finished. When they drove that truck away, our hiding space, and our plan, would go with it.

I spotted movement at my end of the alley. A face covered in shadow, backlit as it was by the bright afternoon sunshine, peeked around the corner of the hotel. A tall figure slipped into the alley and soft-shoed along the far wall.

We had our man! I dropped flat against the cold brick, my heart kicking a hole in my chest.

I looked back at my partner. He was busy covering the other end and hadn't seen a thing. I chucked a nugget of broken brick in his direction, and his head snapped around. I pointed. He nodded.

The stalker had passed by the rear of the truck, cutting off his upper body from my sight. As he continued toward the middle of the trailer, I turned on my hands and feet, reversing my ends to keep my eyes on him. His legs advanced a few steps and halted, advanced a few steps more, and halted again.

He had to be one of the guys who was following us. He wore bell-bottom jeans. Sneakers, too.

Something hit the pavement near me and bounced. It was the piece of brick I'd tossed at Brains. He pointed frantically in the direction of his end of the alley.

I ducked lower to see, and nearly fainted!

Another guy wearing bell bottoms and tennis shoes had entered the alley from the Franklin Avenue end!

The two pairs of feet approached each other and stopped mid-trailer. The men may have exchanged words, but I couldn't have heard them above the growl of the truck.

Another chip of brick pinged past me. Brains motioned toward the dock.

Oh, this was beautiful! The two food service guys had hopped off the dock and into the alley. They had finished their business, and they were ready to leave.

The tennis shoe guys stood to one side as the workers shoved the ramp back into the truck and slammed the heavy side door closed. One pair of uniformed legs walked to the passenger side of the cab and the other set of legs moved around the front of the cab, heading for the driver's door.

Brains and I exchanged scared faces. If we stayed between the truck and the wall, we'd be spotted for sure! But lucky for us, Brains was on the ball. Quick as a flash, he scrambled under the trailer, keeping the wheels between himself and the driver.

I followed his lead, moving deep under the trailer.

The cab doors slammed, and the driver revved the engine. Yikes, what a deafening clamor! The distended drive shaft turned only inches from my head. I clamped a hand over my right ear and got ready to move. As soon as the truck dropped into gear, we would have to clear out.

And that's what happened. As the transmission engaged, we rolled out, scrambled to our feet, and plastered our backs against the alley wall. The driver must not have checked his left-side mirror, thank goodness. He gave no sign he noticed us.

The semi shuddered and crept into motion.

Brains and I shot each other a look. He pointed ahead twice—pointing as if through the truck—and made a grabbing motion with his two hands. I got the picture. As soon as that truck passed by, we would be exposed to our enemies. Our only hope was to take the advantage of surprise and strike first.

As the advertising on the side of the trailer rolled past our eyes, we hunched, tensing our bodies as well as we were able in the cramped space.

My heart was jammed in my throat.

In another second, we would be in a pitched battle.

It could be a struggle for our lives.

We had to win!

Rally in the Alley

Brains and I flattened against the alley wall as the truck roared by within a foot of our faces.

As soon as it cleared out, I saw several things.

I saw the opposite wall of the alley and the loading dock of the McCurdy Hotel. I saw the two guys who wore bell-bottom jeans and tennis shoes standing in the alley directly in front of us, watching the truck depart. I saw the guys catch Brains and me out of the corners of their eyes as we tensed to spring. I saw them turning in our direction.

They were high school boys, upperclassmen. The guy in front of Brains was an inch or two shorter than average, maybe. He had blond hair. Glasses rested on his sharp snout, but nothing was wrong with his eyes. They bugged out of his head when he saw Brains towering over him.

The other boy, the one nearest me, looked like a tougher customer. He was taller than his companion, and he moved with the smoothness of an athlete.

Well, I had news for him. I was an athlete, too.

If you know football, you understand psychology is part of the game. In the second before I lunged forward, I hunched my shoulders, put on my meanest face, and let go with my deepest roar.

Brains, for his part, belted out a Washanee war whoop, and we leaped into battle.

Halfway to my target, I knew my opponent didn't want any part of this. His eyes widened to the size of saucers, and he held up his hands to block my charge.

"You got it wrong!" he shouted. "You got it wrong!"

I stumbled forward as I stopped short, almost plowing into him. When I stood straight, we were eye to eye. But he didn't show signs of going anywhere.

Brains, meanwhile, crouched with his long arms stretched wide to block his opponent from escaping. He had him backed against the loading dock.

"X!" I yelled. "X, are you okay?" My partner could rely on jiu-jitsu if he needed it.

"Everything is under control, Operative Three," he answered.

But that's where he was wrong.

At that moment, the third guy who had followed us rounded the corner of the alley at the Franklin Avenue exit, the end of the alley nearest to Brains.

“Let them go!” he commanded. His voice carried such authority that, for a wild second, I thought he was a policeman. I couldn’t make out his features as he stood there. He was stocky, even chunky, but he was a kid, all the same. He hesitated only a moment before charging straight at Brains.

What a fix we were in! If my partner turned away from his captive, he’d be forced to tangle with two guys. If I moved to help him, the tough kid in front of me would be free to pitch in.

And who knew what could happen?

“We’re outnumbered, X!” I yelled, stating the obvious. “It’s three to two!”

I was wishing Scotty would beam us up when things got crazier. A voice rang out from my end of the alley.

“Make that three to three!”

My head jerked around. A woman stood silhouetted at the entrance, her hands clenched in fists at her side. She was no Raquel Welch, but she wasn’t Twiggy, either.

Holy cats! Terry Dexter had followed us, too!

She leaped forward, moving like the wind.

“Stay with him, Jimmy!” she shouted as she blew past me. “Don’t let him go, Brains!” she called. “I’ll handle the other kid!”

I felt dizzy as if I had stepped out of this world and into a movie. Terry reached Brains in as little time as it would take to tell it. And she arrived in time to intercept the heavier guy. She stood at the ready, obstructing his way.

The six of us froze.

“Everybody, calm down,” Tough Guy said through gritted teeth.

“Pete is right! We mean you no harm,” said Spectacles.

“Right,” I snarled. “This was just your way of saying hello.”

I shot Pete a look to show him I meant business. But when I turned my face away, I half expected him to jump me.

“We sincerely apologize for the inconvenience,” said Big Boy. “But we could not approach you as we might under normal circumstances. We have information—objects of crucial importance to show you.”

He spoke with an odd dignity. He dug into his shirt pocket and produced a white business card. “Please allow me to introduce ourselves.”

I was ready for him to pull some dirty trick. But he remained motionless while Brains accepted the card.

My partner didn’t even glance at the black lettering. He stuck out his right hand. “You are Mr. Jones, I presume,” he said in his Sherlock Holmes manner.

The kid’s eyes widened as if he’d been caught off guard. But his thick fingers closed around Brains’ large, bony hand.

“That is correct,” he said briskly. “Jupiter Jones. You may call me Jupe if you wish. My friends do so.”

Terry gasped.

Jupiter, my eye! I thought. Of all the crazy aliases! He should have stuck with Jim or Joe. I couldn’t hold it in. I had to say something.

“Yeah, right. And I’m Zeus. This is my friend Mercury,” I said jerking a thumb at Brains, “and the girl is Venus.”

“I assure you, Jupiter is my true and legal name,” he said.

His voice carried no hint he was offended. And I couldn’t read his eyes under those heavy lids.

Out on Main Street, this kid in the Hawaiian shirt had looked like a dope. But his appearance had shifted, somehow. I wagered he was as sharp as Vlad’s carving knife. And that would have been a good bet because what he said next settled it.

“Zeus is the Greek chief of the gods,” he lectured me. “Mercury and Venus are Roman deities. You would do better to refer to their Grecian counterparts Hermes and Aphrodite.”

Sharp, yes. And a wise guy. Right away, I didn’t like this Jupiter Jones. Someone else could call him Jupe if they wanted to.

By this time, all of us had drifted into a rough circle. Terry stood on my right and Brains was next to her. The guy named Pete swayed uncomfortably close to my left shoulder. The Jupiter character stood in front of me, and between him and Brains stood the smaller fellow who wore glasses.

“That’s very interesting, Jones,” I growled. “Now tell us why you three have been following us.”

Brains took over the interrogation.

“You claimed you have something of vital interest to present to my partner and me?” he queried.

“Yes, indeed,” replied Jupiter.

He peered up and down the length of the alley. The rest of us automatically repeated his maneuver. No one in the kitchen of the McCurdy Hotel had noticed the square-off outside. The alley was clear.

All the same, Jupiter lowered his voice. And what he said chilled me to the marrow. “Benton and Carson, listen to me and listen well!” he said. “Your lives are in danger!”

He gestured to the kid with the glasses. “Show them, Records.”

Records? I knew right then I was going to have to get used to some pretty unusual names.

Records’ arm went behind his back. He fished for something tucked into the waistband of his jeans underneath the fringed vest he wore. More odd clothing. Did he think he was Buffalo Bill?

“Watch him, X,” I said, tensing. What did Jupiter mean by saying our lives were in danger? I suspected Records might be going for a weapon.

Instead, he produced a brown envelope, the big kind used for filing documents.

“Open it,” ordered Jupiter.

As Records unwound the string, Jupiter quickly filled us in. “We found this envelope in an apartment in Los Angeles,” he said. “Our quarry was a man of

Middle Eastern descent. But he vacated the premises minutes before we moved to apprehend him.”

What the heck was this boy talking about? He sounded like a detective! And the highbrow language he used reminded me of Brains Benton!

I glanced at my partner, but he didn’t bat an eye.

He just watched that string unwind.

Jupiter continued. “We have every reason to believe this individual nurses a murderous grudge against the firm of Benton and Carson and fully intends to execute a plan of revenge.”

With that, Records reached into the envelope and pulled out a batch of photographs. They were black and white glossies, the kind of 8-by-10s photographers at the *Ledger* bring out of their darkroom.

Brains, Terry, and I gathered around Records as he went through the pile, taking one photo from the top and placing it on the bottom, again and again.

It took only a moment to realize Benton and Carson was the theme.

“Surveillance photos,” breathed Brains.

And they were. Brains and I weren’t smiling for the camera. These were long shots, set on zoom. There I was entering the administration building on campus. There was Brains behind the wheel of his car, pulling away from the curb in front of his apartment. More like these: Brains with a college crowd, exiting a student café in Middlebury; me laughing at a joke with friends on the street in downtown Crestwood.

Someone had followed us everywhere. Me to my house at 43 Maple. Brains to his old house two blocks from mine on Franklin and Chestnut. The man had shot photos of Crestwood, too: Downtown buildings, the Washington Street bridge, and Crestwood Junior-Senior High School.

More than a dozen of that last subject.

But Records had saved the best for last.

When the final photo reached the top of the stack, the hair rose on the back of my neck. Terry screeched and covered her mouth with her hands. Brains stared like a deer caught in the headlights.

Jupiter’s voice fell on my ears like the distant tolling of a death knell. “Your enemy is here. He is in Crestwood. He has come to exact retribution.”

In Record’s hands rested a shot of Brains and me leaving an off-campus eatery. We’d had lunch there a month ago when I’d visited him in Middlebury. Brains was leading the way outside and I was close on his heels. But the photographer had cropped around our faces and enlarged the image. Brains’ likeness was watching ahead. I was peering over his shoulder.

I take it back. I wasn’t peering at all. Neither one of our facsimiles, if they had been living, could have seen anything. Because someone had burned out the eyes. The charred holes went clear through the paper.

Arabic words and symbols scrawled in red ink covered our faces.

The message was clear. Some maniac wanted to do that to Brains and me.

Someone wanted us dead.

To the Secret Laboratory!

“We have to get out of here!” said Brains in a strangled voice.

I couldn’t have agreed more. My teeth were chattering like wind-up choppers from a novelty store.

“I’m with you, Chief. Let’s pack and head for the hills!”

“I mean this alley is no place to assemble,” he said. “We must separate and gather again in a secure location.”

That made perfect sense. And the more secure the better.

Like an uncharted desert isle.

The thing Records grasped in his hands elevated hate to a whole new level. This unknown person’s hatred for Brains and me was obsessive, committed, and fanatical.

And I experienced something on a whole new level, too. Fear.

It’s hard to explain. But if you ever see a photo of yourself with your eyes burned out and Arabic incantations scratched all over your face, you will know what I mean.

Brains’ fears, however, didn’t cause him to waste a moment. He was too busy working on a plan. He turned to Jupiter. “I assume you and your men have familiarized yourselves with this town. You are aware of the location of my house on Chestnut Drive?”

“Naturally,” he answered stoutly.

“Excellent! Now, listen to me closely. The upper story of the garage is our firm’s crime laboratory. It’s our headquarters.”

“Wait a minute, X!” I objected. “We don’t even know these guys.”

“I’ve read enough about them, Operative Three. Trust me.”

I sure hoped he was right. I remembered how, earlier that day, he had seemed to suspect who was after us. Not that he had divulged that information to me.

Brains filled in everyone on the details: the secret entrance at the back of the garage, pressing the third nail from the corner of the garage on the fourth board from the bottom, the protocol, the passwords, and the rest.

The boys nodded as they took it in. But I think they hardly believed it.

“When we have reassembled in safety,” Brains finished, “we must determine where our would-be killer is holed up.”

Jupiter didn’t reply. He gulped and pointed high up, to the windows on the north wall of the alley.

“He’s registered at the McCurdy Hotel,” piped Pete, his voice shaking. “Suite four-oh-four.”

“The rear suite,” added Records. You could tell the way his voice rose with each word the thought had at that moment dawned on him.

Creeps! We were practically standing in that maniac’s backyard!

I swear it's true: the words had no sooner left Records' lips than a cloud slipped over the sun. The cool temperature in the alley dipped even lower. Or maybe it was my core temperature dropping. Either way, the dark walls closed in.

You've watched birds fly in a flock, dipping and wheeling in unison, right? Well, that's how the six of us moved for the north wall. In the two seconds it took for us to line up along it, we were panting as if we'd run a three-minute mile. Brother! If I could have melted into that brick, I would have done it.

Brains took charge.

"Everyone split up. Go in different directions." He rattled off the orders. "Each of you take evasive, roundabout paths, but meet at the crime lab in an hour. Make certain you are not followed!"

He craned his neck to make eye contact with Jupiter at the other end of our human chain. "You understand the procedure?"

Pete and Records watched Jupiter hold up three fingers, then four. The boys looked at Brains and nodded again.

"Here are the new passwords," hissed Brains. He whispered something in Terry's ear. She in turn muttered "Rain or shine" in my ear. How she raised goosebumps on my arms during that crisis, I'll never understand. I whispered the password to Pete, and the rest of them passed it down the line.

Brains raised his voice a notch. "Got it?"

Everyone nodded.

"Very well," he said. He checked his watch, raising his finger like the starting gun at a race. "Go!"

The three guys from California rushed to the street and scattered.

Terry grabbed Brains' arm. "I've never been to the crime lab," she said desperately. "And I don't know how to find Chestnut Drive."

Brains hates having his plans disrupted. He swiped his hand across his hair and made a split-second decision. "Go with Jimmy," he said sharply. "I have a matter to attend to first."

I rolled my eyes. Of all the luck! I hoped she had grown out of that let's-get-us-all-killed phase she had gone through when we worked together on "The Case of the Counterfeit Coin" years ago.

She looked at me, but she didn't move her feet.

"Well, let's move it," I growled at her. She reached toward me, and I grabbed her hand, hauling her along behind me.

We hugged the north wall of the alley as we catfooted toward Franklin Avenue. I shot a look over my shoulder once to see which direction Brains had headed but he had disappeared. How he'd had time, I couldn't fathom. By the time we reached the bright sunlight of the sidewalk, I had forgotten it. He knew how to take care of himself.

A peek up and down the street revealed nothing unusual. No sinister Middle Easterner lurked across the street in Liberty Park.

Terry turned, stepping north, but I held on to her hand and didn't budge. She pulled up short.

“Where do you think you’re going?” I asked.

“To my car,” she answered. “It’s parked on Main Street. We don’t need to walk.”

“Forget it. If this nut sees you with me, he’ll be able to identify your car. Who knows what kind of trouble that could cause you? We’re going on foot like the rest of them!”

“I suppose you are going to pay my parking ticket?” she huffed. She pulled to get away, but I gripped tighter.

“On this case, you do what I do. Not whatever your urges tell you to do.” I really laid down the law.

She yanked hard, freeing her hand from mine.

“Don’t even get the idea you’re my boss, Jimmy Carson!”

“You follow my lead, or I’ll leave you right here,” I said menacingly. “I know the way to the lab. You don’t.”

Her face pinched up as if she’d bitten into a raw onion. But when I started south down Franklin, Terry Dexter was trotting right beside me.

We zigzagged all over town, as far south as River St., around to Clover St., back across Washington Ave., and north into the section of town where the streets are named after kinds of trees. The whole time, we kept our eyes peeled for trouble. But no one followed us. Of that I was certain.

By the time we headed down the alley behind the Benton property, my feet felt as flat as Mrs. Ray’s flapjacks. What a day! Terry, on the other hand, could have run another lap around town. The *Daily Ledger* hadn’t dubbed her Crestwood’s “Cinder Track Cinderella” for no reason.

You may be wondering about our talk concerning “the crime lab.” It’s like this. From its junior high school beginning, the headquarters for our firm had been the crime laboratory located in the upper rooms of the Benton garage.

