

JASON AND THE DETECTIVES

The Case of the Missing Trophies

By Karl F. Milde, Jr.

Chapter 1: The Great Trophy Theft

Detective Benjamin Howell hit a button on his desk and spoke into the speakerphone.

“Detective Howell speaking. What can I do for you, ma’am?”

“Detective. Thank God you’re in,” came a breathless voice. “I need to have you come down here right away. Our award case has been broken into. The glass was smashed, and all our trophies and awards were taken.”

“Don’t let anyone touch a thing. You don’t want to let anyone disturb the crime scene. Hold on and I’ll be right over.”

“The kids arrive in just half an hour, so please hurry!”

Howell put his pipe and tobacco pouch in his pocket and raced out the door.

Detective Howell both looked and acted like an English detective out of central casting. His small but powerful frame was enveloped in a Burberry trench coat, which he wore at all times except during the hottest days of summer. His electric-blue eyes, framed by crow’s feet wrinkles, appeared embedded in his leathery complexion. Occasionally he would suck a reflective puff from his pipe to stall for time while his computerlike mind sifted through masses of information and pondered the evidence for clues to the “perp”—the perpetrator of the crime.

When he arrived at the scene, he found two uniformed officers placing barriers in the hallway, using yellow police ribbon to cordon off the trophy case and the area of broken glass.

Dr. Bassett emerged almost at once from the nearby doorway marked *Principal*.

“Hello, Detective.”

“Dr. Bassett, I presume?”

“That’s correct. I’m the one who phoned.”

“I can see why,” Howell said, motioning toward the empty case. “It seems that someone has taken a liking to your school trophies.”

“I find it quite odd, Detective. These trophies have had enormous symbolic value for our school, but they are really not worth very much.”

“Do you think a rival school could be involved?”

“I can’t imagine. We really only have one rival: that’s the Grimes Elementary School. But what good would these trophies be to them? They couldn’t display them or we would insist on getting them back.”

Howell scribbled the information into his notepad just in case. “Spoken like a true detective, Dr. Bassett. My thoughts exactly. But what other reason might there be to steal the trophies?”

“I have no idea. That is a question which I leave in your capable hands, Detective.”

“We shall see what the scene of the crime reveals.” Detective Howell turned to go. “Oh, by the way. Who has a key to the trophy case?”

“The gym coach. I used to have a key too, but I lost it somewhere. For the last three years, there has been only one. Coach Buck. Bill Buck.”

“I see. And who discovered this break-in?”

“I did when I arrived this morning at about 6:30. It was a shock, let me tell you. I just can’t imagine who would want to do such a thing.”

“Was the school locked?”

“Yes, I unlocked it myself.”

“And who has keys to the school?”

“Only three people: our custodian—he locks up at night—Coach Buck, and me.”

“No one else?”

“Not that I know of. Not unless someone made copies of the keys.”

Just then, the first busload of students arrived, diverting Dr. Bassett’s attention to the normal events of the day. Detective Howell began in earnest his search for clues. He ducked under the yellow ribbon and walked up to the trophy case, where he carefully examined the empty shelves and broken glass. Then he took out a small can of powder from his trench coat pocket and began dusting the shelves for fingerprints. Deeply engrossed in his work, he sensed he was being watched. He turned around, irritated at the interruption, and found himself staring at a young boy who just stood there, staring back at him.

“Can I help you?” The edge in his voice revealed his exasperation at being distracted.

“That’s not the question,” the boy replied.

“What?” The detective was getting truly annoyed now.

“The question is not whether you can help me. It is whether I can help *you*.”

The boy’s denim jacket was a bit too large for his frame, but he was otherwise dressed the way other boys typically did at his age, which Detective Howell guessed to be ten or eleven. His ash-blond hair was uncombed or maybe tousled by the wind outside, Howell thought. Despite his young age, he held himself with a quiet confidence that seemed to belong to someone much older.

“I think not,” Howell responded. “Isn’t it time for school to start? Don’t you have to be in

your class or something?”

“Think you’ll find any useful fingerprints there?” asked the boy, answering the question with a question.

“Wha...where?”

“On the shelves. If a thief broke the glass and stole the trophies, he would leave his prints on the trophies, not the shelves. That is, assuming he wasn’t smart enough to wear rubber gloves.” The lad’s hands remained hidden in his jacket pockets, giving him a perfectly relaxed appearance, but his gaze was serious. Focused.

“Well, where do you suggest we look?” The detective now didn’t know whether to be annoyed at this interruption in his work or to take advice from this elementary school student.

“For starters, you might want to look around the *edges* of the trophy case. The thief might have tried to open the case before he broke the glass.”

“Oh, really?” Detective Howell smiled inwardly in spite of himself.

“And there might be prints on the broken glass, of course.”

“You don’t say.”

“Oh, and another thing,” the boy continued. “Anyone who would go to the trouble of taking these old trophies probably had a really good reason.”

Detective Howell was quite amused at the brashness of the lad. He could not imagine himself being so forward when he was in elementary school. “I would agree with that, young man. Uh, what did you say your name was?”

“My name’s Jason. Jason Brooks.”

“How old are you, Jason?” Howell’s voice became softer as he warmed to the young boy.

“I’m eleven, in fifth grade.”

“Very well, Jason. Now let me tell you something. We intend to check this crime scene for any evidence that the perpetrator left behind. That includes fingerprints, pieces of hair, pieces of clothing, blood from any wound that might have been caused by the breaking glass...whatever. You may leave the detective work to my associates and me. However, if you find any, um, clues to this crime, I want you to feel free to call me.” Detective Howell reached for a card in his jacket pocket and handed it to Jason. “Here is my card. My name is Detective Benjamin Howell.”

Jason took the card. “Thank you, Mr. Howell. I’ll let you know if I learn anything.” He gave the detective a brief nod and went on his way to his classroom.

Chapter 2: A Bad Day for Luke

Luke sat next to Jason in class and snickered. The fifth-grade teacher, Miss Alvarez, was in the corner of the room, pulling out some papers in preparation for the next subject, which was math.

“Psst. Bet ya couldn’t get the homework problem.”

Jason tried to ignore him. He was the class pest.

“Hey, I’m speaking to *you*, butthead!”

Jason took his notebook from his backpack and opened it to the page with his solution to the math problem.

“Gimme that!” Luke snatched the notebook away and stared at the page.

Miss Alvarez did not notice.

“What the heck is this?” Luke pointed to Jason’s scribbles on the page.

“It’s the answer to the problem.”

“Well, isn’t that just great. Pardon me, Mr. Smart Alec. I’ll just copy it onto my homework sheet.”

“I’d like my notebook back, please!”

“What’s it worth to you, butthead?”

Jason lunged and made an unsuccessful grab for his notebook.

Miss Alvarez finally took notice. “I saw that! Jason, what do you think you’re doing?”

“He stole my notebook!” Jason complained.

“Who did?”

“Luke.”

“I did *not*. He gave it to me.”

“You took it!”

“Jason’s lying. He’s trying to get me in trouble. Again!”

Jason rolled his eyes. If anything, he’d always tried his best to ignore Luke’s attempts to annoy him.

“Luke, let me see that,” Miss Alvarez demanded.

Luke reluctantly handed over the notebook.

She glanced through it, stopping at the page with the homework solution. “Hmmm...Did anyone see Jason give this notebook to Luke?”

Matt raised his hand. “I saw Luke grab the notebook away from Jason.”