The garage had been a carriage house in the horse-and-buggy days; a barn with stables downstairs and servants’ quarters upstairs.

Brains’ mom and dad had raised their only child in a lenient way. They granted him the use of the second story. And they didn’t blink when he turned the space into his own laboratory and machine shop.

And that wasn’t all. The redheaded genius had rigged up a hidden entrance and secret staircase to the lab.

The back of the garage sits off the alley behind the Benton property. I led Terry through the thick lilac bushes lining the walls. Kneeling, I pressed the third nail in the fourth board from the bottom and waited. I hoped like heck Brains had gotten here before us.

A metallic whisper emanated from a hidden speaker. “Your name and business?”

I glanced at Terry, crouching beside me. Her mouth dropped open as she searched for the source of the voice. Watching her made me feel as if I was entering the lab for the first time. But as a matter of fact, I hadn’t stepped foot inside our old headquarters for more than three years.

I answered the whispered question. "Operative Three and..." I looked again at Terry. "Operative Two," I finished with a grin.

She grinned back as if I had given her the Congressional Medal of Honor.

The voice interrupted our smiling contest.

"Your business?" the whisper repeated sharply.

Yipes! I hadn't completed the protocol.

"Sorry. 'Official business.'" That was the correct response.

I waited a moment and gave the new passwords. "Rain or shine."

A section of the garage wall slid open in front of us. Terry squeaked and clapped a hand over her mouth. I grabbed her other hand, and we ducked through the entrance right before the panel slipped back into place. We stood in the pitch black until a bluish light winked on. The staircase loomed ahead.

We mounted the narrow stairs together, Terry gripping my hand. I didn't hear the steps folding up behind us, so I knew Brains expected more visitors. And that meant we hadn't arrived last.

As it turned out, we had arrived first, after Brains.

At the top of the stairs, another panel opened, and we stepped through.

I gawked. All through high school and the years after, Brains had continued adding to the laboratory. More than ever, the place resembled a cross between Einstein's lair and Mission Control. My old partner had loaded down the worktables and benches with power tools and all kinds of scientific apparatus.

I wanted to ask about the new stuff, but right then we had saving our skins to think about.

Brains, seated behind his desk, swiveled around to face us, his fingers forming a steeple. He wore the white lab coat he habitually slipped into when he was up here. In his lap rested a large, open book.

Terry linked her arm through mine and clutched my hand in both of hers.

"I don't believe it," she whispered in a meek voice. "I can't believe it."

She was impressed, alright.

"Jimmy?" Brains asked.

"Yes?"

"I asked if you would be good enough to man the lookout." He narrowed his eyes quizzically.

I hadn't heard him! What was wrong with me?

"Sure, Chief," I said, snapping to attention. I untangled my arm from Terry and walked to the exact center of the room and tugged on a thick cord dangling from a large eye screw set in the high ceiling. A long, rectangular trapdoor opened downward, and an aluminum ladder unfolded, descending to the floor. I kicked the bottom of the ladder, locking the contraption into place.

Terry must have felt as if she had wandered into the guts of a spaceship as she watched me clamber upward to the cupola that topped the old carriage house. This wasn't any birdhouse-sized cupola. The structure was big enough to serve as a kid's tree house.

I pulled myself through the opening and up to the flooring that trimmed the door. I raised carefully, stooping so I wouldn't butt my head on the low rafters. A wide bench runs around the four walls. I shuffled to it and sat.

Wooden slats covered the windows. You've seen the type. From up there, I could view any compass point in the neighborhood. Heavy-gauge screens had once covered the inside of the windows to keep out birds and squirrels. But Brains had replaced the old screen with a lighter mesh making it easier to see through. Nevertheless, no one viewing the cupola from the outside could see into the darkened cubicle.

"Keep your weather eye open, Jimmy," Brains called. "Inform me when our guests approach. And be on the lookout for suspicious characters who may follow them."

"Aye, aye, Captain." I felt like saluting. But a million questions ran through my mind. Who were these three high school kids from California? What was on the business card their leader handed to Brains? Why did Jupiter talk like a detective? Who was the man who wanted to kill Brains and me? Why did he want us dead? How long had he been stalking us?

And what had caused these three boys to cross paths with him?

See what I mean? Who? What? Why? How? Plenty of questions. But, as usual, Brains appeared to be several steps ahead of me.

How much did he know?

Detectives, Meet Investigators

I forced the questions aside and focused on my job. First, I looked north toward Channing Street and the neighborhoods beyond. To the northeast rose the spires of Crestwood College. In the distance, the Green Mountains snoozed in the afternoon sun.

To the east, Chestnut Drive curved south toward Tinker Drive and Washington Avenue. I could see south for a block down Franklin Street. And, to the west, Chestnut continued straight past Capital Street and on through the subdivision out that way.

In every direction, church steeples rose over the sea of trees and rooftops.

More importantly, I could watch up and down the alley that ran behind the garage. No one could approach the Benton property without my notice.

My foot kicked against something hollow, and I remembered the wooden box under the window seat. The box contained a coil of rope ladder. When you attached the hooks on the top rung of the ladder to the eye screws on the sill of the cupola's west window, the rope reached the ground. This was our escape kit.

Brains had always been more prepared than any Boy Scout.

"If the security of the lab is ever breached, and we are helpless to defend the premises," he had once said, "we can climb into the lookout, pull the ladder up

behind us, and lock the door. A flip of this switch concealed under the window seat seals all exits from the lab for one minute, trapping our attackers inside.”

According to Brains, that would give us time to open the cupola window, monkey down the rope, and get away.

Except for the fun we’d had running practice drills on the day Brains installed the device, we had never needed it.

My eye caught a movement near Franklin and Channing. I opened the wooden box and dug inside until my hand closed over a pair of high-powered binoculars. I set the eyepieces to my face.

A figure strolled steadily down Franklin with his hands in his pockets. He watched over his shoulder from time to time. He walked on the west side of the street until he reached a point near the alley. Then he crossed over.

He looked like a regular guy, but there was no mistaking those bell-bottom jeans. With one last glimpse over his shoulder, he headed down the alley.

“Pete is in the alley,” I called down to Brains.

“Roger,” he replied.

Pete hesitated at the corner of the garage and cautiously pushed his way through the bushes. I was wondering if he would have any problem executing the procedure when I heard Brains speak, whispering, “Your name and business?” into the microphone on his desk.

I turned my attention to my lookout duties again. Here came the fellow called Records. He turned off Tinker and headed north up Poplar Street, aiming to enter the alley from the other end. I hadn’t noticed it before, but he favored one leg. Maybe he had worn a blister on his foot from all the walking, I thought.

“Records is in the alley.”

“Roger.”

Last of all came Jupiter, swinging around the corner of Balsam Street onto Chestnut. He was the leader among the three, and I had no doubt he would breeze through the entry protocol.

“Jupiter approaching the alley.”

“Roger.”

Not a soul had followed any of the three boys. I heard Brains below, greeting Pete as he stepped into the lab. I replaced the binoculars and scooted down the ladder.

When I hit the deck, Brains was back at his desk whispering into the microphone again.

Terry was shaking Pete’s hand and giggling. Pete smiled. Then he smiled some more. Here he was standing in the Disneyland of crime labs, and he couldn’t keep his eyes off Terry Dexter. Not to say I cared.

The door swished open again, and Records stepped through. He nodded at Pete and acknowledged Brains’ greeting. Then his eyes began to wander. His mouth dropped open and locked there. His eyebrows knitted together behind his specs as if he had spotted a nifty Cadillac with mile-high fins cruising down Santa Monica Boulevard.

Finally, Jupiter gave the password and entered the level below. Brains flipped the switch on his desk that started the secret stairs folding up behind the boy. The upstairs panel slid aside, and he entered. But once inside, he stopped short as if he had run into an invisible force field.

By the look on his face, I guessed he had stepped into his version of heaven. His eyes even misted a little. Well, the lab is pretty darn stunning, even to me. I could imagine taking it all in for the first time.

Brains strode forward, the thick book under his left arm and his right hand extended. "Welcome to the headquarters of the Benton and Carson International Detective Agency," he said.

Jupiter shook my partner's hand for the second time that day.

"Your headquarters," he said, half to himself. He was visibly awed.

"Allow me to show you around." Brains said good-naturedly.

He led him off on the tour, Records tagging along with his mouth still gaping.

I turned to Pete and gave him some small talk. "What's your game? What team do you play for?"

"Wrestling's the only game for me." Then, to explain, "Santa Monica High has a broad athletic program. But wrestling is all I have time for."

"Crestwood High is small." I realized he knew it, and added, "But another high school consolidated with ours. Bleeker City. Not a 'city' at all. But football was my game. And baseball in the spring."

"I tore my shoulder in our last match this season," he offered. "I was fine, but I had to sit out the playoffs. Doctor's orders."

Terry made a sympathetic noise, and Pete smiled bravely. To my surprise, my feet edged closer to her. Knock it off, Carson, I told myself.

"Man, that's tough luck. You're a senior?"

He shook his head no. "This fall I am. I'll be back to start the new season."

He asked me no questions in return, and I figured these three guys knew everything about Benton and Carson right down to our middle names.

But I still didn't get how.

Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed my partner demonstrating one of the first gadgets he had installed in the lab—a hidden bunk that dropped out of a section of a wall when he turned what appeared to be an ordinary ink bottle on his desk.

He returned with Jupiter and Records in tow. Jupiter stepped forward, and I found myself shaking hands with him and his friend.

"My name is, as I said, Jupiter Jones. This is Bob Andrews," he nodded toward Records. "And I believe you have met Pete Crenshaw."

Yes, I'd met Pete. But what a diplomatic way to phrase it!

The leader of the three reached into his shirt pocket again and plucked out another one of his business cards. He handed it to me. Maybe, I thought, this will explain things.

The card reminded me of the business card Brains and I had rigged up years ago. It read:

THE THREE INVESTIGATORS

“We Investigate Anything”

? ? ?

First Investigator...Jupiter Jones

Second Investigator...Peter Crenshaw

Records and Research...Bob Andrews

I didn't gawk for a full minute. But it sure felt like it. These guys had a detective agency like Brains and I did!

Correction, like Brains and I used to have.

The card didn't look right, though.

“What gives with the question marks?” I asked. “Aren't you sure you will investigate anything?”

“Allow me,” said Brains before Jupiter could speak. He placed his palms together and gazed at the ceiling. “The question mark, otherwise known as the interrogation mark, stands for things unknown, questions unanswered, mysteries unsolved, riddles of any sort. Their business is answering the questions, unraveling the riddles, and solving any mysteries that come their way. Hence, the question mark is the symbol of The Three Investigators.”

Jupiter bowed. “I could not have said it better myself,” he declared.

My mind felt like batter in a mixing bowl. More questions than answers were coming my way. Pete and Bob drifted to either side of Jupiter. I looked each of them in the eyes, one by one.

“How did you find out about Benton and Carson?” I said, grilling them. My question was loaded with other questions, all wrapped in one big ball. How had they tracked us down? And what was their connection to the mysterious foreigner who wanted to kill us?

As it turned out, one of those answers I didn't want to know!

Revelations

Brains and Jupiter were itching to get down to business.

So were the rest of us. But I had too many questions that needed answering first.

Before I could speak, however, Terry rushed our three visitors. She gave each of the boys the quick hug girls hand out when they greet their best friends.

“I'd rather meet you three than meet the Beatles!” she exclaimed.

She knew more about The Three Investigators than she had let on. And, apparently, so did Brains.

I wished I could say the same, but I had never heard of them. I felt as if I had missed out on something.

Terry started babbling about a mystery readers club to which she belonged and how its newsletter kept track of the trio's real-life activities. I was afraid she would start in about her collection of Kate Durward mysteries. So when she paused to come up for air, I grabbed my chance.

"You guys live in Los Angeles?" I blurted.

She shot me a dirty look.

"Rocky Beach," said Bob.

He noticed my blank face and added, "A small town near Santa Monica."

These guys hadn't had their driver's licenses long and yet they had traveled farther from home than I had. By driving, I mean. My Uncle Ed, a private pilot, had jetted Brains and me halfway around the world to Kassabeba.

Bob pulled a notebook from his shirt pocket. He was ready to supply the exact mileage when Pete interrupted. "We took turns driving," he said proudly.

"The circumstances required urgent measures," intoned Jupiter.

He could say that again! Jupiter may have struck me as a wise guy earlier, but I looked at the boy with growing respect. No other kid in California would have discovered those photographs. And if someone else had stumbled across them, no doubt he would have thrown them aside.

Jupiter and his friends had driven over mountains and plains to warn Brains and me. And by helping us, they had placed their own lives in danger, too. Tell me how many high school kids would do that!

I stared at the business card in my hand. "How do you get any homework done if you're always looking for new cases?"

"Quite truthfully, Mr. Alfred Hitchcock has thrown us several cases on which to work," Jupiter answered.

"Hitchcock!" I yelped, flabbergasted. "You mean the movie director?"

The investigators filled us in on their history. They had formed an alliance with Alfred Hitchcock from the beginning of their detective agency. Pete's father was in the movie business, and Hitchcock had offered a reward to anyone who found a truly haunted house in which to film the director's next project.

Hitchcock wasn't impressed with the young would-be detectives at first. But he did throw them a bone. He let them work on the project.

Of course, they didn't find any real ghosts. During the process, however, they wound up solving one doozy of a mystery. The case involved an actor who had been famous in the past. That fact alone caught the attention of The Three Investigators' movie-directing benefactor.

From then on, Hitchcock passed along to them mysteries that interested him.

It all sounded like a bowl full of cherries to me, and I said so.

Bob nodded in agreement. "If it wasn't for Jupe, though, The Three Investigators would have gone nowhere, professionally. He's the one who finagled a way into World Studios. And the rest is history."

But if it wasn't for Pete's dad and his inside information, I thought to myself, Jupiter Jones would never have gone to Alfred Hitchcock.

Life is a funny thing, isn't it?

But we weren't huddling in the lab to reminisce.

"I still don't get it," I confessed. "You guys found those photos of Brains and me in an apartment in Los Angeles. But it's not like we were wearing name tags. How did you find us?"

That question plopped Jupiter right into his element. He slipped off the corner of a table on which he'd been sitting and stood upright.

"By following the clues in the photos," he said.

He lifted the brown envelope from the table and gripped it like it was proof of his words.

"In one street shot," he said, "a vending machine outside Bennett's Drugstore carries your hometown newspaper. The name of the publication is barely legible through the glass, but with the aid of a jeweler's loupe, I identified a group of letters: C-r-e-s-t."

As in the *Crestwood Daily Ledger*.

I knew what a jeweler's loupe was. We had one in the lab. And photogs at the *Ledger* use them to examine their rolls of processed film.

Jupiter dropped the envelope on the table. "A list of all the nation's newspapers, located by Bob at the Santa Monica Public Library, narrowed our search to three towns.

"In another photo, the names on the street signs at the corner by Brains' house—Chestnut Drive and Franklin Avenue—settled the matter. A quick call to the three towns' post offices confirmed the intersection occurred in only one town. Ergo, Crestwood was our target."

Brains and I glanced at each other. He had been right on the button concerning this guy. Jupiter was a terrific sleuth.

The First Investigator resumed his story. "Traveling to Crestwood was the only way we could confirm our findings. An examination of the city directories at your public library revealed only one Benton household in Crestwood. And we located your address, Jimmy, by using the directories' information regarding family composition. But, even with that information, we couldn't be one-hundred percent certain until today, when you both responded to our 'KANGAROOS HAVE ESCAPED' messages."

Two blanks still needed filling. And I wasn't going to quit until I got the answers. "But, again, how did you know our names? And the big one: How did you know our old code words, 'The kangaroos have escaped'?"

"Bob again." Jupiter handed the explanation over to him. "Bob?"

The blond guy straightened his glasses. "When the name Crestwood popped up, I remembered it from somewhere. So I dug into our files."

I squinted, wondering where this was going.

Bob reversed his explanation to add some background. "I keep records of all our cases. And if a case makes the news, I clip out all newspaper stories written about it. But one article was unique. Three years ago, the *Los Angeles Times* ran a feature story about our first case. 'The Secret of Terror Castle' was the *Times*

story's headline. We had discovered the truth behind a local legend. But the last paragraph mentioned Benton and Carson and your operation in Crestwood."

What? That was news to us! But three years ago? The firm of Benton and Carson had breathed its last by then. Brains and I exchanged puzzled looks. How, then, had we made it into a newspaper in California?

Jupiter stepped in. "The *Times* conveyed only your existence and the name of your hometown. But the last sentence read like this: 'It may seem unlikely that not one, but two sets of teenagers run successful detective agencies, but as the Benton and Carson International Detective Agency says, 'Anything can happen when the kangaroos have escaped!'"

Brains stiffened. When he disengaged his gaze from Jupiter, he turned his face toward me—slowly, like that scary ventriloquist dummy in the old "Dead of Night" movie.

The mouth opened. "Jimmy?" The eyes bored into mine.

I gaped at him thunderstruck, conscious all eyes were on me.

"Jimmy," he repeated, "how does a reporter working for a newspaper in California know the password we used in 'The Case of the Missing Message'?"

My mind slipped out of gear. My lips wouldn't move. I wet them with the tip of my tongue, hoping that would help.