“Anyone else?”

Three or four other children raised their hands.

“I saw it too!” agreed Emily, a dark-haired girl in the third row.

“I should have known,” Miss Alvarez said firmly, handing the notebook to Jason. “Jason, you may sit down. I’m sorry to have been so hasty in accusing you. Now, class: Has anyone been able to solve the extra credit homework problem?”

Jason returned to his seat and sat glumly. No one in the class responded.

“Luke, would you come up here, please, and show the class how to solve the problem.”

Luke remained in his seat. “But...but I can’t, Miss Alvarez.”

“You can’t? Why can’t you?”

“I...I couldn’t solve it.” Luke looked around sheepishly. It was not his style to admit he couldn’t do anything he wanted.

“Is that why you grabbed Jason’s notebook?”

“Yes, I knew *he* could do it, and...”

“So, you *admit* taking it, don’t you?”

“Ah, yeah, I...” Luke suddenly realized he was caught.

“This afternoon, after class, you will write on the blackboard ‘I shall not lie’ one hundred times. I will phone your parents and ask them to pick you up when you are finished.”

“My parents? Don’t call my parents. *Please*. They’ll kill me.”

There were titters from the class.

“Then you will take the late bus.”

Miss Alvarez returned to her desk to continue the lesson.

“I’ll get you for this, Jason,” hissed Luke as she turned her back. “This is *not* over.”

Just then, the loudspeaker beeped, and Dr. Bassett’s voice filled the room.

“Attention, fifth graders. As all of you know by now, someone entered our Fairview Elementary School last night and broke into our trophy case. All, I repeat all, of our school trophies have been stolen. We have contacted the police, and Detective Howell is now investigating the crime. I can assure you that the individual or individuals responsible for this act will be caught and will be subject to disciplinary action.

“If you have any information about this crime, we would like to hear from you. You will not be punished for speaking up, even if you were involved. I want to be clear about this. You will be completely exonerated, even if you were personally involved, provided that you come forward now and tell us what happened.

“By the way, anything you tell us will be held in strictest confidence. We do have an obligation to inform your parents, and we will do so if the situation warrants it, but no one else will know.

“Rest assured that we will get to the bottom of this. If no one comes forward by tomorrow morning, we will start collecting fingerprints from each of you. We are confident that someone’s prints will match those found on the trophy case by Detective Howell.

“That is all for now. I will be in my office all day if anyone wants to come and see me.”

All the students in the class looked at each other. An unspoken suspicion hung in the air, as if everyone were guilty until proven innocent.

Chapter 3: The Fingerprint Evidence

In class the next morning, Jason had just zipped up his backpack and set it on the floor near his desk when Dr. Bassett's voice suddenly came over the loudspeaker.

"Attention, fifth graders. I want to inform you about our investigation of the trophy theft. As you may know, Detective Howell found fingerprints on the trophy case and on some pieces of broken glass. It will therefore be necessary to have everyone in the fifth grade fingerprinted to see if we can find a match.

"When I call your teacher, I will ask him or her to excuse your class from your normal schedule. You are then to file out in an orderly fashion to the administration office, where a police officer is waiting to record your fingerprints. This is an easy and painless process that will take him less than a minute per student. After he takes your fingerprints, you will immediately return to your classroom.

"If you have any questions about this, please ask your teacher. We had a teachers' meeting about this yesterday, so your teacher knows exactly what to do.

"Miss Alvarez, your class is first, so you might as well send them down now."

The class was silent for a moment, and then everyone started talking at once.

"Silence!" shouted Miss Alvarez. *"No talking! I want you to rise quietly and line up single file at the door. Do not take anything with you. No pencils, papers, books, anything. When you are ready, we will march out the door and walk quietly to the school office."*

It was hard to keep from talking, but everyone obeyed as best they could.

When the line reached the office, they stood outside in the hall as each pupil entered, one by one, to be fingerprinted.

Jason whispered to Matt, who stood ahead of him in line, "I'll bet this is just a scare tactic to get the person who did it to confess."

When the class had reassembled in the classroom, Miss Alvarez again called the class to order.

"Now that we have all been fingerprinted, are there any questions you may have?"

Emily immediately raised her hand. "I have one. What will they do if they find a match with the fingerprint they found?"

"That's a very good question. The person whose fingerprints match will then become a suspect. They will be notified, and I assume they will have to go to the police station and answer Detective Howell's questions."

Emily raised her hand with a follow-up question. "Will they tell us who did it?"

"No. That will be kept secret. Only the parents of the suspect will be notified."

Matt raised his hand. "What will happen to the fingerprint records?"

"They will destroy the records as soon as they find the perpetrator."

"I have a question."

Everyone turned to look at Jason, who had raised his hand.

"What is it, Jason?"

"A lot of people touched that trophy case. What if the person whose fingerprints match didn't do it?"

"Well, we'll just have to leave that to the police, won't we? I'm sure Detective Howell will know what to do."

Chapter 4: Jason Tests His Magic Bike

Late afternoon, between 4:00 and 6:00 PM, was Jason's favorite part of each school day. He usually spent that time in his workshop, which he had set up in the garage next to his house. This was Jason's private domain, and no one—not even his younger sister, Amy—was allowed to enter.

Jason loved things that worked: gadgets that buzzed, wheels that turned and computers that exhibited amazing intelligence. And he loved to invent. His workshop was his safe little haven, where he could conduct experiments and create to his heart's content.

At the moment, he was fascinated with his bicycle—his primary means of transportation. He considered his bike a friend. If he treated it with love and affection, it would return the favor many times over. While Jason understood that his bike was not a living thing, like a family dog, he still treated his bike as if it had feelings. *He* certainly had feelings—feelings of affection—for his bike.

Riding his bike was tremendously fun—exhilarating, really—but it could also be hard work. It took energy to get a bike going fast or to pedal it uphill. And when you wanted to slow down or stop, all that energy was totally wasted.

What could I do to make a bike easier to ride? Jason had wondered. *I could put a little motor on it. A model airplane motor might work. It could deliver a horsepower or two. Even just one horse would make a difference. Heck, that's all the pioneers had.*

Jason had worked for nearly a month to modify his bicycle. He was now almost finished and ready to try it out. He just had to connect a couple of hoses.

As the school bus lumbered along, Jason stared out the window, lost in thought. All day

he had been looking forward to this moment when he could get home and test-run his invention. He had told no one about his idea, not even his best friend, Matt, who sat next to him on the bus.

As the bus passed the Fairview Firehouse, Jason noticed the banner that had been attached to the front of the building the day before. It read:

THE GREAT BICYCLE RACE
Fairview Elementary School Field
October 15 at 9:00 AM Sharp

Three-mile race
Open to children of all ages.

A soft thrill ran through him. He'd never participated in a race before, and he wasn't sure if his altered bike would even qualify, but he couldn't deny the timing felt perfect.

When the bus finally stopped in front of his house, he waved a quick goodbye to Matt and the other remaining passengers, grabbed his school bag and leaped off. As the bus started up again and drove on, he walked slowly up his driveway, humming to himself.

As soon as the bus disappeared around a bend, he raced to his house, dropped his school bag near the front door, said "hi" to his mom, and ran out the back to the garage. There stood his pride and joy, waiting for him in the same position he had left it the night before. Jason dove right into his work and quickly attached a couple of hoses to couplings on the bicycle frame.

When all was ready, Jason lifted the garage door and pushed the bike outside. It was *test* time.

"Well, well. What have we here?" His younger sister, Amy, came out the back door of the house and walked over, intercepting him as he was about to leave.

“It’s my latest invention...” Jason never knew what Amy might be thinking.

“Uh-huh. And?”

“And what?”

“And what does it do? Sometimes you can be dense.”

“I call it my ‘Magic Bike.’”

“Oh, yeah? So, what’s magic about it?”

“Come here and I’ll show you.”

Jason brought his bike to the middle of the driveway and parked it upright with its kickstand. Then he went over to the garage and came back with a bicycle pump. He attached the end of the rubber tube sticking out of the pump to a tire valve on the frame and screwed it on tightly. While Amy watched impatiently, Jason pumped and pumped and pumped until he could not force another thimbleful of air into the frame tank. He looked at a round air pressure gauge he had mounted on the frame. Amy looked too, curious in spite of herself. The gauge read 60 pounds.

“Follow me on foot. I’ll go slowly,” Jason said.

Jason mounted his bike, rode out of the driveway, and continued down the local street.

Amy ran alongside. “What’s it gonna do? Fly in the air?” she shouted.

Turning a corner onto a side road, Jason continued until he reached the bottom of a sharp hill.

“Stay here and watch,” Jason commanded. Amy stopped while Jason kept going.

Jason continued pedaling and pressed a lever on the handlebars. At first nothing happened, but then the bicycle started to pick up speed as if it were going downhill, not up. As the speed increased, Jason stopped pedaling altogether. Instead of slowing, the bike sailed up the

hill as if pushed by the wind.

He tossed a glance back at Amy, who stood watching with her mouth open.

When Jason reached the top of the hill, he dismounted and turned his bike around. He checked the air pressure gauge once more. Everything seemed to be in order.

Facing down the hill, Jason climbed on his bike again and started forward. He and his bike picked up speed quickly on the steep downgrade. Again, Jason moved a lever on the handlebars. This switched the air pump motor into full pumping action, causing the bike to slow down somewhat.

Pow! The small explosion sounded like a firecracker, followed by the *pssssssssss* sound of leaking air. Jason looked down and saw that the rubber tube he had just attached earlier had burst, leaving a large hole. He approached the bottom of the hill where Amy stood.

“Darn!” Jason applied the brakes and came to a fast stop. “Too much pressure.”

“Some magic! I get it. That hissing sound was supposed to fill up a balloon so you could fly.”

Disappointed but not deterred, Jason rode slowly back home with Amy at his side.

Amy seemed almost sorry for him and tried to cheer him up. “You ought to enter the bicycle race. I’ll bet you’ll win if you can get that thing working again.”

“That’s the plan, Amy. I’ve still got a week to get it right.”

She caught his eye and smirked. “By the way, I know what it does. I’m not as stupid as you think.”

“Who said you were stupid?”

“Well, being your little sister and all...”

Jason coasted along slowly, one foot skimming the pavement. “Everyone knows girls are

smarter than boys. It's a girl thing."

"Well, geez, thanks for the compliment. Then why do you try to ignore me all the time?"

"Oh, that's a boy thing."

"Gimme a break!" Amy threw up her hands.

"So? You're so smart? How do I fix the bike?" Jason stared at her defiantly.

"You have to put on a hose that can take the load," Amy replied. "And no matter what, you should have a pressure relief valve so the pressure doesn't get too high."

"Good idea!" Jason exclaimed, impressed. "Now why didn't *I* think of that?"

Chapter 5: Detective Howell Has a Suspect

Ben Howell sat in his office, puffing absently on his pipe and brooding. How should he go about unraveling this break-in and theft at Fairview Elementary School? He needed to conduct in-depth interviews of Principal Bassett and Coach Buck, he knew, but his years of experience as a detective told him he'd probably get nowhere by talking to them. If one of them had indeed opened the trophy case and had a hand in taking the trophies, or knew the person who did, they certainly wouldn't reveal this information to anyone. Why would they risk getting involved?

No, he'd have to be subtle and skillful in his efforts to solve this crime. It might be helpful to know what kinds of trophies they were. Perhaps he could cross-reference these trophies with the teams that had earned them. This might lead him to a team member who wanted to keep a particular trophy and throw the others away. By taking all the trophies, the person would make it more difficult to identify the team, much less the team member. *Smart move, whoever you are*, he thought.

There was a brief knock on the door. "Detective Howell?" His assistant poked her head in, interrupting his musings.

"Yes?"

"We have the results of the fingerprint analysis. Matching what we found on the trophy case with the prints of the faculty and students?" What was meant to be a statement was voiced as a question.

"Oh, really? I didn't expect any results until next week. What did you find out?"

"You'll remember we found that lots of prints on the trophy case were the same? One

person left more fingerprints there than any other, it seemed. Well, that was the person we were able to match.”

“Well, I’ll be darned. That certainly is a lucky break,” Howell responded, smiling to himself. “Maybe this case won’t be as difficult to solve as I thought. Tell me, who is it?”

Chapter 6: Jason Tries Again

Riding home on the school bus on Friday, Jason could hardly contain his excitement. He *knew* his Magic Bike would run perfectly this time. He had worked on it whenever he had a spare moment, and now, he was ready to test his invention again.

He couldn't keep his mind on what Matt was saying as his friend rattled on about the day's events at school. The trophies were still missing, and Jason felt the stolen awards were the key to finding out who took them, but he didn't know much about them. He had asked his friends, but no one could remember what the trophies were for. He decided to ask Coach Buck next week when he had a chance. Maybe he had a list. *If only he, or someone else, had taken a picture of the trophy case.* That would have gone a long way to solving this crime.

And what about Detective Howell? What was he doing to solve the case? Jason wondered if he should call Detective Howell to offer his ideas. But not right now. In the meantime, he had his invention to think about.

"Matt, stop talking and listen!"

Matt blinked, momentarily taken aback. "Listen?"

"Just listen," Jason insisted, leaning closer. "I made another invention. I'm about to test it and I want you with me."

Matt's eyes lit up. "When?"

"Now. When we get home."

"Well, sure. I'll have to ask my mom. Do you want me to come over?"

"I'll meet you at the top of Killer Hill. Come with your bike."

"No problem. I'll tell Mom you need me. She'll let me go."

The brakes squealed as the bus shuddered to a stop.

“Thanks. Oh, and, Matt...”

“Yeah?”

“Whatever you do, don’t bring Karen along.” Jason rose and jumped off the bus, leaving his friend to wonder what he had invented now and why he had asked him not to bring his little sister.

Jason dropped his backpack in his house and rushed out to the garage. His bike was waiting there, ready to go. As he rode it over to Killer Hill and then pedaled up the long steep slope, he felt glad that Matt, and Matt alone, would be with him during this moment of truth.

He must have left immediately when the school bus dropped them off, Jason figured, because Matt was already waiting there with his bike at the crest of the hill when he arrived.

“Thanks for coming,” Jason called as he rode up, panting. “Take a look at this!” He hopped off the bike and showed Matt the air pump motor, explaining how it was supposed to work. “First, we have to pump up the tank.” Jason reached for the tire pump he’d brought with him.

“Let me do it.”

“Okay, and I’ll watch the pressure gauge.” Jason handed Matt the pump.

“This is neat!” Matt hooked up the pump and operated the plunger until he could pump no more.

“Is that enough?”

“Sixty-two pounds,” Jason read from the pressure gauge. “Yup, we’re ready.”