Brains tried again. "Who in Crestwood might have spoken to a newspaper reporter in California concerning a code phrase we haven't used in seven years?"

I was thinking hard and coming up empty. Then suddenly, like when heavy drapes are brushed aside, brilliant sunshine streamed through.

It had been the best weekend of my life up to that point. Benton and Carson had broken its first big case. An FBI agent had come to the Bentons' house and collected the information from Brains and me. Then he and his fellow agents had apprehended the criminal the same night. A reporter from our hometown newspaper interviewed us. The next morning, the *Crestwood Daily Ledger* had run the story on page one along with our photos under the hammer headline "Junior Sleuths Trap Crook."

Weeks later, I was at the *Ledger's* loading dock collecting the daily papers for my route when I heard a "Hey, Jimmy Carson!"

I turned, and it was the reporter who had written the story.

He'd come outside for a smoke. He said he wanted to tell Brains and me he respected our fledgling detective firm.

Man! Imagine that!

"It shows me nothing is impossible," he added with admiration.

And that's when James MacDonald Carson, riding high on a cloud of pride, said those words, even giving them a conspiratorial tone: "Anything can happen when the kangaroos have escaped!"

He laughed, not understanding what it meant, and waved so long.

I raised my head and looked Brains in the eyes.

"Lew Jarman," I confessed. "I said it to Lew Jarman."

The Enemy Named

The blue eyes meeting mine closed. The red-haired head tilted forward. The bony fingers pinched the bridge of the long nose.

“You were young,” said Jupiter casually. He was running interference for me. “Lew Jarman spoke to a fellow reporter. Perhaps a former classmate from journalism school. Or a colleague from another newspaper. Or maybe it was business—a phone call to the *Los Angeles Times* regarding some news matter, and the talk eventually turned to shop...”

Brains raised his head. “One subject led to another. And Lew Jarman of the *Crestwood Daily Ledger* recounted an interesting story he’d recently written about a junior detective agency in his town.”

Jupiter picked up the thread. “And he shared an amusing addendum to his story—a mysterious phrase about kangaroos escaping...”

“And four years later, the *Times* reporter, writing about The Three Investigators, was reminded of his conversation with Lew, realized he had a twist ending for his feature story, and—*voila*,” finished Brains.

Terry had been silent, but now she had questions. “But how did you figure out Brains went to State U and Jimmy to Crestwood College? How did you find Brains’ apartment in Middlebury? How did you know what ‘The kangaroos have escaped’ meant?”

The Three Investigators filled in the rest of the story. It had only been a matter of car mileage and shoe leather. As Pete said, “You can learn a lot by sitting on a stool at a soda fountain in a small town and asking questions.”

And as Jupiter said, the boys from California hadn’t known if “The kangaroos have escaped” were code words or just a funny phrase used by Brains and me. They only knew it meant something to both of us.

The matter was closed as far as my partner was concerned. He had work to do. “With your permission, Jupiter, I would like to examine that photograph.”

Jupiter pulled it out of the envelope and handed it over. Brains turned without a word and floated over to a worktable. He placed the photo under a microscope and snapped on a viewing light. The rest of us crowded around him as he leaned over the lens, muttering darkly to himself.

Suddenly, he raised his eyes. He aimed his stare in my direction, but he looked straight through me.

“Most interesting,” he said. He bent back over the eyepiece. After a few seconds had passed, he called me over.

“Jimmy, do you see anything peculiar regarding the holes in the photo?”

He stood aside as I squeezed my way between Terry and Pete to get to the microscope. The apparatus was a terrific magnifier. Brains had constructed it from discarded eyeglass lenses.

I leaned over the eyepiece. Under the magnification of the lens, the black and white of the photo appeared like the surface of the moon. I shuddered. The hole that was burned through my eyeball had the appearance of a volcanic crater.

“Examine the hole and tell me what you see,” said Brains.

I wasn’t sure what my friend was digging for.

“Well, it was burned clear through the paper,” I said.

“Please describe the burned edge.”

I stared until my eyes watered. “The edges are charred,” I said weakly. “And the hole is circular, not rough.”

I sighed. I wished I could see deeper than the obvious facts.

“Ah! Any striations or other markings around the edge?”

“None I can see.” My head was beginning to ache.

“Excellent observations, Operative Three.” He appeared satisfied. He waved Jupiter over to take my place at the microscope.

As the First Investigator peered through the lens, Brains peppered me with more questions. “By what method did our enemy produce those holes?”

“A match?”

“Indeed not. A lighted match held under the photo would have produced a much wider area of charring. Furthermore, the holes would not exhibit such circular precision.”

“Well, maybe he carved them out with the point of a heated knife,” I guessed, thinking of how the maniac felt about us.

“But, as you observed, there are no striations such as the edge of a knife would effect.”

Brother! I couldn’t see the point of this.

“Heck, X! What difference does it make how he made the holes?”

“Perhaps none. On the other hand, the answer may prove to be vitally important.”

“A magnifying glass?” Jupiter guessed, his eye still on the lens. “Perhaps our Middle Eastern friend focused sunlight to a tiny point on the surface of the photo.”

“A possibility,” answered Brains. “I suspect a concentration of solar energy would produce more charring than we see, however. Nevertheless, I cannot be certain without running tests.”

I gave it one last shot. “The end of a lit cigarette?”

Brains shook his head. “A cigarette is too wide.”

“Gee, Brains, how do you think he did it?” asked Bob.

Brains frowned fiercely at the microscope as if the device deliberately withheld the answer from us. “I cannot determine. But I shall speculate. The madman used an object heated internally, fed by a constant source of power. Something leaving a near-perfect circle without a trace of surface abrasions.”

“The end of a thick wire!” said Jupiter, his eyes widening.

“Applied persistently to the surface of the paper,” agreed Brains.

Terry gasped. I assumed all the neat deductive reasoning had wowed her. But when I turned, she was gawking at her watch.

“Omigosh! I’m late!”

“Late for what?” I asked.

“Rehearsal! The school play is tonight. I have an important role!”

Crestwood High presents a major stage production near the end of every school year. My sister, Ann, had been involved with the drama department when she attended school there. As Terry’s former camp counselor, she had encouraged her to try out for the play one year. Terry had stuck with the acting.

“I can’t believe I forgot! But I can’t go, I can’t,” she moaned. “I have to stay and help you guys.”

“Nonsense, Theresa.” Brains started out talking all fatherly, but he finished sounding like a four-star general. “It isn’t likely we shall solve this case tonight. But we will need your assistance early tomorrow morning. Please arrive here at eight o’clock, sharp!”

Terry blinked. I knew she wanted to salute. I remember feeling that way many times.

Anyway, she apologized for having to leave, said goodbye, and headed for the door. Brains flipped the switch that started the stairway unfolding for her.

“Proceed with the utmost caution, Theresa,” warned Brains. “The garage may be watched.”

“Maybe I’d better escort her to her car, Chief,” I offered.

Brains hesitated, pulling at his ear, and thinking.

“If you would rather Jimmy stayed, Brains, I could walk her downtown,” Pete offered quickly.

Terry grinned at Pete. But when she noticed me watching, it faded.

“If no one objects,” Brains said to Jupiter, “that strategy may be for the best.”

But Terry wasn’t having any of it.

“I can take care of myself, thank all of you very much,” she said. “Besides, once I reach Franklin, I intend to *run* to my car.” The way she said it meant she was in a hurry, and she didn’t expect any one of us could keep pace with her. She may have been right.

“I’ll keep tabs on you from the lookout,” I said, pointing upward.

She nodded and headed down the stairs. I scrambled up the ladder and grabbed the binoculars.

Terry made it to the end of the alley fine. She slipped along like a cat, all her senses tuned to detect a possible attack. But after she crossed Chestnut at the corner of the Benton property, she kicked it into high gear. Man, the girl could move! Anyone following her on foot would need four legs. Like a cheetah. The foliage swallowed her from my view after she crossed Vine.

I headed back down to the lab.

“All clear,” I announced. “No lurkers. Terry is safe.”

Everyone had found a place to sit on chairs or table corners. Jupiter removed the photograph from under the microscope and held it aloft.

“His name is Ali ben Sharjah. He is an Omani national. He entered this country under false pretenses, using a fake identity. While here, he illegally obtained a firearm on the American black market. But The Three Investigators could not imagine his intentions until we found this example of his handiwork.”

It was my turn to be amazed. How had these high school boys obtained such detailed information? Then I remembered the exploits of two young sleuths, students at Crestwood Junior-Senior High School. It didn't matter how these guys had got onto Sharjah's tail. I knew better than anybody that anything is possible if you have a leader like Brains.

So this Sharjah character was gunning for Brains and me. Maybe he wanted to capture us before he killed us. Maybe he wanted to torture us first, wanted to poke out our eyes with electrified wires.

His only motive could be revenge for some wrong he felt we had committed.

I didn't have to be Sherlock Holmes—or even Brains or Jupiter—to put two and two together. Maybe this Sharjah had entered the United States as an Omani, but I knew he was Kassabeban to the core.

From the moment Jupiter revealed our enemy hailed from the Middle East, I knew for whom he worked.

Halfway around the world, a ruler sat on the throne of Kassabeba because Brains and I had won the day for him here in Crestwood.

Halfway around the world, the man who had usurped that throne, only to be deposed, skulked with a remnant of loyalists in his mountain hideout. There in his bleak cave, the defeated half-brother of the Emir's father had remained for the past six years, nursing bitter thoughts.

He no longer had the resources to assassinate his foe, Prince Halam. But he could eliminate the two Americans who had assisted Halam when the legitimate Prince of Kassabeba had been a student at Crestwood College.

Brains Benton had found the missing Golden Vial containing the Stone of Light and Wisdom—a phosphorescent rock and an important national symbol—the possession of which was vital to the coronation of a new emir.

The usurper's ignorance of the Stone's existence had caused a revolt at his coronation. But he had managed to cling to his ill-gotten crown through sheer force of arms—for a few days, that is.

In the meantime, Brains had recovered the missing Stone and handed it over to the legitimate emir, Prince Halam. Armed with the evidence of his birthright, the rightful heir had returned to Kassabeba, rallied his faithful, and routed his enemy.

All of this is recorded in our case file, “The Case of the Roving Rolls.”

If not for the two American boys, the mountain chieftain might have ruled from the Emir's palace with its minarets, its fountains, and its Garden of Royal Palms. But instead of raising the people of his country from poverty, as Prince Halam had done, the usurper would have lived lavishly on the proceeds of his nation's oil exports.

My partner set his mouth in a grim line. My heart pumped as if there was no tomorrow.

And maybe tomorrow would never come.

Because our enemy had a cruel name. A name that had once sent shivers through the Middle East. He was none other than Kalib al Mene ben Ras-Bey.

Ras-Bey!

The Storm Before the Storm

Jupiter Jones slumped in his chair. His black hair hung in his eyes. His heavy eyebrows formed a V above his nose. His features drooped and his lower lip protruded.

Jupiter was lost in thought. Finally, he roused and spoke.

“Brains, we must address a question more important than how Sharjah burned holes in paper. We need to ask ‘Why?’”

“He hates Brains and Jimmy, and he wants to kill them,” said Pete. “That’s why.”

“Jupiter is inquiring into the psychological significance of blinding Jimmy’s and my effigies,” Brains said. “In other words, we need to ask ourselves why Sharjah targeted our eyes in particular.”

Psychology again! What a waste of time! We needed to take the offense against Sharjah immediately, and I said so.

“For crying out loud! What difference does Sharjah’s mental health make?” I spouted. “We know why he’s in Crestwood. So why do we care if his mother didn’t potty train him?”

Pete nodded in agreement. Bob remained silent, waiting for further developments. And if either Brains or Jupiter heard me, they gave no sign. They were holding court on their own mountaintop.

Brains hefted the big book he had been reading when we first entered the lab. “I borrowed this from my father’s home library on my way here,” he said.

I grabbed a look at the title. “Customs and Traditions of the Near East, Ancient and Modern.”

“Did you say library?” The sound of that word perked up Bob.

“My father has an extensive private collection of materials about Middle Eastern cultures,” Brains informed him.

His father is a professor of ancient history at Crestwood College.

I had been inside Professor Benton’s home office a couple of times. Man! What a place! His den was loaded with relics that would have fit just dandy into some of the nation’s top museums.

And books! The room was lined wall-to-wall with every book written on ancient history—newer books, older books, leather-bound books—all of them organized on the shelves in the same logical way Brains arranged his lab.

“But to my point,” my partner said, raising a finger. He flopped open the tome to a bookmarked page. “In the Middle and Far East, the eyes bear particular significance. The eyes are the medium through which learning, understanding, and wisdom enter the mind. Thus, the eyes serve as the gatekeepers to both good and evil.”

“Those concepts aren’t so different from the way we think today,” observed Bob.

“Correct. Ancient Middle Eastern customs still affect Western thinking. The literalness with which these matters are believed, however, constitutes the primary difference.”

If I closed my eyes, I could hear Professor Benton speaking, holding his son and me captive at the dinner table as he went on and on about the Punic Wars.

I still didn’t know why this ancient stuff mattered, but I knew Brains did, and that’s what counted. I would understand after he finished pontificating. All I needed to do was settle in and wait.

“To continue,” he said, “to the ancients, blinding the eyes of an enemy was considered a just punishment, especially in matters of state and war. You may recall how the Philistines captured a judge of Israel named Samson and gouged out his eyes.”

Well, no, I didn’t personally recall it. But I did remember hearing about it in Sunday school. Is that what Sharjah wanted to do to him and me? My heart rate kicked up a notch.

“Perhaps more significantly,” said Brains, “when the military forces of Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, captured Zedekiah, the king of Israel, Nebuchadnezzar executed Zedekiah’s sons right before his eyes. Immediately after that event, Nebuchadnezzar blinded his royal prisoner. The last thing the captive king beheld was the slaughter of his family.”

Creeps and double creeps! I didn’t remember that story in Sunday school! What an inhuman thing to do, even to your worst enemy! And the cool way Brains laid it all out made the act more horrible. The rest of us cringed.

Then it hit me. Ras-Bey considered Brains and me to be his worst enemies. And it all had to do with “matters of state and war.” Ras-Bey had sent Sharjah to do his dirty work. Did the act of revenge they planned include wiping out our families? A cold lump the size of a goose egg formed in my throat. I swear, for a few seconds I couldn’t breathe. But I choked out a few words.

“Brains! Those ancient customs—please tell me people in the Middle East don’t do that nowadays!”

“In pockets of the world, time has remained frozen for millennia, Jimmy,” he answered soberly. “Despite modern influence, many of the old thought processes have never died.”

“Then...then it’s possible this Sharjah may want to harm...our...” I couldn’t say the words.

“Brains, where is your family?” Jupiter asked urgently.

“Mother is in Maine visiting her sisters,” he answered. “She will not return home for two weeks.”

“And your father?”

“In Iraq. He’s gone for the summer.”

I didn’t wait for the question. “My mom and dad are in your state, Jupiter. They plan to come home by tomorrow evening, however.”

“Then we must close this case tonight!” snapped Brains. He leaped from his chair and paced furiously. “Jupiter, what age is Sharjah?”

“He’s in his early twenties,” answered Jupiter.

That shocked me. Our would-be killer wasn’t much older than Brains and me. This guy was going to be tough to tangle with.

“We may conclude, then, Sharjah is not another name for Ras-Bey himself,” said Brains. “Neither is Sharjah either the Duke or Jujab, confederates of Ras-Bey whom Jimmy and I encountered before.”

No kidding. Those two Kassabebans had been in their thirties years ago.

Brains asked Jupiter: “If Sharjah observed you, Bob, or Pete, would he recognize any one of you?”

“We shadowed him for several days, but he never encountered us face to face. Something spooked him, causing him to flee his apartment in Los Angeles. But I do not think he would know us by sight.”

“Excellent news!” cried Brains. “That allows us to initiate covert operations.” He stopped pacing abruptly and turned toward me. “Jimmy! The lab now has an outside phone line. Call Uncle Ed in Kassabeba. Ask him for all the information he has on Ras-Bey’s current whereabouts and activities. Sharjah, as well.”

Years ago, my uncle had encouraged my best friend to call him Uncle Ed, too. And Brains had done exactly that, with pride, ever since.

Edward MacDonald had been one of America’s ace pilots during the Korean War. After the conflict, he went into the piloting business for himself. Within a few years, he found a great job flying the Emir of Kassabeba all over the Middle East, Europe, and around the world.

After a time, the old emir had died under mysterious circumstances. At the time of his death, his son and heir, Prince Halam, was finishing four years at Eton in England. But the emir’s half-brother, Ras-Bey, seized the opportunity to overthrow Kassabeba using strong-arm tactics.

Prince Halam, finding himself exiled, came to Crestwood College to finish his education because he had friends here—mainly Mrs. Willoughby, widow of T. Phillips Willoughby, a Crestwood native. You may have heard the name Willoughby. He was the geologist who struck oil in Kassabeba, effectively bringing the little sheikdom out of the economic Stone Age.

Anyway, Mrs. Willoughby had always treated the prince as if he was her adopted son. That’s where Uncle Ed came into the picture. He had retained his job as the royal pilot with the new government in Kassabeba, but he sent a letter asking Brains and me to keep an eye on the prince and to keep a lookout for Ras-Bey’s two agents, the Duke and Jujab.

That letter triggered “The Case of the Roving Rolls,” a series of events that turned Brains and me into the heroes of Kassabebe. And when Prince Halam returned to his homeland to reclaim his throne, Uncle Ed became his pilot for life.

That’s why Brains wanted me to call Uncle Ed to get the scoop on Ras-Bey. Not only was Uncle Ed the Prince’s personal pilot, but he was also his confidant.

I studied my watch and worked on the math. “For Pete’s sake, Brains! It’s three in the morning over there.”

“If I remember rightly, Uncle Ed is an early riser. We must contact him at all costs, Jimmy. Make that call.”

Calling Uncle Ed

I stopped arguing, dug the number out of my wallet, and grabbed the phone on Brains’ desk.

If you’ve ever made an overseas call, you know the hassle involved. But calling Kassabebe at three a.m. their time is more than your ordinary tough order.

Within minutes, I became part of an international process. I got relayed from one operator to another. Sometimes the phone at the other end rang forever before someone bothered to answer. Sometimes I didn’t hear a ring at all. I had to wait, wondering if my call had spun off into outer space. The operators’ accents got stranger and harder to understand. Some of them spoke no English at all. The best I could do was shout Uncle Ed’s number into the line. Twice I hung up and started over.

In the meantime, I kept one ear open as Brains made battle plans with Jupiter and the other two investigators. The four of them huddled around a table near me. Brains was drawing a crude map on a piece of paper. The others nodded as he spoke.

At one point, Jupiter snapped his fingers and said, “We brought our walkie talkies with us. I stored them in my trunk.” That piece of information sent Brains into orbit. My partner started drawing Xs and arrows all over that map the way he’d worked out football plays for the coach in his high school days.

I couldn’t catch every word they said, but I didn’t need to hear it all to grasp the awful truth. Brains planned for us to do a little breaking-and-entering job. Namely, into Sharjah’s hotel room!

During one long pause between operators, I kept the phone to my ear but interjected myself into the proceedings. “Brains, let’s go to the cops with this one!” I pleaded. “This Sharjah isn’t a common crook. He’s a different animal. We could get ourselves killed! He may be a danger to innocent bystanders!”

“And what will we tell the police, Operative Three?” Brains asked acidly. “There is no law against defacing a photograph.”

“But Sharjah entered the United States illegally,” I wailed. “If we go to the police, they’ll nab him, and the government will deport him the same as they did to Otto Gruber!”

Gruber was the guy who had tried to steal the circus from Skeets.

Brains shook his head. “Technically, Sharjah entered legally, even if under false pretenses. He posed as a college student, according to Jupiter. He enrolled, too. But the Crestwood Police Department will not arrest Sharjah for failing to attend his classes in California.”

“You can convince Hadley to hold him on something. You’re the cat who talks the birdies out of the trees,” I argued.

He shook his head again, vehemently. “Not a chance. And what if I could? After the police questioned and released Sharjah, he would be long gone. Our enemy would become more cunning, and our lives would be in jeopardy from day to day. Never, Operative Three! We must inspect Sharjah’s room. We must enter the lion’s den. Only if we find evidence Sharjah is a killer will we be able to convince the authorities to arrest him.”

I wasn’t going to win this one. But our luck was holding. A phone began ringing at the other end of the line. It sounded far away as if it was coming from the other side of the world. And it was. The fellow who answered wasn’t another operator. He was my Uncle Ed!

“Jimmy!” he shouted into his mouthpiece after I greeted him. He was a bit groggy. “Great guns! It’s good to hear from you, buddy. How is life in that teeming metropolis known as Crestwood?” His voice came through the telephone line as if he was speaking from the other end of a long tunnel.

“Strange things are going on, Uncle Ed.” I shouted to be heard, too. “Brains and I need information. We need as much information as you can give us about Ras-Bey!”

“Ras-Bey?” Uncle Ed paused. I could almost see him scratching his chin. “You guys aren’t messed up with him again, are you?”

“A friend of his is in Crestwood,” I answered.

Static started building on the line.

“Quick, Uncle Ed. Before we lose our connection. Where is Ras-Bey and what has he been up to?”

Uncle Ed respected Brains and me. He knew if Benton and Carson asked for information, we needed it.

“Ras-Bey has been lying low since Halam routed his rebels. You remember, before I flew you and Sherlock here to hang out with the new Emir in his palace.” Uncle Ed often referred to Brains as Sherlock. And that couldn’t have pleased Brains more.

“I remember,” I shouted.

“Well, Ras-Bey’s been hiding in his mountain fortress. Nothing but caves up there. He’s not worth going after, some say. But our intelligence tells us he’s gathered quite a band of fanatics around him. Most of them he’s attracted from the surrounding hill tribes.”

My heart thudded in my ears. “Did you say fanatics, Uncle Ed?” Sharjah was nothing if not fanatic.

“Ras-Bey has found religion, Jimmy. Claims he’s the chosen man and the rightful heir to the throne of Kassabeba. His divine mission, according to him, is to push the corrupt American foreigners out of all Arabia, beginning with Kassabeba.”

“Are you worried?”

“Not yet. Ras-Bey doesn’t have the firepower. But over the past few years he has attracted a growing number of hotheaded young radicals from neighboring nations into his circle. They hate Prince Halam and everything he stands for. Halam has eliminated poverty in Kassabeba. The people are becoming freer and more modernized. The world is changing. And Ras-Bey has tapped into the fears of true believers.”

“That doesn’t sound as if he’s lying low to me.”

“Ras-Bey’s done all this on the q.t. Bit by bit, he’s becoming more influential, politically. But the young ones, the true believers who left their homes and congregated around him in the mountains, those are the ones who believe Ras-Bey has been called to raise a holy army.”

“Holy? But Ras-Bey is a killer. He had the old Emir of Kassabeba murdered, even though we can’t prove it. Those young guys sound like suckers to me.”

“They are. But Ras-Bey is preaching a message they’ve been hoping to hear. Understand? Some of them would do anything for Ras-Bey.”

The static started popping again, making it harder to hear Uncle Ed.

“Anything?” I yelled. “You mean such as killing?”

The line crackled so badly that I caught only half of Uncle Ed’s reply.

“Killing is nothing to...the...in this world, Jimmy. Many of Ras-Bey’s followers...completely...gladly die for him.”

“Have you heard of a man named Sharjah?” I wished I had a megaphone.

“Sharjah?” Uncle Ed repeated. He kept right on speaking, but the static drowned his words.

“I can’t hear you, Uncle Ed.”

“Sharjah is...can’t...his specialty...for Ras-Bey...”

“Uncle Ed, can you hear me?”

“Jimmy, if you and Brains are...Sharjah...keep...get your...he’ll stop at...call...”

A storm of static filled my ear before the line went dead.

I stared at the handset in my fist as if I’d lost my connection to a crystal ball.

What was it Uncle Ed had tried to tell me about Sharjah?

Suddenly, I was glad to have The Three Investigators on our side. Because Sharjah was more than your garden-variety criminal. He was a true villain.

Creeps! In all our years of nailing bad guys, the firm of Benton and Carson had never run into anyone like this Sharjah, not even among the most hardened drug runners.

I thought Brains and I had solved our last case when I resigned from the firm. And maybe we had.

Because this case was shaping up to be our last case. Ever!

The Assassin

“That’s it!” cried Brains. He bounded from his chair. “That is the word I’ve been unable to translate!”

I had, a moment before, relayed to him and The Three Investigators the information Uncle Ed in Kassabeba had given to me over the phone.

“Word? Translate?” his spiel had sent my head spinning.

He grabbed the photograph from the table and held it close to his spectacled eyes. The rest of us crowded around him, hoping to see something that would help us understand his excitement.

“This word!” he exclaimed. He pointed at a group of Arabic characters scrawled across his and my images. “I could not decipher its meaning before.” He turned to me, speaking rapidly. “You remember, Jimmy, how the printed Japanese word appears quite distinct from Japanese script.”

“Yeah?” My partner was referring to the folder in our files labeled “The Case of the Painted Dragon.”

“The case is the same with the Arabic language!” he said. “The words on this photograph are written in Arabic script. Most of them are difficult to discern. Be that as it may, here we can make out the word ‘God.’ And over here, we see the word ‘holy.’ But this word, this word, here, written large,” he said, tapping the photo, “apparently holds special significance. Yet I have been unable to understand it until now.”

“Well, good grief!” I barked. “Are you going to tell us what it means, or not?”

“It is an old word, Operative Three—a medieval word, steeped in dark deeds. It is the word ‘Fedayeen’!”

From the expression on his face, he must have thought the word would bowl us all over. But Feda-whatever wasn’t ringing any chimes for the rest of us. Jupiter, however, asked a more obvious question.

“You read Arabic, Brains?”

My friend shook his head.

“No. I absorbed only a smattering of the language when Jimmy and I visited Kassabeba some years ago.”

But a smattering to Brains is like a barrel full to us ordinary people. That redheaded genius learns through osmosis.

“So what is this ‘federalese’?” asked Pete.

“*Fedayeen*,” stressed Brains. “It is from the Arabic ‘Fida’i,’ meaning ‘man of sacrifice,’ or ‘suicide fighter.’ A Fedayee is ready to sacrifice his life for the cause.”

“Creeps! Like Uncle Ed said, many of Ras-Bey’s followers would gladly die for him.”

“Correct, Jimmy. Ras-Bey has resurrected the concept of the Fedayeen.”

“Who were the Fedayeen, Brains?” asked Bob, pulling a notebook and pen from his shirt pocket.

“Pardon me for not speaking more fully. I have the advantage of my father immersing me so thoroughly in Middle Eastern studies. The original Fedayeen appeared during the Middle Ages. In the West, the Fedayeen were known as the Assassins, the agents of an unorthodox sect of the Muslim religion.”

“Unorthodox,” I said. “Unlike the orthodox religion practiced by Prince Halam.”

“That’s right, Jimmy. Perhaps the word ‘unorthodox’ understates the case. The Fedayeen permitted the commission of any atrocity in the name of their cause. The Assassins periodically descended from their mountain fortresses, committing murders and other acts of terror on the orthodox lands below. Saladin himself, the Muslim general in the Crusades, warred against the Fedayeen.”

Jupiter’s head jerked back. “Jimmy, didn’t your Uncle Ed say Ras-Bey is holed up in a mountain fortress?”

“Hey, that’s right!” I said. “Old Ras-Bey must be copying the tactics of that Fedayeen sect from the Middle Ages.”

“So I would suspect,” replied Brains. “The leader of the old Assassination Order was called Shaykh-al-Jabal, the ‘Old Man of the Mountain.’ Prince Halam’s old enemy has raised a new Fedayeen, a Fedayeen Ras-Bey, you might say.”

“So Sharjah, then, is one of these Fedayeen?” asked Pete.

The poor kid was wringing his hands. Creeps! So was I.

“I’ve studied very little Islamic history,” Jupiter said thoughtfully. “But the word ‘Fedayeen’ now sounds familiar.”

“That’s because a second Fedayeen appeared early in the last decade, Jupiter. We have grown up with the word in our culture,” said Brains.

“Who were these second Fedayeen?” I asked.

“Refugees from the 1948 Arab-Israeli War. They organized Palestinian Arab terrorist groups. Operating from bases in neighboring countries, the new Fedayeen conducted hundreds of acts of sabotage and murder against the Israeli civilian population.”

“Sounds to me as if Ras-Bey wants to cash in on that spirit,” I said. This stuff was eviler than I could comprehend.

“That is the case if we have discerned rightly,” he agreed. “I believe Ras-Bey has assembled a core of radical loyalists who desire to push all modernization into the sea.”

I felt my world turning upside down. I think we all did—me, Brains and the three Californians. How was any of this possible? And who could believe Brains and I had become the targets of such vengeance? Suddenly, I wished we had

never heard of Prince Halam and Kassabeba. If only Uncle Ed had worked for some nice American airline instead!

Understanding Sharjah made a big difference. After that, developments shifted into high gear.

Brains and Jupiter had taken a long time to work out their plan of attack. But the scheme itself was simple. Two of The Three Investigators would stake out the McCurdy Hotel from different vantage points. If one of them spotted Ali ben Sharjah approaching the hotel, either on foot or in his rented car, they would relay the information via walkie talkie to the third investigator positioned on the stairway leading to Sharjah's room on the fourth floor.

Since we were Sharjah's target, my partner had insisted we take the greater risk of searching the Kassabeban's hotel room. If I knew him, though, a herd of wild buffalo couldn't have stopped him from personally ransacking Sharjah's place.

"From the information you relayed to us, Jimmy, it is clear Uncle Ed recognized the name Sharjah," said Brains. "Therefore, we may assume he is no second-rate assassin, if assassination is what Uncle Ed referred to as 'his specialty.' Therefore, Ali ben Sharjah is not only deadly, but he is capable as well. We must proceed with that in mind."

Brother! As if I could forget it. You've heard of cold feet, right? Well, I was chilly from head to toe.

"We will need transportation for this operation," Jupiter stated.

"Jimmy, I need you to run home and get your car," said Brains. His car was parked at my house, too, at the front curb.

"If Jimmy gives me the keys, I can get his car for him," volunteered Pete. "Sharjah may be watching his house. But he won't recognize me."

Jupiter shook his head. "We can't risk Sharjah associating you with Jimmy. If Sharjah sees you drive away in his car, he will recognize you when we stake out the McCurdy. Stay put, Pete. Jimmy must do this."

Well, that was fine with me. But all the time I was hoofing down Franklin Avenue toward my street, I could almost feel evil eyes following my every move. And when I turned the key in the ignition, I cringed, halfway expecting the car to blow sky-high the way gangsters' cars explode in movies.

But the motor rumbled to life without a hitch.

She's a beauty, my car. A raven black '64 Galaxie 500 I bought from my friend Ben Carlin last year for little more than a song. She was like new when Ben bought her. He had finished souping up her 351 Cleveland with a fancy new four-barrel carb when he fell in love with the 427-power plant in the newest Galaxie, and he had to have it instead.

You may remember Ben. He got a year in jail for stealing charity money when he was a young man. He had aimed to use the money to enter his hotrod in the annual Columbus Day Road Race at Middlebury, meaning to pay back the stolen money with his winnings.

The judge suspended Ben's sentence and gave him five years' probation instead since Ben had helped Brains and me catch another crook.

Other factors had come into play in the sentencing, too, such as Ben's rough childhood. "Mitigators," the judge called them.

Anyway, that stuff is history. Most folks in Crestwood forgive Ben, but some still won't.

Ben owns up to doing wrong, though, and takes the criticism like a man. After his conviction, he straightened out, married his sweetheart, and joined a church. And now he's doing what he loves, working as a partner at the Acme Garage and driving in local races.

Sometimes, he works in the pits.

I took a twisting, winding way back to Brains' house. Turning west out of the driveway on Maple Street, I followed Lilac Boulevard. I zigzagged north to the lonely outskirts of town, passing the old cemetery on College Road. The headstones didn't cheer me up, but one thing did—I knew no one could have followed my car without me knowing it. I doubled back to Brains' and motored down the alley behind the garage.

Following protocol, I slipped up the folding stairway and entered the lab.

Right away, I noticed the three guys from California looked different.

"Hey, where's your regular clothes?" I asked.

"Brains informed us we stand out like proverbial sore thumbs in Crestwood," Jupiter said. "So he loaned us some of his family's clothing."

They made a funny sight. Bob's shirt fit him too large. Gone was the fringed vest. Pete's shirt was tight in the chest. And Jupiter wore, of all things, a bowling shirt that fit him to a T.

Their bell bottoms were replaced by regular jeans.

"You own a bowling shirt?" I asked Brains.

"It belongs to my uncle who visits us from the city," he said, shrugging.

"Mother always intends to return it to him. But come! Let us proceed with our mission!"

Something bothered me, and it had nothing to do with the fit of the shirts.

"Hold on, Brains! How can we be sure Sharjah won't be in his room at the McCurdy?"

"I checked at the McCurdy's front desk," he said. "The attendant informed me that Mr. Sharjah, as he called him, is always absent from the hotel in the afternoon, never returning until late evening."

So that's how Brains had slipped out of the alley behind the McCurdy so quickly! He had reentered the hotel from the loading dock, cutting through the kitchen, again, as he made his way to the front of the building.

"As I informed the others while you were on the phone with Uncle Ed, the clerk asked me if I was the man for whom Mr. Sharjah had been waiting. He said Mr. Sharjah appeared upset that his friend had not yet arrived."

"I don't like the sound of that," I said.

"Neither do I. Sharjah has been expecting the arrival of a confederate."

Well, wonderful news! The butterflies in my stomach celebrated by doing triple loops.

“This is Mission Impossible,” I moaned. “We haven’t a clue as to what this second guy looks like! There’s no way to watch for him.”

“That’s exactly what I said,” exclaimed Pete. “Fellas, I seriously think we’d better call in the FBI on this.”

“But it’s as Brains explained, Pete,” Bob countered. “We have nothing on these guys that will stick. It isn’t as if the FBI will drop everything and run to Crestwood at the word of some high school kids. Not even for college guys.”

“Well, isn’t this cozy,” I said to Brains. “Now we have a murderer for both of us. Two killers, no waiting.”

“Courage, Operative Three,” he placed a hand on my shoulder. “You must steel yourself for the mission ahead.”