Jason climbed on the bike and started pedaling downhill. Matt followed on his own bike, picking up speed.

Jason reached with his finger to engage the air pump. The little device made a whirring sound as it started pumping. Jason glanced down at the pressure gauge. It was climbing fast, reaching 90 pounds, then 100, and finally 105 before the pressure relief valve opened with a *hiss*. The sound remained until Jason slowed to a stop at the bottom of the hill. Matt braked also.

“Wow! So far, so good. Now for the *real* test.”

“What are you going to do?”

“You’ll see.”

Jason turned his bike around, facing uphill.

Matt did the same. “Do we go up again?”

Jason flipped the lever on the handlebars. His bike began to move by itself, at first slowly, then faster, until it zoomed ahead without him pedaling at all. Jason turned around when he reached the top of the hill. “Well, what do you think?” he shouted to Matt.

Left standing there at the bottom of the hill, Matt was unable to do anything but gape.

“What the...”

Chapter 7: The Great Bicycle Race

The Great Bicycle Race was scheduled to take place the very next Saturday. People started showing up at the elementary school soccer field at eight in the morning. Jason and Matt bicycled to the field together, while their families drove ahead. Jason's sister, Amy, and Matt's sister, Karen, were already there waiting and greeted Jason and Matt as they rode up.

"What took you so long?" Karen teased.

"Shut up," said Matt, out of breath.

"You're pooped already? You'll never win," responded Karen. "I'm betting on Jason's 'Magic Bike.'"

"My brother will win for sure," Amy said supportively. "With his new bike, it's like he's riding a motorcycle."

Ignoring the girls, the boys dismounted and pushed their bikes to the registration desk. After signing their names and paying a small entrance fee, they walked over to the next station for a bicycle safety inspection.

Matt went first and watched as his bike quickly passed inspection. Then Jason moved his bike into place and waited for the inspector.

"What's this?" The inspector pointed to the air pump mounted over the rear tire.

"It's an air pump."

"What's it for?"

"It's for braking."

"What's wrong with the brakes?"

"They work too."

“Well, let’s see.” The inspector tested them, and they worked to his satisfaction. He checked the tires and rotated the wheels, listening for bearing noise.

“Okay. But I still don’t understand that air pump. Where does the air go?”

“Into the frame.”

“Yeah, right.”

Jason tossed a glance at Matt, who had a scared look on his face. “You never know when you might need some spare air,” he said.

“Just as long as it’s not a motor. Now run along.”

“But it *is* a motor. An air motor.”

“I thought you said it was an air pump.”

Jason noticed the line behind him was growing. “It *is* an air pump and an air motor too.”

“Does it run on any kind of fuel?”

Jason could feel the inspector’s eyes bearing down on him, demanding he tell the truth.

“No. It just uses air,” Jason blurted, nearly certain now that he’d be disqualified.

“Then it’s okay. You passed. Vamoose. Scram. Next customer!”

Jason quickly pushed his bike over to Matt, who was waiting for him. “Whew! I was really worried about that.”

“Yeah, me too,” Matt said, shaking his head.

“Hey, look at *that* bike,” Jason remarked, pointing.

Matt looked to the registration desk and saw a young man in his mid-teens pushing a shiny new red racing bike.

“Must have been expensive,” Matt noted.

Jason noticed Amy and Karen walking around together and investigating the competition,

even stopping to talk with a few of the contestants. They too were admiring the red racing bike.

After the last of the bicycles cleared the registration desk, racers began assembling at the starting line. Jason and Matt joined them and listened as the referee spoke.

“This is the starting line and also the finish line. The race is over country roads that are clearly marked. Just follow the signs and you’ll end up back here. All the roads are blocked off so you don’t have to worry about cars. You’ll have the roads all to yourselves.”

Off in the distance, Jason could see one other person pedaling furiously and coming toward the assembled group on his bicycle. As the figure came closer, he recognized his African American classmate, Luke.

“Keep your distance from the other contestants,” the referee continued. “We don’t want any accidents here. Are there any questions?”

One young boy raised his hand. “What if we get tired?”

“You can stop along the way as often as you like. You can even drop out of the race if you want to. But we encourage you to finish, even if it takes all day.”

Jason raised his hand. “What if our bike breaks down?”

“Stay right where you are, and a race monitor will help you. We have monitors stationed all along the way. Any other questions?”

There were none.

“All right then, take your place at the starting line. Let the race begin!”

Just then, Luke rode up and nearly collided with the group of contestants. “Well, look who’s here! If it isn’t Jason—I mean *butthead*—and Matt.”

Jason and Matt acknowledged his presence with a polite “Hi, Luke.”

“I see I came just in time.”

“You know you have to register and get your bike inspected, right?” Jason said to him.

Luke looked over his shoulder to see a stern-faced worker at the registration table waving him over.

He let out a groan and pedaled toward the table just as the referee raised his hand. In it was a starting pistol. “All ready. Get set. Go!” He fired the pistol in the air.

Amy and Karen shouted to their brothers, “Go, Jason! Go, Matt!”

Jason pushed down hard on the pedals, feeling the initial resistance before his legs found their rhythm. The pack of racers, nearly thirty girls and boys, started off slowly from the starting line and headed toward the exit from the elementary school field to the open road. At first, they were bunched together and jockeyed for position, but the faster bike riders quickly took the lead, and the others stretched out behind as they found a comfortable pace. The teenager on the red racing bike moved easily ahead to the front of the pack.

Jason and Matt pedaled hard at first, trying to keep up with the older athletes, but not for long. They realized it was futile and let the leaders race ahead while they proceeded at a more sustainable pace. *Let them go*, Jason told himself. *You’ll catch up at the hill*.

Luke got a late start after his bike went through inspection. He huffed and puffed as he tried to catch up to his two classmates. “Hey, wait!” he shouted angrily. “Let me ride with you. Except for the jerks up in front, none of these other flatfoots know what they’re doing. We can beat them.”

“You can ride wherever you want. We can’t stop you,” noted Matt, annoyed.

“What’s the matter? Afraid to talk to me?” jeered Luke.

Jason kept his expression neutral, even as he felt Matt bristling beside him. “We can talk,” he said to Luke, giving Matt a quick glance. “What do you think, Matt?”

“How can you say that?” Matt asked him. “He tried to get you in trouble at school.”

“He learned his lesson. Right, Luke?”

“Lesson? What lesson?”

“See! He’s still out to get you!”

“Duh. Give me a break, you guys. Just because I’m smarter than you are...”

“All right. You can join us,” Jason said after a pause, giving in.

“Say, butthead.” Luke looked over at Jason’s bike after he finally came abreast of it.

“What’s that thing on the back of your bike?”

“It’s an energy saver.”

“A *what?*”

“An energy saver. Every time I apply the brake, it pumps air into a tank.”

“That’s the dumbest thing I’ve ever heard.”

“Well, there’s a hill coming up. You’ll see.”

Sure enough, Jason, Matt and Luke were approaching an expected long steep hill. Even the front-runners, who had established a commanding lead at the beginning of the race, could be seen laboring up the hill just ahead. Jason reached back and pressed a lever, switching his air pump to an air motor. The motor began to whirr, and his bike shot toward the hill. He tossed a glance back to see Luke gaping in amazement.

Leaving Matt and Luke behind, Jason moved ahead toward the approaching hill. He continued pedaling to maintain his forward speed and soon closed in on the front-runners. Jason imagined Matt and Luke watching in disbelief as he caught up to and then passed the leader on the red racing bike and crested the hill ahead of him.