I sneaked a look at Pete. I could tell by his face he’d rather be sitting in his living room, watching a game on TV. Shoot, I couldn’t blame the guy. He was probably wondering what he had gotten himself into. Bob didn’t look gung-ho either, but he was willing to go along with anything Jupiter wanted to do.

And Jupiter? Like my partner in detection, he was salivating to go into action.

“Pete and Bob will report any suspicious activity from their posts on the street,” said Brains. “We must bank on the probability Sharjah’s friend will appear Middle Eastern, also.”

“Oh yeah?” I asked, sarcastically. “Ras-Bey’s old agent, the Duke, passed for an Englishman.” Kassabeba had once been a crown colony.

“Nevertheless, you must incur some risk if you expect to walk free of fear again,” said Jupiter. “If Brains has correctly deduced your situation, this menace must be eliminated before your parents return home tomorrow night.”

He had a point. I knew in my heart what had to be done. If we didn’t get the goods on Sharjah tonight, he could strike at Brains and me—and at our families—in his own sweet time.

Pete and I looked at each other. He set his chin and nodded. The matter was settled. We were all in this together.

“Well,” I sighed, “let’s go.”

Into the Lion’s Den

We let ourselves out of the lab via the regular stairs inside the garage. We piled into the Galaxie, Brains in front with me. I did some more fancy driving to make sure we were clean. Jupiter directed me to his jalopy. It turned out he had parked it on Oak Street, the road on the other side of my block. He retrieved the walkie talkies from his trunk and passed them out to his friends.

I let out Pete a block behind Bennett’s Drugstore. According to the plan, he would leg it from there, taking up his post inside Bennett’s recessed doorway on Main Street in the same spot Jupiter had stood watching Brains and me earlier.

From there, he could keep an eye on the front entrance to the McCurdy across the street. He could spot Sharjah approaching from any direction, too.

I drove around the block, crossed Main, and parked in the *Daily Ledger*'s lot, at the southwest corner of the building. We could observe the two parking-lot-side entrances to the McCurdy from that point, as well as all the area around.

The plan called for Bob to remain in my car, seated up front on the passenger side. That's an old detective trick, get it? If you sit behind the wheel of a parked car for a long time, someone may get suspicious. But if you sit on the passenger side, or in the back seat, people assume you are waiting for the driver to return.

Jupiter gave Bob the seated job because he worried about his friend's leg. It came out Bob had broken it in several places some time or other in the past. Although his leg had healed, standing on it for long periods tired him out. That was the reason Bob had limped when he came up the alley behind the garage.

The time had come. Brains, Jupiter, and I said farewell to Bob, and we threaded our way through the parked cars toward the McCurdy. The hotel's two side doors require a guest key, but lady luck smiled upon us. As we approached the southernmost door, a hotel customer struggled out. Or at least he tried to. The poor guy was toting some enormous luggage. He lugged a huge alligator suitcase in each hand, and he packed two smaller alligator cases under his arms.

"Allow me to assist you, sir," Jupiter said politely, holding the door for him.

"Thank you, m'boy. That's ever so helpful." The man had a little beard, a goatee you call them, and he spoke like a high-toned British sort. I told you the McCurdy gets all kinds.

"You'll never know how helpful," I muttered as the three of us passed quickly inside.

The McCurdy's low-watt chandeliers hardly made a dent in the darkness of the hallway. The hotel establishment didn't believe in crass fluorescent lighting. Doors lined the hall, six to each side. To our right, a broad, carpeted stairway ascended upward.

Jupiter didn't waste any time. I could tell from what he said next The Three Investigators had cased the building before.

"Sharjah's quarters are on the fourth floor," he said. "Follow me."

We did, taking those stairs two at a time. Jupiter halted on the fourth-floor landing and tested his mike.

"First to Records. Do you read me?"

"Records to First," squawked the walkie talkie. "I copy."

"We're on the fourth floor, Records. Stand by."

"Roger."

Jupiter clicked another switch on the boxy radio.

"First to Second," he said into the mouthpiece. Pete replied and Jupiter repeated his message. After he finished, he turned to Brains and me. "Stay here. I'll go knock on Sharjah's door to make sure."

Before we could say anything, the husky kid trotted down the hall, moving as if he weighed nothing at all. There on the fourth floor, the suites are larger and

only two doors punctuate each side of the hall. He stopped at the second door on the left and rapped on it. He waited and knocked again. No answer.

He waved us in and we did the old soft-shoe in his direction. My heart was beating like a tom-tom. My partner hadn't been kidding. I would rather have dropped into the lion's cage at the Central City Zoo.

All kinds of thoughts raced through my head. What if Sharjah hadn't left the building? What if the Assassin was downstairs in the lounge, instead? What would happen if he caught us? What if his friend got past Pete and Bob and he discovered us? My knees knocked so hard I don't know how I ever made it down the hall to suite four-oh-four.

But somehow, I did, and we joined Jupiter at the door to Sharjah's apartment. Before I could ask how we planned to get inside, Brains tugged a leather case from his back pocket and opened it. His burglar kit. I hadn't seen that for a while.

While he used two picks on the lock, Jupiter double-checked his connection with Bob and Pete. They reported the all-clear and their leader signed off. Brains was worked up, too, don't kid yourself. Maybe his hand shook a little, but that door wouldn't open for him.

I sweated as the minutes ticked by. If Sharjah, his ally, or any of the hotel staff came up the elevator or stairway, our geese would be cooked. Jupiter offered a hand. "Let me try it," he suggested.

X gave way, and Jupiter picked at the lock for a while without any luck. Just when I saw our plan slipping away like water running down a drain, a tumbler clicked, and the knob turned. We'd made it!

Jupiter stood aside as Benton and Carson crowded through the doorway bumping into each other like Laurel and Hardy.

The First Investigator stayed in the hallway to keep watch. My partner gently closed the door behind us.

What a layout! The hotel had furnished the apartment as sumptuously as Mrs. Willoughby's drawing room. All the furniture was top-of-the-line, some of it antique. A stone fireplace dominated the center of the room.

Brains didn't waste time sightseeing.

"Hasten, Operative Three! Should Sharjah return and find us, our fates would be sealed!" My friend has a way of calming me like that.

Man, we gave that place the once-over. We searched like mad, opening cabinets and closets and feeling under chairs and divans. But one thing soon became obvious.

"X! No one is living here. Sharjah has cleared out!"

Brains stood in the middle of the main room running his hands through his red hair. "I don't understand it, Jimmy."

You can tell how distressed he was by the way he used my real name. "Two of the finest detective agencies in the world have used every ability at their disposal! Yet despite all our precautions, something tipped off Sharjah."

Well, didn't that rock you? The way he talked you'd think we could never lose! If you asked me, it was time for a heaping dose of reality.

“Face it, X. Sharjah has split. Maybe he’s plain smarter than we are. Or maybe The Three Californians goofed up. Jupiter ‘Zeus’ Jones may even have steered us to the wrong suite!”

His arms dangled dejectedly at his side.

“I don’t know, Jimmy,” he said forlornly. “I just don’t know.”

He looked so beat standing there. I felt as if I had kicked him when he was down. What a friend you are, Carson, I told myself. I tried to make it up to him.

“Listen, X. Sharjah may have met the friend he was waiting for, and they moved on. Maybe they’ve left Crestwood for good. There could be a million reasons why he split. We can’t bar anything.”

He lifted his head, gazing into space in that goofy way he does.

“Bar!” he shouted, snapping his fingers. He said it so suddenly I jumped. He lunged toward the counter at the corner of the room. “Come, Operative Three! We neglected to search the bar!”

I couldn’t imagine what he expected to find secreted in a bar. After all, Sharjah had fled. Was it likely he’d left a pistol or a passport behind?

But Brains was determined to search the bar. And where X goes, good old Operative Three is sure to follow.

We slipped behind the counter, and he proceeded to go through the contents with a fine-toothed comb.

It sure looked to me as if that bar was only a bar. A lot of heavy glasses were stashed under the counter, along with some mighty expensive brands of liquor. Some of those fancy bottles were worth a ton of money.

A wooden cabinet along the wall behind the bar held some of the same stuff, including a small icebox.

That little fridge interested him as much as anything. He hauled out some glass containers. He set those aside and searched under the sink. He pulled out a plastic jug of some kind and placed it beside the jars. He was playing a game called “What Doesn’t Belong?”

All the time, he muttered to himself, sniffing around like a hunting dog on the trail of a big fat rabbit. If other people could have seen him, X might have appeared funny to them. But my partner knew what he was doing.

I stepped back and out of his way.

The late afternoon sun slanted through the windows, and I prayed Sharjah, or his friend, would not return for any reason. Out in the hall, the radio crackled as the First Investigator once again checked his link to his partners. I knew the second either Bob or Pete spotted anything suspicious, Jupiter would knock on the door and warn us.

When I turned back around, Brains was on his knees behind the bar with his long snout shoved inside one of those odd glass containers. He wiped an index finger around the rim of the glass and touched the end of his finger with the tip of his tongue. Then he spat on the floor. He wasn’t mumbling anymore. He was whining, whimpering.

“For crying out loud, X! What are you doing?”

“Extraordinary! Most extraordinary!” he squeaked. But he wasn’t talking to Jimmy Carson. He was operating in his own world.

He leaped to his feet, seized the wastebasket under the counter and strode to the middle of the room. He upturned the can, spilling its contents over the floor.

Holy smoke! This wasn’t your ordinary trash. Rolls of insulated copper wire, pieces of electronics, and wads of paper, stained with all kinds of colors, came rolling out. He dropped to his knees, nosing through the rubbish like a dog rooting through an overturned garbage can.

I didn’t get what it all meant, but a dark mist filled my senses—a thick, oily presence that felt and smelled like death to me.

“X, please! Have a heart! What is all this junk?”

“Get Jupiter!” he barked, not acknowledging my question. “Hurry!”

I jumped for the door and opened it so quickly Jupiter’s eyes popped.

“X needs you, quick!”

He hustled into the room.

Brains was poring over three crumpled pages of hotel stationery spread out on the floor. Someone had doodled on them with a ballpoint pen. Jupiter and I kneeled on either side of him to get a better view.

“Schematics,” Jupiter declared.

“Yes,” agreed Brains. “An electrical device, crudely drawn, as if Sharjah needed to refresh his memory. Perhaps to construct the apparatus.”

I recognized some of the symbols—amps and ohms.

“See here,” said Jupiter, pointing. “This must be a battery.” He traced a line representing a wire. “This makes a complete circuit. But what could this be, I wonder.” His finger came to rest on a shapeless form interrupting the circuit.

Wires! Batteries!

I gasped. “X, remember the holes Sharjah burned through our eyes on the photograph? I’ll bet a dozen doughnuts you were right about how he did it!”

“Come,” he said, springing to his feet. He led Jupiter behind the bar. I settled in on one of the high bar chairs.

Brains raised the large plastic jug.

“Ammonium nitrate,” he announced.

“The stuff farmers mix with fertilizer?” I asked. “Holy cow! Maybe Sharjah has a green thumb.” I nervously picked up the hotel’s complementary bar guide and fanned myself with it.

He held one of the glass jars aloft. “Unless I am mistaken, this contained HMX.”

“Talk English, X,” I said.

“High Melt Explosive,” answered Jupiter, “It’s a new product chemically analogous to RDX.”

Oh, the HMX that is analogous to RDX. That cleared it up for me. But I hadn’t overlooked the letter common to both—the “X” that meant “explosive.” What could it all mean? I shook my head to clear away the cobwebs.

“I understand where you’re going, Brains,” said Jupiter. “But you’re the chemist. Spell it out for me.”

X spread his hands toward the glass jars at his feet. Then he dropped the bomb. Literally.

“These chemicals can be combined to make a homemade bomb.” He rattled off the names of a few more chemicals with names as long as my arm.

The muscles on my neck tightened and my hair stood straight up. I could barely move my dry lips.

“Holy smokes! Are you telling us this guy is a ‘mad bomber’?”

“So it appears. Perhaps it is his ‘specialty,’ as Uncle Ed said, a means of assassination Sharjah has perfected. But when and where will he strike?”

“Are you kidding?” I yelled. “The lab, X! Sharjah has checked out of the hotel and he’s on his way to bomb the lab!” I jumped off the stool in my excitement. I was ready to dash off to the Bentons’ house.

Jupiter pulled at his bottom lip as if he wanted to yank it off his face. Then he spoke. “We cannot be certain of that, Jimmy,” he said. “We cannot afford to waste time chasing after Sharjah in the wrong direction.”

That killed me! This kid was smart, all right, but he wasn’t a partner in Benton and Carson. After all, it was our necks on the line. We had to make the ultimate decisions.

“You’re darn tootin’ we can’t waste time,” I shouted. “And with every second that goes by, we’re that much closer to the lab going *boom!*”

I flung my arms wide to emphasize the point. I still had the bar guide in my hand, and when I slung it, a sheet of paper folded lengthwise shot out of the guide and crash-landed on the bar. I barely noticed it. I mean, who cared at a time like that?

Brains Benton, that’s who. Does the guy ever miss a trick? Jupiter was trying to calm me when Brains interrupted.

“Jimmy! Jupiter!” My partner gripped the unfolded paper in both hands. His jaw hung slack on his chest. A slight gagging sound came out of his mouth. He stood like a mummy, unmoving.

That had never happened to him, no matter what the circumstances. My heart almost stopped with fear.

“X! What is it?”

His lips began to move, but nothing came out. Jupiter and I rushed to either side of him to see what had transfixed our friend.

The thing in his hands was a theater program.

“Those dates at the top of the page,” I breathed. “The Opening Night. That’s today!”

Without speaking, Jupiter pointed at the line of bold text under the date.

DICKENS’ “A TALE OF TWO CITIES”
A Production of the Crestwood Senior High
School Drama Department, 7:30 p.m.

Below the announcement, a list of credits named the actors and actresses. Terry's name was second from the top, below the fellow playing Sidney Carton.

LUCIE MANETTE Theresa Dexter

Right smack in the middle of the program, in the place where the page folded, someone had burned a perfect circle through the paper, a smooth hole without much charring around the edges.

My legs drooped as if they had cement weights attached. I wet my lips.

"Sharjah," I croaked. "He couldn't. He wouldn't!"

Faint sounds began to issue from Brains' moving lips. Barely a murmur at first, but as his voice grew stronger, I made out the words. My friend wasn't in shock after all. He was snapping the pieces of the puzzle into place.

"Destroy the seat of learning, understanding, and wisdom," he said. "Burn our eyes. Blast our eyes."

The seat of learning, understanding, and wisdom! Crestwood High School! Sharjah intended to blow up the auditorium while the kids performed in the school play! Half the town of Crestwood would be there!

The last rays of evening sunlight glimmered through the windows. I checked my watch.

We had only minutes to spare.

Wings to Our Feet

The three of us thundered down those steps triple time. Folks staying at the McCurdy must have thought someone had cut loose an avalanche of barrels at the top of the stairway.

Jupiter plastered the walkie talkie to his head as we jumped from landing to landing. "Pete!" he yelled. "Hustle and bustle! Get to the car! Get to the car! NOW! Repeat, NOW!"

When we hit the ground-level floor, Jupiter and I turned for the door leading outside, but Brains headed down the hallway.

"Go for the car!" he told us.

"X! Where are you going?" I shouted.

"To obtain important information," he screeched. "Bring the car to the front entrance! Meet me there! Now, go!"

We burst through the access doors and dashed through the parked cars toward the corner of the *Ledger* building. Here came Pete on our left, sprinting along a line intersecting ours. Boy, that kid should have joined the track team.

Bob saw us coming and leaped from the front passenger seat. He knew something big was happening. He ran around the car, opening doors for us.

We threw ourselves into the seats and slammed the doors. I cranked the engine, and she roared to life.

“What happened? Where are we going?” yelled Bob from the back seat.

“Sharjah plans to set off a bomb tonight at the school play,” Jupiter said over his shoulder. “We’re going to stop him!”

Pete lurched forward in the back seat, covering his face with his hands. “Oh, blessed criminy!” he wailed.

I wrestled that Galaxie through the parking lot, wheeled left onto Main, and screeched to a halt, double-parked on the wrong side of the street at the front entrance to the McCurdy. A driver coming my way locked his brakes and honked furiously.

Just then, Brains exploded through the front entrance and hit the street. Jupiter scooted over next to me to let him in.

“Sharjah has not checked out!” Brains panted as he flung himself inside. “He re-registered this morning to retain the suite for another week. Go, Jimmy!”

He didn’t have to tell me. I pulled around the irate driver and headed for the stoplight.

“Traffic will be heavy on Washington, Jimmy. Everyone is headed for the senior play. Take Franklin straight to Vine and turn right,” he commanded.

My partner had a plan. That’s more than I could say for myself. I zoomed around the corner of Franklin and floored it. The g-force from that blast-off pressed us into our seats.

Even then, Brains and Jupiter had enough wits to carry on a confab.

“If Sharjah moved out the McCurdy, Brains, then why did he retain his suite?”

“So the police would have time to search his quarters before another guest moved in.”

“That’s it!” cried Jupiter, his eyes brightening. “He took all his belongings with him. Everything, that is, but the evidence. He wanted his bomb-making materials to be discovered!”

“Precisely. Sharjah wants the world to know who is responsible for tonight’s bombing, and why.”