At the top of the long hill, the road turned into a curvy downhill run. This enabled Jason

to stay ahead, and each time he applied the brakes to negotiate a corner, he restored a little energy to his tank. By this time the race was half over, and Jason was winning!

Chapter 8: Trouble Finds Luke

At the bottom of the hill was a sudden curve. Jason applied the brakes once more, much harder than before. *Pow!* The little air pump motor in the back exploded with a loud noise. Jason felt the bike shudder, but it didn't slow down. He quickly tried to apply his safety brake. By this time the road had turned the corner, but his bike continued to go straight, traversing the edge onto the gravel shoulder. The brakes caught and skidded the wheels on the gravel, slowing the bike only slightly as it headed straight into the woods.

"Holy cow!" screamed Jason.

Branch after branch slapped Jason in the face as he plunged headlong into the brush. Luckily, he missed hitting tree trunks and finally slid to a stop just inches away from a gigantic oak. Shaken and bruised but not seriously injured, Jason closed his eyes and caught his breath. "Thank God. I can't believe I made it through that!"

After a moment of calm, Jason dismounted his two-wheeled vehicle and made his way back to the edge of the road, pushing and pulling the bicycle with him through the brush. Just as he reached the clearing, he saw Matt and Luke flashing by.

"Hey, guys!" Jason shouted.

The two boys turned their heads as they passed.

"Wow! It's Jason!" Matt called out. He and Luke brought their bikes to a quick stop on the downhill slope.

"What happened?" Luke wanted to know.

Jason followed on foot with his bike at his side until he caught up with them. "Something happened to the air pump," he told them, trying to catch his breath. "It sort of...exploded."

“Oh my gosh. Are you okay?” Matt asked with concern in his voice.

“Yeah, I think so. Scared the heck out of me, though.”

A couple of cyclists whizzed past.

“Can you still ride?” Luke asked.

“Let me look at my bike a minute.” Jason checked his bike over and found everything in working order, except for the little pump motor on the rear wheel. “I think it’s all right. Brakes work at least. Let’s go!”

They all mounted their bikes again and reentered the race as the last group of racers coasted by.

“We’ve got some pedaling to do if we want to catch up,” Jason said.

“I’m ready,” said Matt.

“Me too,” added Luke.

Fueled by a burst of excitement, Jason stood on the pedals and pumped his legs to gain momentum and surge his bike forward. He looked over his shoulder and found Matt and Luke following suit, matching his pace. Soon they passed one racer after another, closing the distance to the next group of racers ahead of them.

Before long, Jason, Matt and Luke had moved up far enough to see the leaders of the race ahead. One of the bikes in the lead reflected sunlight from its bright red frame. By this time, they were becoming exhausted, but Jason knew that the final half mile of the race, just before entering the elementary school field, was a downhill run. And this final stretch was just ahead. The leaders of the race had already reached it and had started down.

“I think we have a chance if we can just reach the hill,” Jason shouted.

Matt signaled to Jason and Luke. “I’m really beat. I’ve got to slow down a bit.”

“You go on ahead,” Luke shouted to Jason. “Matt and I just don’t have it anymore.”

“Alright, then. Here goes. Wish me luck!” Jason doubled his efforts in a last spurt and started to move ahead. He looked back momentarily and saw Luke’s bike steering erratically. The front tire wobbled back and forth as Luke tried frantically to bring the bike under control. Luke squeezed the brake handles on both handlebars, but they squeezed closed without slowing the bike’s wheels.

“Help!” shouted Luke.

Jason pedaled a bit ahead, then immediately stopped in the middle of the road and jumped off his bike. He waited as Luke plummeted forward, unable to slow down on the downhill slope. Just as Luke came alongside him, he grabbed his shoulders and held tight. Luke’s forward motion pulled Jason along, his feet dragging on the pavement, but the bike began to tip in Jason’s direction and headed for the edge of the road. The two boys collapsed together on the grassy strip by the roadside.

“Are you okay?” Jason looked over at Luke, who lay in the grass with a frightened look on his face.

“Uh, yeah,” Luke gasped. “I...I think so.”

Matt came riding up. “My God! Was that scary!”

“You saved my life,” Luke mumbled, seeming totally shaken now. His face had turned ashen.

“No such thing. It wasn’t a big deal.” Jason tried to calm Luke down as he lay there.

“That really *was* a big deal,” Matt said. “It was a brave thing to do. And if you kept going, you probably would have won the race.”

Jason overheard the clapping from the crowd in the distance as the first of the racers

finished the race. “You’re making too much of this.” Jason stood up. “Enough already. Let’s just walk.”

“Jason...” Luke slowly climbed to his feet.

“Yeah, it’s okay,” Jason said calmly, trying to brush off any show of appreciation he thought might be coming from his often-prickly classmate.

“I promise I’ll never call you ‘butthead’ again. Except, of course...”

“Except what?”

“Except if you really *are* a butthead. Or a bonehead.”

Jason and Matt grinned. It was a defining moment for all three of them. Luke was now a friend, one that Jason and Matt could count on.

“Let’s go to my place. I’ve got a workshop where we can fix our bikes,” Jason offered as they walked the rest of the way down the hill, pushing their bicycles at their sides.

“Don’t you want to know who won?” asked Matt.

“Nope. But next time it will be one of us,” Jason said firmly.

Amy and Karen were waiting at the finish line and screamed when the three boys appeared.

“What happened?” they shouted in unison.

Jason recounted the events, and the looks on their faces revealed how sorry they felt for Luke—so much so that the girls even forgot their usual sarcasm.

As they stood there talking, Detective Howell emerged from the crowd and walked up to them. “Hello, Jason. It’s nice to see you again,” he said warmly.

Jason was surprised to find him here at the bike race, of all places. “Uh...hi, Mr. Howell.”

“Is this your friend?” he asked, nodding in Luke’s direction.

“Yeah.” Jason explained to his friends, “This is Detective Howell. He’s investigating the trophy theft at school.”

“Luke, we’ve been looking all over for you,” Howell said. “I’d like you to come down to the station with your parents to answer some questions.”

“What’s this about?” Luke answered.

“The trophy theft. Just routine, you understand. No need to worry.”

Jason became immediately alarmed. His detective instincts went on high alert. Bad boy that he was, Luke would not have had anything to do with the missing trophies.

“Do I have to bring my parents?” Luke pleaded. “I don’t—”

“I’m afraid so.”

“Why? I’d rather not bring them, if it’s all right with you.”

Detective Howell motioned for Luke to step away from his friends, and when they were out of earshot, Jason saw him whisper something to Luke. Luke’s eyes widened.

He looks scared. But about what? Jason could only wonder. His friend may have been a badass, but he was not a thief.

Jason had put his detective hat aside while he threw his full effort into the bike race, but now the theft of the school trophies returned to the top of his priority list. He was finally free to focus on solving the crime.

Chapter 9: Did Luke Do It?

When Luke told his parents about his fingerprints being found on the trophy case and the broken glass, they reacted just as he expected them to.

“You did *what!*” his father screamed.

“I didn’t do *anything*. They just say they found my fingerprints on the trophy case. That’s all.” Luke felt defensive, as he always did in the presence of his parents.

“So how did they get there? Tell me that!”

“I...I don’t know. Lots of kids probably have their fingerprints on the case. I probably left them when I looked at the trophies.”