“Don’t talk that way, guys!” I exclaimed. Those two spoke as if the bomb had already exploded.

Franklin has a stop sign at each crossroad. I slowed for each one. But I didn’t stop.

While my partner and Jupiter talked things over, they hunched forward in their seats, doing double duty as my navigators. “Clear left!” Jupiter would shout, “Clear right!” Brains would yell.

I came to a rolling stop only once when I waited for a car to pass by on Maple. I glanced to the left as I gunned it the last block toward Vine. I caught a glimpse of my house and yard. Would I ever see my family again?

“The play starts in fifteen minutes,” I said miserably. “We’ll never get the people in the auditorium out in time.”

“We can’t warn them, anyway,” said Brains. “It would be like yelling ‘Fire’ in a crowded theater. Hundreds could die in the crush.”

“Then what can we do?” I moaned.

“Find that bomb, Operative Three, and defuse it! We may have more time than we think. Sharjah most likely set the timer to trip after the play is well underway to catch latecomers. And he may be aware the doors to the auditorium close fifteen minutes after the play begins. A contained explosion has more effect.”

More effect! Such as pulverized bodies and a collapsed ceiling. I told myself to shut up. I couldn’t afford to think that way.

Jupiter’s head jerked as if something had that instant dawned on him. He grabbed Brains’ forearm, his fingers digging in.

“The schematic,” he said ominously, “contained no timing device.”

Brains’ eyes widened and he clenched his fists until his knuckles turned white. “Hurry, Jimmy, hurry!” he choked.

I swung my car around the corner. She burned rubber as she screamed down Vine.

Brains shouted directions. “Right after you pass Chestnut Drive, pull in at the alley before the Vine Street Garage. Then turn hard right into the service alley between the garage and the Sunny Spa.”

I understood his plan then. Crestwood High is straight across Washington from the alley. We would save time by not searching for a place to park on the street or in Municipal Field.

The Galaxie skidded into the service alley, and I braked. The five of us shot out of it and sprinted through the heavy traffic on Washington Avenue like a row of crazed ducks.

Cars dodged and honked. Tires squealed. Drivers cursed. Someone, somewhere plowed into someone else’s bumper, by the sound of it.

I don’t know how we all made it across in one piece, but we did.

“Brains, I don’t understand,” wheezed Bob, as we gathered on the sidewalk. “That part about the bomb having no timer. Why is that important?”

“Because Sharjah is wearing it.”

“The timer?”

“No, he’s wearing the bomb.”

“You gotta be kidding!” I howled. “No one is that crazy!”

But Brains was off, bolting across the school lawn. The rest of us followed right on his heels. That’s crazy, I kept thinking. Crazy! No one in his right mind would “wear” a bomb. Why, the killer would kill himself!

Then it hit me. Sharjah was not in his right mind. He was one of the Fedayeen. He was willing to kill himself for the cause of Ras-Bey!

My running feet grew wings.

The five of us were all knees and elbows as we pounded toward the new south wing of the school that housed the auditorium. Our group sounded like an army unit as Jupiter shouted orders to his men and they answered. Brains and I prayed

out loud as we ran. Or maybe a better word is begged. If ever God was in heaven, we needed his help.

A mob of people entering to see the play blocked the main entrance to the new auditorium. But Brains had a plan. He led us directly to the backside of the wing.

The shadows of evening had collected there, but my seeing-eye-dog friend led us straight to a set of double doors.

We caught up with him as he pulled the handle.

Locked!

My heart sank like a torpedoed battleship.

Brains pounded on the doors, and we all joined in.

“Open up! Open up!” shrieked Brains.

Maybe heaven truly *was* with us. At that moment, a tiny bird of a woman came nipping down the otherwise deserted back hallway. When I saw her, I almost shouted for joy. She was Mrs. Clopake, Brains’ and my old English teacher from the days when we had attended Crestwood Junior High. She was a sponsor of the Drama Club.

Mrs. Clopake, oblivious to us, nearly passed by. But, at last, she heard the commotion outside and paused. She squinted at the door, halfway blind as she is, and minced her way over. She peered through the window, one hand to the side of her face.

“Oh my! What is the ruckus about?”

“Mrs. Clopake! Mrs. Clopake! Please let us in!” pleaded X.

The prim lady’s eyes opened wide when she caught sight of him.

“Well, my goodness, if it isn’t Barclay. For heaven’s sake.”

“Mrs. Clopake, please open the door,” he begged.

“Oh! Oh, silly me! Certainly, Barclay.” She was as happy as a frog on a lily pad. Brains had been her prize student, and, boy, was she glad to see him.

She pushed the latch, and he yanked open the door. We swarmed in as Mrs. Clopake jumped with excitement.

“Oh, there’s Jimmy Carson, too. Oh my. How are you, sweet boy?”

“I’m fine, Mrs. Clopake. We’re here to see Terry Dexter,” I said, thinking fast on my feet.

“Oh, yes, to wish her luck on opening night. ‘Break a leg’ is the expression, is it not?”

“Mrs. Clopake, we need to find her now.” I had to get this woman to focus.

“Can you tell us how to get backstage? It’s an emergency.”

Neither Brains nor I had ever darkened the door of the Drama Club.

“Oh, dear. Emergency! Not her poor father, I hope. His heart, you know, is so...”

“Yes, yes, it is about her father. Now, please....”

“The stage entrance is straight that way,” she said, pointing right. “Right past the exit sign.”

We took off like a runaway herd of horses, leaving her standing with her mouth open.

“Well, for gracious sakes!” I heard her say.

We tore open the backstage door and crowded into a long hallway that extended to either side. Dressing rooms stretched in either direction. Ahead was the backstage area. It was a great setup, with ropes and sandbags and lighting everywhere. But we weren’t there to collect autographs.

Brains led the way up a short flight of steps, and we found ourselves right on the main stage.

The curtain was closed, but we heard the audience on the other side of it. Hundreds of voices chattered in hundreds of conversations. The discordant noise of the orchestra warming up in the pit played like a nightmare soundtrack to our frantic agony.

Stagehand kids moved things around, putting the final touches on the sets. No one asked why we were there or what we were doing. The Three Investigators were high schoolers, and the firm of Benton and Carson had graduated only two years earlier. In other words, we blended in.

I heard a voice behind us.

“Jimmy, Brains, Pete! What in the Sam Hill are you guys doing back here?”

We turned and my eyes popped out of my head. The voice belonged to Terry Dexter. But she didn’t look like Terry Dexter. The woman was dressed in a long, full dress in the style of the Eighteenth Century. The neck of the dress scooped low in the front. She had piled her hair high on her head. Her face was all rouged and mascaraed and lipsticked with stage makeup.

She stared at us, unbelieving. I could tell we were the last people on earth she expected to encounter at that moment.

Brains single-mindedly turned away from her. “Jupiter,” he said, “observe the audience through the gap in the curtains. Be careful you are not spotted. Establish if Sharjah is anywhere in that audience.”

“Sharjah?” asked Terry, her curiosity piqued. “Who’s that?”

I grabbed her by the arm and hustled her over to stage left. And I made a decision I didn’t know I was capable of making. It haunts me to this day. I’ll never know if I was right or wrong. But what I did was this: I warned Terry to get out of the building—but I didn’t warn any of the other kids on the stage.

I knew if I told everyone, the news would spread like wildfire. Kids would rush to tell their families in the audience, and panic would break out. As Brains had said, it would be yelling ‘Fire!’ in a crowded theater.

And what would stop Sharjah from blowing the place immediately?

“Get out?” She snapped. “Well, thanks a lot, mister.”

“I’m serious, Terry. Get out of the building now!”

She sobered up fast. “Jimmy, what’s wrong? What’s happening?”

“Never mind that. You have to leave.” I gave her a little shove-off. “Now, get going.”

“Not till you tell me what’s going on,” she demanded stubbornly. “Are we in danger?”

I felt ready to explode. We had no time for games. I had to get to work, and she had to get out. Pronto!

I grabbed her by the shoulders and pulled her face near to mine. She let out a little “Oh!” as if she thought I was going to kiss her or something. Well, I wasn’t. I put my lips to her ear.

“Now, get this, sister,” I hissed. “Don’t tell anyone else. If you do, people will get hurt. Lots of people. But I’m telling you to get out of this building, Terry Dexter. Now!”

Her eyes stormed. “Jimmy Carson, don’t even think you can tell me what...”

I don’t understand why I did it. Maybe I thought she would take me seriously if I did. Maybe I thought this was the last time I would be alive to see her. Who can say why, I’m not a shrink.

All I know is, I kissed her.

I pulled her in close and kissed her hard on the lips, okay? It was a desperate time. So what would you have done?

I broke the embrace, and she looked at me with eyes the size of soup spoons.

“Now get out,” I snarled. “Get yourself as far from this building as you can. Run!”

She nodded like a woman in a trance, turned, and trotted toward the stage steps. “You’re still not my boss!” she threw over her shoulder.

I didn’t watch her go. I rushed back to the others as Jupiter turned away from the curtain.

“Confirmed!” he exclaimed. “We were correct. Sharjah is seated in the audience!”

Desperate Struggle

“Then it’s true,” said Brains. “He would not remain unless the explosive device was on his person.”

“Let’s go get him!” I yelled.

“Steady, Operative Three,” he said. “You and I are Sharjah’s prey. He would recognize our faces immediately. One sight of us, and he would pull that switch.”

That’s when Jupiter took over.

“Brains, you and Jimmy stay here, behind the curtain. Keep an eye on Sharjah. Pete, Bob, and I will hurry around to the front of the auditorium and enter through those doors. Then we will slip up on Sharjah and grab his arms so he can’t reach the detonator under his overcoat. The moment you see us make our move, you and Jimmy rush to our aid.”

I didn’t know if that was a crackerjack idea or not, but it was the only plan on the table.

Brains nodded in agreement.

“Wait a second,” I said. I wanted to make sure I knew what this Sharjah guy looked like before The Three Investigators left on their mission.

I slipped over and peered through the crack between the curtains.

"Careful, Operative Three," cautioned Brains. "Sharjah must not see you."

Jupiter muttered instructions in my ear. "He's a dark-complexioned fellow wearing a long, dark overcoat."

My eyes swept the center of the audience, and I spotted him right away. So *that* was Sharjah. Man, he *was* young, just as Jupiter had said. And he wasn't a big guy, at all. He had dark eyes and the thickest set of eyebrows I had ever seen. They met in the middle of his forehead. He hadn't shaved for a couple of days.

He acted perfectly comfortable sitting where he was, but his eyes darted from side to side.

His dark grey overcoat appeared overstuffed as if something was hidden under there. I knew what it was—the evil device that had the power to change the lives of every person in Crestwood, forever.

And you won't believe who was sitting right beside this guy. Chief of Police George Hadley and his wife! I guessed Crestwood's head constable had a niece or nephew in the play. The Chief looked funny in his civvies. But I wasn't laughing. If that maniac pulled the cord, the Hadleys would be the first to go.

"I see him," I said.

Brains slipped beside me to get a gander, too.

"Look for Chief Hadley," I told him. "Sharjah is sitting to his right."

He said he saw the guy, too.

Then I took one more peek, and, man, was I glad I did. Maybe my eyes are a little sharper than Brains' or Jupiter's. Anyway, I spied a familiar face, six rows behind Sharjah and a few seats to the left.

"Hold it, Brains," I said. "Remember that guy with the goatee who was leaving the hotel? The one we passed on our way in. He's here, too!"

I described his position, and he grabbed another look-see.

"Yes, I see, now, that he is," he said. "But why would an English tourist take such interest in a small-town high school play?"

"Maybe he's some kid's rich uncle," I suggested, "And he's come to see his nephew perform tonight."

"Then why didn't his Crestwood relatives put him up for the night? And why did he leave the McCurdy weighted down with luggage only an hour before the play begins?"

Jupiter snapped his fingers. "He may very well be Sharjah's confederate!"

"My thoughts exactly," said Brains. "We may have just missed encountering Sharjah's friend in the act of clearing the last of their belongings out of suite four-oh-four."

Creeps! If he had recognized us, what a deadly fiasco it would have been!

"But why is he here?" I hissed. "It takes only one man to blow a bomb."

If Brains heard me, he chose not to answer.

"Jupiter," he said, "I suggest Bob cover this other man on the chance he may attempt to come to Sharjah's aid when you tackle him."

“Done!” said Jupiter. He peeked once more through the curtain, then directed Pete and Bob to get a bead on those two characters, too. The two investigators snatched a look.

“Got them?” Jupiter asked his men. They nodded. “Then let’s go,” said the First Investigator. “We may have five minutes...or we may have no time left at all.”

With those words of comfort hanging in the air, the three boys departed on their mission. They had only to follow the hall circling outside the auditorium to get to the front doors.

Brains and I took up our posts at the curtain. We each found a place where we could observe Sharjah and the man who might be his friend.

“X! If the guy from the hotel is Sharjah’s pal, how can we tell which one of them has the bomb?”

“Sharjah is more centrally located for maximum effect. It would seem his friend is there only to assist him.”

He frowned. “There’s something wrong with that scheme, Operative Three, but I can’t put my finger on it.”

“I’ll tell you what’s wrong. Those two are crazy enough to kill themselves. We can’t expect any logic. Sharjah may not wait for the auditorium doors to close. He could throw that switch at any time, X, and we’d be gone.”

My legs shook. I couldn’t help it.

He touched my shoulder.

“Steady as she goes, Operative Three. We are the only hope Crestwood has.”

Maybe it was the way X put it. Liquid fire sluiced into my bloodstream. Maybe it was the same chemical that galvanizes our soldiers in Vietnam when they charge a hill. My legs still shook, but now with eagerness. I couldn’t wait to get my hands on these guys.

Jupiter, Pete, and Bob appeared on the other side of the auditorium.

Let me give you the picture. Four entrances are spaced across the top of the stadium. Two aisles run down the sides, and two aisles separate three blocks of seating. At the bottom of the stadium, in front of the stage, sits an orchestra pit.

The Three Investigators split up and made their ways down the two middle aisles—Jupiter in the aisle to my left, and Pete and Bob in the aisle to my right. They tried to appear natural, moving with the crowd that continued to filter through the doors at the top.

I don’t think either Brains or I could breathe by the time Jupiter entered the central block of seating in Sharjah’s row. Pete entered from the other aisle, in the row behind him. Bob sidled into the row behind Sharjah’s friend.

“*What courage they have,*” I thought. They knew their lives could vanish in an instant. They could have bolted for California, leaving us to fend for ourselves.

Jupiter moved slowly in the Kassabeban’s direction, smiling, nodding, and apologizing to folks who made room for him to pass. He bumped along, bumping into knees, and looking for all the world like some dopey kid who had lost his seat.

I checked Pete. He timed his movements so he and Jupiter would meet both in front of and behind Sharjah at the same moment. Meanwhile, Bob shuffled through his row, stalling so he would be in place the moment his friends snatched the Assassin.

The three had nearly gained position. Events rapidly moved to a head. Brains clenched and unclenched his hands. We both tensed, ready to bolt from behind the curtain and speed on our way to help Jupiter and Pete.

I hoped Bob could hold his man if he turned out to be Sharjah's friend.

Almost there! Jupiter had made his way to within one seat from Sharjah. Hadley sat on the other side of the Kassabeban. By that time, Pete was directly behind Hadley. I caught my breath and held it.

Sharjah jerked and took notice. He peered down his row, past the Hadleys, in the other direction. His head whipped back toward Jupiter, and his eyes narrowed. I sensed the reason for his suspicion: every seat in his row was taken.

It happened faster than you can imagine. One moment, Jupiter was the amiable, slow-moving fool—the next, he sprang like a tiger. “Now!” he yelled, and he and Pete moved as one.

Sharjah didn't know what hit him. Each boy grabbed a forearm and held it high, keeping his hands from the unseen switch concealed beneath his overcoat. The Assassin came to life, screaming and struggling.

“Charge!” yelled Brains, and we shot out from behind that curtain like two sprinters going for the Olympic gold medal.

We didn't stop when we got to the edge of the stage. We sailed over that orchestra pit filled with kids playing woods and strings. Brains made it fine, landing on two feet, but I came down a little too hard, twisting my ankle.

Hot knife-like pain shot up my right leg. I didn't stumble, though. I couldn't afford to fall, and I wasn't going to do it.

Brains took the left aisle, and I took the right.

Sharjah squirmed and bucked like an animal in a trap. Foreign words streamed from his mouth. But, brother, when he saw Brains and me coming for him, he began playing to Hadley and the crowd, pleading in English.

“Please! Please, my friends! I am honorable man, Mr. Police Chief. These boys, why are they assaulting me?”

I swear to you, Hadley had hardly begun to react to the struggle going on next to him. But that call for assistance revved the old boy's engine.

“Now see here!” he bellowed. “You young punks leave this man alone.” The Chief rose heavily to his feet, swinging his weather-balloon belly around to face the action.

Brains and I entered from opposite ends of Sharjah's row. We barreled past shocked people, knocking their legs aside without ceremony. A general roar of voices swept the crowd as hundreds of pairs of eyes watched with amazement.

Hadley grappled with Pete, trying to pry his hands from Sharjah's arm. He almost succeeded, but I couldn't let that happen. I dove over Mrs. Hadley's lap

and grabbed the arm Pete struggled to keep in his grip. Brains added to the heap, helping Jupiter on his side.