“Why don’t I believe you? Do you believe him, Sherry?”

“How do I know what trouble he gets into?” Luke’s mother grabbed a piece of cheese from the refrigerator. “Do you expect me to follow him wherever he goes?”

Luke stared at her. She wasn’t being at all supportive. He was innocent, he knew, but his mother wasn’t coming to his aid.

“Maybe the police can knock some sense into him,” his dad said. “Let’s take him down to the station.”

“Why do *I* have to go?” complained Sherry.

“The cop said we both have to go. Along with Luke.”

Luke just stood there, listening to his parent argue.

“Damn! What a waste of time,” his mother said.

Reluctantly, Luke followed his mother and father out to the car. He sat in the back seat, his mood like a black cloud as his father drove them to the police station. When they

arrived, they walked in, and his father spoke through a screen to the desk sergeant.

“A Mr. Howell told us to come in here with our son. His name is Luke.”

* * * *

Detective Howell stepped out of his office to find Luke and his parents in the waiting area.

From his experience in handling troubled youngsters, Ben Howell knew his approach needed to be friendly. One misstep and his suspect would become instantly guarded and stop talking.

“Thank you for coming,” he said as warmly as he could while trying to beam his best smile. “Step right in here, please.” He directed the three of them to an internal conference room.

Luke and his parents followed Detective Howell into the small room, furnished with a single table and six chairs. They all took a seat, with Howell at the head of the table. He addressed his initial comments to Luke as delicately as he could.

“As you know, I have been called in to find out who broke into the trophy case at your school, Luke. I have been investigating this theft, and we looked at some fingerprints on the broken glass that fell to the floor. There were many fingerprints, I can tell you, all different, but most of them—not all—matched yours.

“Now, I’m going to ask you a few questions and tape-record your answers. But before I do, I want you to know that anything you say or tell me may be used in a court of law if you, or anyone else, are accused of the crime. Do you understand this?”

Luke nodded and said weakly, “Yes. I’ve heard that before. On TV, I think.”

“Also, you are entitled to have a lawyer present while I ask you these questions, if you want one. If you and your parents can’t afford a lawyer and you ask for one, we will appoint one

free of charge.”

“I don’t want any lawyers here,” Luke’s father interjected.

“How about you, Luke? Would you like us to appoint a lawyer for you?”

“Uh, no, I don’t think so.”

“Are you sure? It is your Constitutional right to have a lawyer represent you if you want one.”

“I don’t need one. I didn’t do anything.”

“All right then. Let’s proceed with the questions. First, let me turn the tape recorder on.” Howell reached over and pressed a button on the recorder in the middle of the table. As he did so, he saw Luke look around the room. Everyone faced him. A large glass window on one wall of the room formed a one-way mirror. He saw Luke stare at it and assumed Luke knew what it was for. Luke probably wondered how many criminals had been in his very chair, subjected to questioning for hours on end.

“Luke, how long have you been attending Fairview Elementary School?”

“I started in first grade. This is my fifth year.”

“Do you like the school?”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“Did you ever go to kindergarten?”

“When I was little, we lived in the Bronx. I went to kindergarten there.”

“Where in the Bronx?”

“I don’t know. Dad...Mom, where did we live?”

“We lived in the South Bronx,” Luke’s father said. “Tough neighborhood. A lot of drugs. Kids getting beaten up. We moved out as soon as I could afford to, when Luke

was about five.”

“Did you have trouble adjusting to Fairview?” Howell wanted to bring the focus back to Luke, to whom he again directed his question.

“I don’t think so. What do you mean?” Luke shot a quick look at his father.

Howell caught the concern on his face. “Did you ever get in trouble at Fairview Elementary?”

“Well, yeah. A couple of times.”

“Tell me what happened.”

“Well, when I was in third grade, I beat this little kid up after he called me a name. He used the N-word. His parents complained to the principal, and I got suspended. Just for a day. And then in fourth grade, I stole some sports equipment.”

“Any other time?”

“Any other time, what?”

“Did you get into trouble at any other time?”

“No.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah, I’m sure.”

“What about the time you threw a stone through the school window? It went right into a classroom and nearly hit the teacher.”

“Oh, yeah. I remember that now.”

“You did that?” his father questioned.

Howell saw Luke squirm in his seat, this time avoiding eye contact with his parents.

“Yeah,” he said. “I did that, but it wasn’t a big deal. The school never even told my parents.”

“Now, Luke, tell me the truth. Are there any other times you got in trouble and were caught?”

“Well, yeah, maybe two or three more times.”

“As a matter of fact, you are constantly getting into trouble, aren’t you?”

“I wouldn’t say that.”

“And now the trophy case has been broken into. You did that too, didn’t you?”

“No, I didn’t!”

“Don’t try to lie. If you did it, we’ll find out anyway. If you lie about it now, it will be worse for you later.”

“Dad! Tell him I didn’t do it!”

“What do I know?” Luke’s father responded. “You lie half the time, and the man is right. You’re always in trouble.”

“We’ve tried and tried to talk some sense into him,” Luke’s mother said defensively.

“I didn’t do it!”

“Do you know who did?”

“No.”

“If you tell the truth, no one except us will ever know. What you tell me will never leave this room.” Howell looked at Luke as sympathetically as he could.

“I don’t know anything.”

“Are you sure? I’m giving you one last chance.”

“I’m sure.”

“All right then. You may go...for now.” Howell stood up, indicating the meeting was

over.

Luke rolled his eyes as he stood up. He and his parents followed Howell out of the room. As they left the police station, Howell heard Luke's father tell him to walk home. He said he was "fed up" dealing with Luke's problems.

Some family, Howell thought. I wouldn't want to be Luke right now.

Chapter 10: The Detectives Get to Work

The next day, Jason, Matt and Luke sat on the floor in Jason's bedroom and discussed the school crime. Luke confided in them about his trip to the police station, where he said Detective Howell had grilled him mercilessly. He said his parents hadn't been too kind to him either.

After Luke finally finished telling his story, Jason and Matt looked at each other and nodded. They agreed they would do what they could to help him clear his name.

"This whole thing just doesn't make sense," Matt stated in frustration.

"Somewhere out there is a person with a motive. If we could just figure out the motive, we could find the person," Jason offered.

"God, I'm so worried. How can we do *that*?" asked Luke.

"Yeah, where do we start?" Matt wondered aloud.

A knock on the bedroom door interrupted them. "Can I come in?" It was Amy.

Jason glanced around at the others. Maybe her perspective could be useful. "Okay!" he shouted.

Amy poked her head inside. "What are you guys up to?"

"We're working on solving the crime at school," Jason replied, his tone signifying importance.

"Oh, sure. You're gonna solve the crime when the police can't?" Amy could be annoyingly sarcastic when the opportunity arose.

"So do you have any good ideas?" Jason challenged her.

"You want me to help you solve the crime?"

"I didn't say that. Just put up or shut up, that's all."

Amy sat down beside them on the floor. “Why don’t you start with research...at the public library,” she replied brightly.

“Research on what?” Jason wanted to know.

“The trophies. Go back through the past issues of the local paper and read all the articles that were written about them.”

“What good will that do?”

“I don’t know, but have you got any better idea, dummy?” Amy shot back, holding her own.

Jason considered the idea. He already intended to ask Coach Buck about the trophies soon, but local articles might contain additional details. “The more we learn about the history of these trophies, the closer we’ll come to the motive,” he said, sounding more confident than he felt. The others nodded in agreement.

“What other choice do we have?” asked Matt.

“Can’t think of any,” replied Luke.

Jason leaned back against his bedframe and crossed his arms. “Then let’s do it.”

“Can I come along?” asked Amy.

“No. My friends and I want to do this together,” Jason protested.

“Hey, it was my idea!” Amy stood up and glared down at him.

Jason searched for a good reason to give her. “What do you want with a bunch of boys, anyway?”

“I’ll agree you guys aren’t much fun. But you’re all I’ve got.”

“Why don’t you call my sister? She might want to join you,” suggested Matt.

Amy narrowed her eyes, trying to figure out if Matt was being sincere or just brushing

her off. “You know what? I will because she’s a true friend. You guys are such a drag.” Amy stormed out of Jason’s room, slamming the door as she left.

The boys agreed to meet at the library on Saturday morning at ten, when the library opened. Until then, they would have to focus on school.

“What can we do in the meantime?” Luke asked.

“Nothing,” Jason and Matt replied together. Jason wasn’t yet sure that Luke should be a full-fledged member of the team. He’d been antagonistic in the past, but it seemed as though he’d been cut down by his recent run-in with the law. Detective Howell may have been a good influence on him.

The boys looked at each other.

“Then let’s go ride our bikes!” Luke said enthusiastically.

Chapter 11: The Public Library

Jason, Matt and Luke were waiting outside the front door of the town library when Ms. Perry, the librarian, came and unlocked it from the inside.

“Hello, boys! What a pleasant surprise.”

“We’d like to do some research,” explained Jason.

“Well, do come in! Can I help you in any way?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Matt chimed in. “We would like to look at back issues of our local newspaper.”

“How far back do you want to go? A couple of weeks? A month?” Ms. Perry led the boys to a rear alcove in the library.

The scent of aged paper hung heavy in the air. Jason’s gaze wandered over the shelves, some filled with faded, worn spines, while others boasted glossy covers featuring sailboats and comic collections. A spark of curiosity flickered in him, and he couldn’t help but wonder why he didn’t spend more time exploring this place.

“Several years,” replied Matt.

“Oh, that’s on microfilm. You’ll have to learn to use the reader.”

Luke ran his fingers over a leather-bound book with gold Roman numerals on the spine. “That’s no problem, ma’am. We’re fast learners.”

“I’ll bet you are. You all look so intelligent! Funny thing, though...”

“What’s that?” asked Luke.

“We had a detective in here just yesterday. Detective somebody. Said he wanted to look

at back issues of the newspaper too.”

“Detective Howell?” Jason asked, finding his voice unexpectedly tight as he exchanged a glance with the others.

“Howell? Why, yes, that was his name. Do you know him?”

“Not really. But he’s working on a case of missing trophies at our school. We’re doing the same thing.”

“Well, isn’t that exciting! You’re like…like young detectives,” Ms. Perry said brightly.

“Let’s just say we’re helping Detective Howell. Could you tell us how long he stayed here?” Jason asked.

“A couple of hours, I’d say. I don’t think he found what he was looking for.”

“Why is that?” asked Matt.

“Well, he stopped at the desk on the way out. He was in a bit of a sour mood. He asked if there were any other newspapers that reported local events, and I told him no.”

“That’s too bad,” offered Matt, feigning sympathy. “Maybe we can find something.”

“You can try. That’s what the library is for. Here, let me show you how to use this thing,” Ms. Perry said, pointing to an instrument set prominently on a desk in the corner. She pulled out a roll of microfilm and demonstrated the use of the microfilm reader. “All the rolls of film for the newspaper are in this drawer,” she said as she turned to leave.

“Thank you, ma’am!” Jason said politely.

The boys looked at each other.

“This is going to be *boring*,” Luke commented.

“Yes, but we have to do it. There’s no other way,” Matt said.

“Yeah, but who are we to find something the police couldn’t even find?” Luke said dejectedly.

“Let’s make a game out of it,” suggested Jason. “We’ll each take turns at the microfilm reader. Fifteen minutes apiece. Whoever is not reading gets the next microfilm ready. We start by reading the report of the burglary. Hopefully it will give a list of the trophies, what they were for and when they were awarded. We can then go back to the newspapers on those dates and read all about them.”

“Good idea,” agreed Matt.

“B-O-R-I-N-G,” Luke said.

The boys set about their work. They first found and printed out the newspaper story about the burglary, which gave them all the information they needed about each trophy. They then went back to the sports pages of newspaper issues of earlier years and printed out the articles reporting how their school won these trophies. This project took them the better part of the morning. They finally took their stack of printouts to the front to present to Ms. Perry.

“We printed out all of these pages. Do we owe you some money?” asked Jason.

“Not a cent. It’s a delight just to have you boys here in the library. Please think of this place as your ‘home away from home’ and come again soon.”

“We sure will!” Luke promised. Even he seemed proud of what they had accomplished by working together.

On their way out the door, Matt said, “Now we have some reading to do.”

“We can split this up too,” Luke suggested. “Let’s go back to Jason’s workshop. We’ll each take a third of the pile and see if we can find any clues.”

Chapter 12: A Cloud of Self-Doubt

By evening, the boys had read everything. They sat on the floor in Jason's garage and talked about their boring, wasted day.

"It's the same dumb old story every time," Luke said. "Our team wins a race or even a championship, and we get a trophy. Big deal."

Matt stretched his arms above his head and let out a sigh. "Yeah. We can't even identify a *person* who won a trophy and might want it back. It was always the school *team*."

"There's got to be a clue in there somewhere. We're just missing it," said Jason, dejection slipping into his voice for the first time all day. Up to now, he had refused to admit defeat.

"This detective stuff sure is a crock," Luke said.

"It takes perseverance. That's a quality you don't seem to have," accused Matt.

"It takes brains. And that's something we have a lot of," Jason said firmly. "Between the three of us, we have a good deal more than that detective. Remember, Detective Howell looked through these papers too, and he didn't find anything."

"But we didn't either. Duh. So, we're even. Maybe there's just nothing there." Luke was clearly about to give up.

Matt straightened the stacks of papers and set them in a pile. "I think it's time for me to go home," he said, a bit sadly.

"I've had enough," Luke echoed, clearly discouraged.

The three boys got up from the floor. Matt and Luke moved toward the open garage doorway.

“Well, goodbye, I guess,” Jason said. “I don’t know what else we can do.”

“Let’s sleep on it,” suggested Matt.

“Yeah, maybe we’ll have it all figured out in the morning,” Luke added dejectedly. “But I doubt it.”

Jason nodded. “Okay. We’ll call it a day.”

Matt and Luke walked outside to their waiting bikes and headed for their homes, leaving Jason to ponder the pile of newspaper printouts. Jason sat down again and picked one up at random. The headline read: “FAIRVIEW SWEEPS 5K RACE, WINS CHAMPIONSHIP TROPHY.”

The dateline was June, just over three years ago.

The text mentioned the names of several contestants, but none stood out as having earned the trophy single-handedly.

The accompanying photo showed a large trophy sitting on top of an automobile, with a team of schoolchildren standing in front. One adult was present in the picture: the school gym coach.

“Who was he?” Jason wondered aloud. “He’s not coaching at school anymore.” The name given in the picture’s caption was “Will Daman.” *We can ask Dr. Bassett on Monday*, he thought.