The whole mass of us teetered off balance, a tangle of limbs, pushing against each other and swaying from side to side.

All the while, Sharjah caterwauled about what an honorable man he was and how he would sue America for damages. His overcoat was coming undone, and underneath was a lumpy black material wrapped around his waist.

The bomb!

The people in the seats nearest us had scooted away but it appeared nobody thought this altercation was a threat to their lives. Which was good because one spark of fear could light the flame sending hundreds racing for the exits.

I was draped like a monkey over Hadley's back as I held on like mad to Sharjah's arm.

"Chief, stop," I gritted in his ear. "This is a bad guy. Help us bring him down!" I couldn't tell him why. I couldn't shout he had a bomb.

"You're a lunatic, Carson!" Hadley roared. "And so are you, Benton. Let go of this man or so help me...!"

I was so distracted by the fight I didn't spot the police officer surging through the row before it was too late.

"Brains!" I shouted. "Behind you!" My buddy didn't have time to react before a beefy arm in blue circled his skinny neck, dragging him away from Sharjah.

Jupiter didn't abandon his post. He held on for dear life, literally.

I didn't hear the next policeman coming at all. He landed on my back like a brick wall falling. Hadley grasped at his chance and, together, the two cops wrestled me away from Sharjah.

I turned my injured ankle, lost my footing, and crashed to the floor like a boxing bag ripped from its ceiling joist. I was jammed between the rows of seats. The heavy cop shoved his boot into my gut to hold me down as he and Hadley worked on prying Pete loose from Sharjah's arm.

We were going to lose!

"Hadley, please!" I cried. "Stop! You don't know what you're doing!" I may as well have counseled peace to a pit bull in a dogfight.

Brains begged, too. All four of us pleaded with an endless barrage of "Stop!" and "Please!"

With a final sideways twist, Hadley and the big cop tore Pete away from Sharjah. That shifted the weight of the cop off me. At last, I found some space to move, and I clawed my way to my feet.

I was too late. Sharjah's freed hand moved like a snake toward his midsection. An expression of utter triumph distorted his face. Jupiter, still holding on to the other arm, snatched at Sharjah's free hand, but he couldn't catch it.

Brains wriggled frantically. His face was as red as a beet. His glasses swung from one ear. With one last supreme effort, he wrested himself from the officer holding him and lunged at Sharjah.

But the Assassin had grasped the bright object embedded in the material around his waist. His eyes rolled, wild and distended. His hair flew in all directions.

Then he yanked the switch, closing the circuit with a shout rising in manic laughter.

I closed my eyes tight and waited to die.

The Living Dead

In the darkness, I heard laughter.

But a man can't hear when he's dead.

I opened my eyes.

Sharjah was howling, convulsed by gales of laughter. Foam flecked his lips as his dark eyes fastened on Brains' face.

My friend was ashen. His red hair blazed against his white skin like a forest fire in winter. He looked stricken, stabbed to the heart by a death that hadn't come.

For the space of a heartbeat, everyone froze—Brains, Jupiter, Pete, and me—even Chief Hadley and his henchmen.

Then another voice, filled with lunatic laughter, joined Sharjah's.

The guy we had passed at the McCurdy, the one with the goatee, stood straight up from his seat and chanted a verse in Arabic that froze me to the marrow.

He raised his arms high. His right fist brandished one of the smaller alligator bags he had carried earlier that day.

You've heard someone say his life passed before his eyes? Well, it wasn't my life, but the answer to the riddle that flashed through my mind.

Sharjah had known his prey well. He had used Brains' and Jupiter's genius against them. Once he knew The Three Investigators were on his tail, he had used them, luring them to Crestwood with the charred photograph, knowing they would contact Benton and Carson. And he had departed the McCurdy every afternoon at the same time, establishing a *modus operandi* that presented us a logical time frame wherein to search his suite. And he had left behind evidence concerning his intention to destroy the school auditorium that night at seven-thirty.

Then Sharjah had played the decoy, blasting our souls with the vision of our deaths and the death of everything we loved. And now his confederate would kill us a second time with the real bomb in the alligator bag.

All we could do was watch it end.

So he had planned, anyway.

But Sharjah didn't know we had discovered his confederate.

And so, when Goatee took a moment to gloat, he made his biggest mistake.

Because that was when Bob nailed him.

The wiry Third Investigator wrapped a full nelson under the Kassabeban's arms and around the back of his skull. He linked his fingers together and held on like a spider as the bomber strained to bring his arms down and his hands together.

For a second, I thought Bob could hold him. But he started losing ground. Goatee was compact in build, but he was twice as strong as any man his size had a right to be.

I was on my way to the struggle, taking the direct route by scrambling over the tops of seats, and stepping on confused people's shoulders and thighs. I had only one more row to go before I reached Goatee when two of Crestwood's citizens figured they should give the police a hand.

The two men who tackled me were forty-something dads, big guys with plenty of weight who brought me down inches from the goal line.

Bob maintained his full nelson. But with his arms pinched as they were under the Kassabeban's arms, he had become the one who was pinned. Goatee succeeded in lowering his arms. He fumbled with the latch on the bag.

I couldn't get away from my captors. They had me good. It seemed like curtains after all.

But lightning struck in the person of Lucie Manette. The Eighteenth-Century woman appeared out of nowhere, moving faster than her voluminous dress would seem to allow.

When she reached Goatee, she reared back and delivered a haymaker that would have ended the shorter Kassabeban's bombing career if it had landed.

But he ducked, and who do you think caught it in the face? The sound was like a wooden mallet smacking a thick steak. Down Bob went.

Goatee should have used the moment to reach into his bag and detonate the bomb. But instead, he watched Bob hit the mat, giving Terry the chance to wind up another punch. And let me tell you, brother, this one connected.

Down went Goatee.

I cheered. I had to.

But even lying prone on the floor, the little man clung to one handle of the suitcase. Terry snatched the other handle and braced one foot against the armrest of a chair. A tug-of-war ensued—the man's gravity pitted against her braced foot.

Below, Sharjah and Hadley shouted like madmen. Pete, Brains, and Jupiter struggled through their rows, making for the aisle in hopes of coming to the rescue. The two uniformed police chased after them, right on their heels.

The crowd in the auditorium rose to its feet, milling. By this time, they had to wonder if they ought to be someplace else. Some folks located near the doors edged toward them. I knew if some over-imaginative fool yelled, "He's got a gun!" the stampede would begin.

But then the Marines landed. Or maybe it was the Cavalry. It was a dozen men in trench coats. They hustled through the upper doors and down the aisles. When two of them came to Goatee, they subdued him in a couple of seconds flat.

One of the men stood in a middle aisle and raised his badge for the audience to see.

He said he was the FBI. He chuckled as if nothing serious had happened and he said everything was under control.

What a public relations guy he would have made.

“Well, folks,” he said loudly, “we had a little fun tonight. But it’s all over. Tell you what, though, if you wouldn’t mind, I’d like you to do me a little favor. The regulations say we need to treat this as a crime scene, okay?”

“That means you must leave so we can search for evidence. Ha, ha. So if you good folks in the back row would be kind enough to file out now, and if you folks in the next row would file out after them, and so forth down to the stage. All of you file out one row at a time, okay, and we sure would appreciate it. Remember to take your time. No hurry. Thanks a lot, people.”

By the time the agent finished his speech, the folks who had been on the verge of panic seconds before, shrugged at each other. Some of them smiled and others grumbled, as if to say, “Drat the inconvenience.”

Well, the two middle-aged guys who thought they had helped the police escorted me through the row and presented me to the man with the badge. Shoot, I didn’t resist. Are you kidding? The boys in trench coats looked like a band of angels to me.

Chief Hadley and his two patrolmen approached the agent in charge, with Brains and The Three Investigators in hand. Hadley addressed the agent.

“I am Crestwood Chief of Police George Hadley,” the constable said pompously.

Before he spoke again, he turned and gave Brains and me the evil eye. And the way that eye glittered said plenty. At last, the old windbag had the goods on Benton and Carson. He tasted sweet revenge.

“These boys have committed several serious felonies tonight,” he said. “Assault and battery and resisting arrest, to name only three. If you need to interview them, you can visit them at the police station.”

The FBI agent grinned in a crinkly way. He had iron-gray hair and appeared to be in his fifties.

“Sorry, Chief,” he said. “I’m taking custody of these young men right now. The FBI needs them as witnesses.”

Hadley flushed a deep red. “But—but...these boys are my prisoners!” he sputtered.

“Prisoners?” The agent smiled broadly. “Why, these fellas are heroes!”

The Chief’s mouth popped open. You could almost see steam shooting out his ears.

“Heroes, my foot!” he fumed.

I thought old Hadley would blow a gasket.

“They’ve done nothing but obstruct justice in this town since they were kids!” he said.

Then the agent said and did something that threw us for a loop.

“Now, that’s not how I remember them,” he said, grinning again. He turned to my partner and stuck out his hand. “It’s good to see you again, Brains. You, too, Jimmy. You two have built quite a career as criminal investigators since last we met.”

Brains pumped the man’s hand. “Thank you,” he replied. But it was easy to see the President of the Benton and Carson International Detective Agency had no clue to the agent’s identity. Neither did I. For a second, I thought the guy was pulling something on us.

I shook his hand anyway.

“You don’t remember me, do you?” he asked us.

“Jim Patton?” Brains guessed.

The name rang a bell. But I still couldn’t place it.

“That’s me,” the agent said, laughing. “I interviewed both of you the night we took down Otto Gruber.”

Say! Jim Patton! He was older, but the face fit the name. Boy, was I glad to see him! We shook hands with him all over again.

Hadley turned pale as if he had eaten too many green apples. All his dreams of arresting us were blowing away in the wind.

Crestwood’s citizens trudged by us, watching with curiosity as they emptied the auditorium.

I nudged my partner and pointed. Four burly agents had the cuffs on Goatee. That was one Fedayee who was going nowhere.

About that time, Terry joined us, accompanied by the FBI agent who had been questioning her. But the agent had bad news. Not about Terry, but Sharjah.

Somehow, in the confusion surrounding the subduing of Goatee, the other Fedayee had disappeared!

Hatching the Plan

Patton gave the cold eye to Chief Hadley and the two Crestwood cops. “You detained these young men and let Sharjah go?”

Hadley fell speechless.

Patton turned to one of his fellow FBI agents. “All-points bulletin. Set a web for Ali ben Sharjah. I want him picked up tonight!”

The guy nodded and took off.

I hoped they caught Sharjah right away. I couldn’t live knowing that maniac was prowling around out there. He would be fit to be tied since he had failed in his quest. If he remained free, how would he exact his revenge?

Hadley figured it was time for him to look in charge of something. He and the two Crestwood police officers drifted down the aisle and made a nuisance of themselves, directing traffic out of the auditorium.

Patton wanted to know our connection to the three guys from California. Brains and Jupiter gave him the score. By the time they finished, they had the agent shaking his head in wonder.

“Not one, but two detective agencies run by kids,” he said. He added, “No offense, fellas.”

We all assured him none was taken. Then Terry related her role in the affair. Patton took notes. But he said we’d have to tell our stories all over again later.

I balled my hand in a fist and shook it at Terry. “Nice punch.”

“You should know,” she said, flashing a smile.

I didn’t miss the joke. My jaw had met those knuckles before. She had been ten years old. And I had been thirteen, on the floor, and looking up.

“Him?” said Bob, surprised, slurring his words through a swollen jaw. “What about me?”

“Agent Patton,” said Brains, speaking swiftly, “may I offer a suggestion? I have a plan that will capture Sharjah in short order.”

Patton blinked. “Haven’t you accomplished enough, Benton?” he said. “You and your friends have saved the day.”

“Sir, I believe if we move with dispatch, we may save the night, also.”

Can you believe the pluck of my partner? Here was Patton, a captain in the FBI, and Brains spoke to him as an equal. But that is how it’s always been with him. His confident way causes older adults to forget he is years their junior.

“Let’s have it,” replied Patton.

He laid out a simple plan. Several FBI agents would immediately leave to stake out the Benton garage. After an appropriate amount of time had passed—say, the time Sharjah might estimate it would take for the FBI to debrief us—I would drive Brains and myself to the Bentons’ house. We would let ourselves into the garage by its front door, use the main stairs to enter the crime lab, and wait for Sharjah to come calling.

When the Assassin showed, the Feds would nab him.

“And what makes you think Sharjah isn’t hightailing for the airport, or cutting across the countryside?” Patton asked.

“I base my suppositions on these facts, sir. Killing Jimmy and me was Sharjah’s primary mission. In that, he failed. In failing, he lost face. He would not think of returning to Kassabeba without having done the deed for his master, Ras-Bey. Moreover, he must accomplish his task this very night, for Sharjah knows every hour that passes brings him ever closer to his capture at the hands of the American authorities. And Sharjah knows all eyes are watching for him—he cannot flee to fight another day. In other words, sir, to Sharjah’s way of thinking, Jimmy and I must perish before the sun rises—and the sooner the better.”

Patton removed an empty tobacco pipe from his coat pocket and chewed on the stem. “Sound thinking, Benton,” he commented.

Brains blushed from the praise. But he wasn’t finished.

“And if I might make a request, sir. Jimmy and I want our friends to play a role in Sharjah’s capture. If not for them, there would be no night to save.”

So far, I hadn't said a word. Neither had Terry or The Three Investigators. But after one look at their faces, I knew he had hit the nail on the head again. After everything all of us had been through together, helping nab Sharjah was a matter of honor.

Patton hesitated, probably at the idea of involving high schoolers in a dangerous mission. But I sensed his respect for Brains had raised a notch because of his eagerness to share the glory.

"Your friends can ride along on the stakeout detail," Patton said finally. He smiled at them. "Make sure you bring along those homemade walkie talkies."

"Yes, sir!" exclaimed Jupiter and the others.

Patton called for a couple of agents and spoke to them briefly before turning Terry and The Three Investigators over to their custody. Before our friends left, we exchanged farewells and good lucks.

Patton turned to me.

"Oh, before I forget, Jimmy," he said, smiling. "Your Uncle Ed had a message for you if we found you and Brains still alive. He sends greetings to you both from the 'burning sands of Kassabeba.'"

My friend and I laughed loudly. We should have known the FBI wasn't here by some wild coincidence. Following my phone call with Uncle Ed, my mom's brother had tipped off the FBI concerning Sharjah's whereabouts, most likely with the full authority of Prince Halam behind him.

Right after that, Jim Patton and two other agents whisked us out of the building and into Patton's car. As we whizzed through the back streets of Crestwood, Patton said over his shoulder, "We contacted your friend, Mr. Porter, as you requested, Benton. He promised to meet us at his store."

Sure enough, when we pulled into the alley behind the town's leading haberdashery, a light burned in the otherwise darkened building.

Creeps! It sure gave me the willies, helping Brains load those two stiff mannequins into the trunk of Patton's big Buick. I felt as if we were disposing of a couple of bodies.

And not any two bodies! According to the plan, the dummies would represent Brains and me!

That's what brought it all home. We were out to trap our would-be killer. And the bait was none other than Benton and Carson!

Trapped in the Trap

I checked my watch. The time was three o'clock in the morning.

Brains and I had set the two mannequins in chairs, one seated on either side of his desk. My partner had painted the hair of the dummy sitting in his chair fire engine red. If you saw X's hair you would know the paint was only a shade away from the real thing. Besides, the only source of light in the lab was the low light

of the desk lamp and that did a lot to tame colors. His old prescription glasses placed on the mannequin's nose completed the disguise.

My "double," seated facing "Brains," didn't resemble me much. But it did have brown hair, and that would have to do.

Brains got the idea for using the mannequins as stand-ins for us from our experiences in "The Case of the Stolen Dummy."

The portable tape recorder rested on the desk between the dummies, ready to be switched on at a moment's notice. He had cued the tape to the beginning of the conversation we had recorded that morning.

The legs of the aluminum ladder, reaching down from the open rectangle in the center of the ceiling, rested solidly on the floor. Our escape hatch was ready.

But I was beginning to believe we wouldn't need it. According to Brains' theory, Sharjah wanted us dead before sunrise, and "the sooner the better." But not much time was left on the clock.

"Maybe Sharjah smelled a rat," I said, breaking a long silence. "Maybe he hit the road."

"I doubt it," he said stubbornly. "He has no place to run. The highway and the turnpike are the only ways out of this terrain. And those avenues are blockaded. Likewise, the airport and bus terminal are covered. Sharjah is trapped."

"I don't know, X. Sharjah may be a nut, but he's a pretty sharp character."

"He is the most intelligent villain with whom we've ever dealt. Sharjah deliberately left behind clues that Jupiter and I could unravel. But he performed his task so cleverly we didn't suspect he was leading us on."

"You guys did catch on to him—at the end. I mean, you figured out enough to ruin Sharjah's plans. Creeps! If not for you and Jupiter, the whole school would have gone up in smoke."

I wasn't kidding. Minutes before Patton had dropped us off at my car hours earlier, an agent had informed him by radio that Goatee hadn't carried a bomb in that small alligator bag. It contained a signal transmitter designed to activate two larger bombs!

Goatee had concealed the bombs inside the two larger alligator suitcases he had toted out the door of the McCurdy right under our noses.

It killed me when I remembered Jupiter politely holding the door for him. If only we had known!

Anyway, Goatee and Sharjah had planted those suitcases at two strategic locations in the auditorium. It was the perfect plot. Who would suspect a *suitcase* had a bomb in it?

According to the agent at the other end of the radio, if the bombs had exploded, the blasts would have knocked out two structural supports on which the south wing of the school rested. Anyone surviving the blast would have been buried under tons of rubble.

Including Goatee and Sharjah. I shook my head in disbelief. What had influenced two high-IQ types to make such a mass-murder suicide deal? Then I remembered my dad's war stories—how Japanese kamikaze pilots flew fighter

planes into American warships during World War II. The kamikazes sacrificed themselves for their Emperor, much in the same way the Fedayeen had attempted to do for Ras-Bey.

What a world, man.

A walkie talkie Jupiter and company had constructed crackled with sound.

“Unit One reports no visitors,” Jupiter’s voice sounded. “Unit Two reports all clear.”

“I’ll take this one,” I said as I lifted the radio off the desk. The stakeout detail had checked in with us at intervals all night long. We all desperately wanted something to happen.

“We copy, Unit One. All quiet here,” I said into the mike.

I set the radio on the desk, rose to my weary feet, and stretched. I yawned, too. I had practically lost my jitters. I walked over to the ladder and kicked at the base the way you check the tires on a used car.

Even Brains acted bored. He joined me, and, taking hold of the ladder, shook it a little as if he doubted its strength. When and if Sharjah showed up, the ladder was our ticket out. We planned to climb to the lookout cupola, drawing up the ladder and rope after us. And one of us would flip the switch, locking Sharjah inside the lab and trapping him.

Patton and his FBI agents would surround the Assassin and offer him a choice. Like, give up or die.

“I suppose one of us should show himself at a window again,” said Brains. From time to time we did, hoping to let Sharjah see someone in the lab.

Before either one of us could take a step, it happened. Something behind Brains caught my eye. All my tiredness left me in a moment.

A red light on the desk flashed silently off and on!

“X!” I wheezed. “The alarm! Look at the burglar alarm!”

He turned to see and seized my shoulder.

“Someone is on the main stairway!” he hissed.

“Sharjah! It’s got to be Sharjah!”

“Indeed! But how did he get past the detail?”

“Creeps! The guy is a ghost!”

X started toward his desk, intending to grab the walkie talkie and warn the others, but I gripped his shirt.

“No time for that!” I yelled. And, brother, was I right. As the words left my lips, the latch on the lab’s door began to rattle and turn.

Brains whirled around. “Up the ladder, Jimmy! Go!”

I didn’t waste a second arguing about who should go first. The sooner I started, the sooner my friend would be right behind me.

It turned out, none of it mattered, anyway. I had stepped on the first rung when the door boomed open.

The Master of Minds

In stepped Sharjah, dressed in black. His teeth gleamed against the dark shadow of his unshaven face. His fierce eyebrows, drawn down, nearly concealed his beady eyes. In his right fist, he clutched a big, black pistol. And he aimed the muzzle straight at our heads!

“No, no, my friends!” he said mockingly. “Please come down. Play with Sharjah.”

Brains raised his hands shoulder high, palms forward. I backed off the ladder, moving slowly and steadily. I figured why give him a reason to shoot me immediately, right? I meant to squeeze out every moment of life I had left.

True to his nature, Sharjah decided to toy with us. He moved into the room, keeping out of our reach, his gun now trained on our guts. He spotted the two mannequins seated at the desk and smirked.

“Do the two Americans think Sharjah is a fool?”

I swear, I couldn’t move my lips. They had gone completely numb. Not so with my buddy, though. Even facing certain death, Brains kept his head.

“Not at all, Sharjah. My friend and I were only now speaking of your genius.”

That interested the Kassabeban. By the look on his face, he couldn’t have agreed more with him.

“You are smart men,” he said, tapping his head with his free hand. “But you are tools of Satan.”

I didn’t take that as a compliment. Here this maniac had tried to blow up an auditorium full of innocent people including women and children. How could anyone get his mind so twisted around?

“Congratulations, Sharjah,” said Brains, as smooth as ice. As he spoke, he edged toward the desk. “You have beaten us. We are no challenge for you. We should have realized that from the beginning.”

I didn’t know what on earth my buddy had in mind, but he had only one shot at making it work.

Sharjah wanted to hear more. He moved farther into the room, keeping his gun pointed at us. He circled us, always facing us with that dead man’s grin plastered on his face.

“I have beaten everyone—you, your police, your pathetic FBI surrounding this place.”

So he knew! Patton’s crew had been apparent to him.

“My friend says you are a ghost, Sharjah. With that I agree,” Brains said, flattering him. “How did you manage to elude our protectors?”

“After your stupid police let me go, I came here. Right away. Boom,” he bragged. “Sharjah knew your next move.” He tapped his head again.

“But the FBI searched these premises before staking them out,” said Brains, feigning awe, “They searched the garage and inside my father’s automobile.”

Sharjah fished in his pocket with his free hand and brought out a screwdriver.

“They should have checked the boot,” he sneered. The English call the trunk of a car the “boot.” Until twelve years before, Kassabeba had been an English protectorate.

We had amused Sharjah long enough. He steadied his gun hand with the other hand and aimed at Brains’ heart.

“But now, my friends, it is time for us to die.”

He intended to kill us and turn the pistol on himself. Or maybe he planned to die in a hail of enemy gunfire. Sharjah knew once he fired that pistol, the FBI would respond. There was no escape for him.

Patton and the others were cooling their heels in their vehicles outside. They had no idea what was happening. If only I could grab the walkie talkie in time! But I knew if I moved a muscle, Sharjah would shoot me in the blink of an eye.

Our new friends, The Three Investigators, were out there, too. In a flash, I realized they would blame themselves for our deaths. No one should bear that burden. Believe me.

And how would Terry feel? She was with them, waiting for me. Brains and me, I mean.

“We are fated to die at your hands, Sharjah,” said Brains. He fought hard to keep the squeak out of his voice. “Therefore, before you kill us, I have an object of great importance for you to deliver to your master, Ras-Bey.”

The Kassabeban’s eyes narrowed to slits.

“Do not try to trick me,” he said with laughter in his voice.

But he didn’t fire. Not yet.

“It is an object for which Ras-Bey has long searched,” X continued. “Prince Halam doesn’t have the authentic relic. He has only an imitation I manufactured. You see, I found the true Stone of Light and Wisdom and seized it for myself.”

The Stone! But we *had* given it to Halam. What a yarn he was spinning! I couldn’t imagine how it might save us.

“You lie!” spat Sharjah. But the Kassabeban couldn’t hide the gleam in his eyes. I figured Ras-Bey had clued him in on the why of his mission—how Brains and I had recovered the Stone and foiled the usurper’s effort to hold the throne.

And I realized that in the same way Sharjah had used Brains’ genius against him, even so, my friend had turned the Kassabeban’s devious mind around on *him*. After all, a mastermind such as Sharjah had to wonder if Brains had double-crossed everyone and stolen the Stone.

We had this one chance to live. If we made it, I would never question my partner’s use of psychology again.

“No, my friend,” Brains said, mimicking the Assassin’s language. “The Stone of Light and Wisdom is right here on my desk.” He motioned with his hand.

“Touch nothing on desk!” commanded Sharjah. He shifted his feet nervously. His finger twitched on the trigger. Brains froze, his hand outstretched toward the desktop.

“I have no weapon, Sharjah. I have only the Stone of Light and Wisdom. A gift to your master, concealed in this ordinary ink bottle.”

So that was his plan! No matter what he said, I knew well it was no ordinary bottle of ink.

The killer's eyes fastened on the large bottle resting on the desk. I held my breath. What if he decided to simply shoot him and take the bottle?

But I should have known that redheaded genius was one step ahead of the game. If Brains had the Stone, Sharjah wanted to live to take it to Ras-Bey. But if Sharjah fired his gun, the FBI would either kill or capture him. And the Stone would be forever lost to his master.

A tremor passed through the Assassin's body.

"Liar!" he hissed.

My heart skipped two beats. I think he almost pulled the trigger.

But he said, "Hand the bottle to me." He motioned with his gun. "Easy. No tricks."

One false move from Brains, and it was over for us.

Moving like a glacier, my partner reached for the bottle. I knew what was going to happen. I measured the distance between the gunman and me. I figured it for five yards. I tensed, preparing for the running tackle I had to make. This could be your last move, Carson, I thought. My heart raced like a Jaguar engine.

Brains' bony hand closed over the bottle. But instead of lifting it, he gave it a turn. And that's when a section of wall revolved, and a bunk dropped down behind Sharjah.

The little Kassabeban leaped like a bee-stung cat, spinning around and firing blindly in the direction of the noise.

That ear-splitting bang was like the starting gun at a race to me. I took two running jumps and dived. Sharjah caught my motion from the corner of his eye and whirled around, his pistol leveled to take me out. He fired again, an explosion that deafened me.

But his aim was an inch too high. Jimmy Carson was flying in low.

Man! It felt good to hit him! I carried the smaller man ten feet before we crashed to the floor. He started to clout me with the butt of his gun, but Brains landed on both of us like a hundred-sixty-pound grasshopper.

We fought in a pile of tangled arms and legs. Everything happened in a blur of speed. Sharjah moved like a viper. Every time one of us grabbed his gun arm, he twisted it free.

I kept thinking that big pistol would go off in my face. I wasn't sure who was going to win until a large, wing-tip shoe stomped hard and heavy on Sharjah's gun arm, pinning it to the floor.

Jim Patton! How had he arrived so quickly?

"It's over," he told Sharjah. And, brother, he meant it! I'm not a firearms expert, but I was certain the chunk of metal Patton shoved into the Kassabeban's gut would have blasted the man into two pieces.

Brains and I were still sprawled on top of Sharjah. We held our breaths, waiting for the mad bomber's next move. All I could think at that moment was that I would hate to have a man killed right under me.

But guess what happened. Big, bad Sharjah gave up. I guess facing eternity without dragging other folks along with him was too much to handle. The suicide killer chickened out, big time.

And when Patton's men lifted Brains and me off Sharjah and dragged the fanatic to his feet, the Fedayee Ras-Bey cooperated meek as a lamb. I couldn't believe the change in him.

"Smart move, Carson," said Patton, pumping my hand. "Leaving that walkie talkie on 'send.'"

"S-sure," I stuttered. I had no idea what he was talking about. But who was I to disagree with him?

Then it hit me. I must have forgotten to flip the radio back to 'receive' after I answered that last call! Jupiter had heard everything going on in the lab. That explained how Patton and his men had arrived in the nick of time.

I had goofed up royally. But it had turned out for the best.

X stared at me with his mouth open. Then he rolled his eyes and shook his head, a smile spreading across his face.

As they say, I thought—but I didn't dare recite the cliché to my partner—all's well that ends well.

And the Beat Goes On

If you think the world slowed down for us after the capture of Sharjah, think again. We got off one merry-go-round only to get on another.

The Three Investigators were as involved in the aftermath as we were. It was a good thing final exams were over in Santa Monica, or the boys would never have finished their academic year.

And Terry? Crestwood Senior High allowed her to test out of her classes later that summer. The administration figured they owed her one. That's why they let her graduate with her class, handing her a blank diploma without saying any word but "Congratulations!"

But the circus started right after the FBI hauled Sharjah out of the lab and spirited him away to someplace in Virginia.

Jim Patton had us call our parents and guardians, first thing. I woke Mom and Dad at Ann's place in California. When Ann answered, she thought I was hurt or something.

When my pop got on the horn, he thought I had been arrested. But we got it all straightened out. Not the whole story, of course. But at least my folks knew I was okay.

Mom said they would pack right then and head home immediately. I heard Ann saying she was coming along, too.

Brother! This was getting crazy.

Brains called his mother in Maine. She said she planned to catch the next flight out.

Jupiter phoned his aunt and uncle, and Bob and Pete contacted their moms and dads. The three boys had a tough time convincing their folks to stay in Rocky Beach. But after Jim Patton got on the phone and explained in his drawling, folksy way how busy the kids would be anyway, they agreed to stay in Rocky Beach, California.

With the stipulation that The Three Investigators call home every day!

As for Terry, one of Patton's agents drove her straight home to her ailing father in Bleeker City, three miles from Crestwood. He had been too ill to make it to the opening night. It sounds strange to say so, but it turned out to be a good deal for him. If he had been in the auditorium, he might have died of a heart attack right then and there.

So, anyway, Terry went home to break all the excitement to her dad before he heard it on the morning news and worried himself to death.

The big news wire services—the Associated Press and the United Press International—invaded Crestwood. Reporters from the big statewide dailies, including the Capital Observer, collared whoever they could find for a story.

But Brains and I gave our exclusive statements to our reporter pal, Lew Jarman of the *Crestwood Daily Ledger*. Lew even got a short quote from Patton. The *Ledger's* presses melted down putting out an Extra.

And when the sun rose over Crestwood, the banner headline read:

BENTON AND CARSON & THREE INVESTIGATORS 'SAVE DAY'!

Young Detectives Thwart Foreigners' Plan to Dynamite High School Play

Well, of course, Sharjah hadn't used dynamite. But Lew didn't write the story wrong. No, it was the headline writer on the copy desk who read dynamite into the story.

Lew is a top-notch reporter. He takes pride in his product. So that foul-up exasperated him, naturally.

But none of it mattered in the long run. The details would come out later. And, boy, did they ever! Each day brought more headlines and more information. After a week had passed, Crestwood's citizens were twitching as much as if the bombs had gone off after all.

Most of the townspeople hailed Brains and me as heroes. But a few of them blamed us for the whole mess. They said if we hadn't fooled around in foreign affairs in the first place, none of this would ever have happened.

That shows you, you can't be everyone's friend. Some folks won't like you no matter what you do.

Of course, The Three Investigators were a sensation around town. And Theresa Dexter got her share of the limelight, too.

Altogether, the six of us were celebrities, but we didn't have time to bask in glory. The FBI set up shop right in the county courthouse off Liberty Square, and we spent most of our days there, telling our stories over and over.

Where did The Three Investigators sleep? They stayed where they had been living all along—the good old Edgewood Motel four miles north of town.

Anyway, when my parents got home that first day, I figured my goose was cooked. Mom and Dad had taken a dim view of our detective work in the past.

But, despite all that, I guess they had listened to the facts on the radio as they drove home from the airport. They learned my friends and I had saved Crestwood from an unimaginable tragedy.

When Dad climbed out of the car, he got all teary-eyed. And that's rare. He hugged me and pounded me on the back until I thought I'd lose a lung. Then Mom and Ann had to get their licks in, too.

Brains was standing to the side, and his face fell a little. I guessed what he was feeling. Because of Iraq's travel restrictions, his father was stuck there for the summer.

But my dad spotted him and roughed him up as well. After that, Mom and Ann had to smother him, of course.

All the attention cheered him, I could tell.

I figured his mom would go to pieces when she got home, but she didn't. I guess by that time she was accustomed to her son's scrapes with the grim reaper.

Finally, the time came when the three Californians had to leave. The FBI wanted them back in Los Angeles where they could go over the details of the case with them there.

On the boys' last day in Crestwood, Mom cooked everyone a spectacular roast beef dinner. We all gathered at our house—Theresa, Jupe, Bob, and Pete. Brains, too, of course, and Brains' mother. Cooking isn't Mrs. Benton's strong point, but she pitched in anyway and helped Mom in the kitchen.

The rest of us tried to stay out of the way. We were standing in the hall, chatting about the battle in the auditorium, when Pete tried to get serious. He touched Theresa's arm.

"Gosh, Theresa, you could have been killed," he said.

Her eyes flashed as she moved her arm away.

"Are you saying only boys should play hero?" she snapped.

Confusion rippled across Pete's face.

"Well, I guess not," he said. "But that's the normal way. Right?"

Theresa bristled.

Go on, Pete, I thought happily. Dig that grave deeper.

I was holding in a belly laugh when the phone in the hall rang. I answered.

Holy cats! It was my girlfriend! I turned my back on the others.

"Cindy!" I gulped. The conversation started fine. Maybe too fine. Before I knew it, Cindy was saying her friends had seen me with a girl around town.

"Oh, her?" I said. "She's an old friend. She...she helped us with our case." I felt Theresa standing behind me, soaking in every word. But I couldn't walk away. If only telephones didn't have cords!

That didn't satisfy Cindy. I didn't want her getting jealous. What made it worse was the fact I couldn't talk plainly to her with everyone else hanging around. Especially Theresa.

"Look," I said, lowering my voice, "she's just a high school...." I paused, recalling the listening ears. "I mean, she's in high school."

That calmed my girl like gasoline on a four-alarm fire.

"Cindy! I gotta go," I said. "Dinner is ready. Everyone is here... Yeah, she's here, but...."

The connection went dead.

"Hello," I said. "Hello?"

I placed the receiver in the cradle, closed my eyes, and counted to three before turning around.

Almost everyone pretended not to look at me.

Except Pete. I could tell he wanted to laugh.

And Theresa? She gave me the blank stare thing.

Just then, my mother called us into dinner. Saved by the bell!

Theresa made a big production out of linking arms with Brains.

"I suppose I'll need an escort," she said, turning up her nose.

My mouth dropped. So did Pete's.

Brains grinned and gave me a wink as we trooped into the dining room.

~