Jason stared at the headline for a moment and then turned his thoughts to the other newspaper articles. A theory of the crime was tantalizingly close, but it still eluded him. He just couldn’t think of a plausible scenario that fit the facts as he knew them. Maybe the planned interviews would help.

Jason walked to the side door of the garage, turned out the light and left just as his mother drove up with Amy.

“Find anything, smarty-pants?” Amy jeered.

“No. Did you?”

“Maybe. Maybe not. I wouldn’t tell you if I did.”

“Mom!” Jason protested, holding his hands out while staring at his mother.

“This is between you and Amy.”

“Did she find out anything?” he asked.

“Well, she did some searching at the library...”

“I know that!”

“Yes, Amy found a very interesting article.”

“Can I see it?”

“No,” Amy interjected, her voice almost a whine. “I *won’t*.”

“Mom!” Jason looked at his mother again.

“Amy will tell you in her own good time.”

Amy and Jason followed their mother into the house for supper. Jason eyed Amy suspiciously, wondering if she was telling the truth or just trying to get under his skin. How could she have found something when he, Matt, and Luke had spent most of the day chasing any possible lead they could think of?

Chapter 13: Dr. Bassett Weighs In

The next day, the boys called each other, but none had any new ideas to offer about the trophy theft. Jason told Matt and Luke what he had read about the gym coach, and they agreed it was worth pursuing. While gym coaches would have no motive to steal a school trophy, they might at least recall the circumstances of winning the trophy and, if pressed to remember, might conceivably offer a clue to the crime. The chances were slim, but this slender reed was all they had at the moment.

On Monday morning, before school started, Jason, Matt and Luke presented themselves to the principal's assistant at the school office. Jason held up the copy of the newspaper article. "We would like to speak with Dr. Bassett about this article," he explained.

"Well, you will have to wait. Dr. Bassett is very busy," came the stock response from the woman.

Just then, Dr. Bassett walked out of her office and noticed the boys. Luke seized the opportunity by saying, "Dr. Bassett, can we have a quick word with you, please?"

"What is it about?"

"The trophy burglary. We think we have a clue."

"Oh, really?" Dr. Bassett's mouth curled up at the sides in mock amusement.

"Yes, ma'am," Jason interjected. "We found an old newspaper article which we think might shed some light."

"Why don't you three come into my office for a talk."

The boys looked at each other in disbelief, as if to say, "What luck!" and then followed

Dr. Bassett into her office.

After they settled into the three chairs in front of Dr. Bassett's desk, Jason began: "We've done some research on each stolen trophy at the public library. To follow up, we'd like to interview some people about the times that the trophies were awarded."

"Why are you doing this?"

"To help Detective Howell solve the crime."

"Frankly, boys, I don't think Detective Howell needs any help. He is very competent at what he does."

"But don't you think it would be a good thing to talk to the coaches?"

"I will give you my permission to interview them, just as you might do for the school newspaper. But let me tell you one thing..."

"What's that?"

"Detective Howell is at least one day ahead of you. Last Friday, he asked me for the address of one of the coaches involved with those trophies, and by the time you get around to speaking with him, the detective will have already taken his statement. I believe you're wasting your time."

Jason, Matt and Luke thanked Dr. Bassett and left her office for their classes, but not before asking her for the address of the former gym coach Will Daman. Jason did not know whether to be elated that they could continue their investigation or to feel dejected because they could not keep up with Detective Howell. They agreed to meet after school.

Chapter 14: Coach Bill Buck Tells His Story

“I just don’t see the point. The detective knows his job. He’s got the time. If anyone can catch the thief, he can. Why are we doing this?” Luke was testing the resolve of the group, Jason realized. He had arranged to meet with his friends at the school playground after their classes ended for the day.

Matt responded, “We know the school inside out. We can get information that Detective Howell can’t.”

“And besides, one person can’t think of everything,” added Jason. “Maybe if we put our collective minds to work, we can add bandwidth.”

“Add what?” asked Luke.

“You know. *Bandwidth*.”

“What the heck is that?”

“A band of frequencies—in the electromagnetic spectrum. It’s just an expression.”

“Oh.”

“Then let’s add *bandwidth*,” affirmed Matt. “Where do we start?”

“We’ll start by interviewing our gym coach, Mr. Buck,” Jason said. “Then we’ll interview the previous coach, Mr. Daman.”

“Good idea.”

Powered by Jason’s enthusiasm, the boys headed for the gym to look for Coach Buck. They found him airing up a basketball using a hand pump.

He looked up, pleasantly surprised to see them. “Hi, boys. Don’t often see you here after

school. What can I do for you?"

"We'd like to ask you some questions about the stolen trophies," Jason said.

"Why, sure. But what for? Detective Howell was here just this afternoon. I'm afraid I couldn't be very helpful."

"We're helping Detective Howell," offered Matt. "We want to give him the school perspective on the burglary."

"Makes sense, I suppose. So, what questions do you have for me?"

For the first time, the three boys were at a loss for words. Neither Jason nor the others had prepared a list of questions to ask.

"Were...were you there when our school won any of those trophies?" Jason began.

"Yes, I was. Our teams won a trophy in two out of the last four years."

"So, you were present when two of the trophies were awarded?"

"That's correct. We won the soccer championship four years ago, my very first year of coaching, and we won the long-distance race last year."

"Did you notice anything unusual about any one of these trophies?" Matt asked.

"Unusual? Like what?"

"I don't know. Anything. Anything out of the ordinary."

"Can't say as I did."

"Who presented the trophies?" Luke wanted to know.

"Athletic league. Our school's a member of the conference, and we compete against each other."

"But who actually presented the trophies?"

“A guy named Jim Wright. He’s a volunteer official for the league.”

“Is he still around?” Jason asked.

“I’m sure. He’s been handing out trophies for the league for as long as I can remember.

Lives around here somewhere. You can probably find him in the phone book.”

Jason thought a moment, then asked, “Where were you when the trophy case was broken into?”

“I was home, I guess. Don’t rightly know when it was broken into. Detective Howell says middle of the night.”

The boys looked at each other. Jason realized they hadn’t even known when the crime was committed. What lousy detectives they were, Jason thought.

“Well, thanks, Mr. Buck,” Jason said. “I guess that’s all we have for now.”

“Any time, boys. Glad ta help.”

“Oh, just one more thing…” Jason turned back. “Do you remember a coach named Will Daman?”

“Never met the man. Understand he resigned from the school, kind of in a hurry. Left an opening for me, though. For that I’ll always be grateful.”

“Do you know where he went?”

“No, I don’t, boys. You might check with the principal’s office to see if he left a forwarding address.”

“Good idea,” Jason said, although they had already obtained the address. “Thanks again, Mr. Buck.”

“Goodbye, boys. Let me know if you find any clues!”

A check with the principal's assistant yielded the address of Jim Wright. The boys made plans to interview him as well as Mr. Daman.

"This time we've got to prepare some intelligent questions!" Luke exclaimed.

"Like what?" asked Matt.

"I thought we did pretty well with Coach Buck," Jason commented.

"Are you kidding? If Coach Buck committed the crime himself—and I'm not saying he did—we would never have had a clue," Luke said.

"Okay, so what do you suggest?" Matt placed his hands on his hips. "Put up or shut up."

"Well, for starters, we don't just blurt out, 'Did you see anything unusual?'" Luke replied. "What a dumb question! You ask the person to recall the circumstances of an event, and then maybe, just maybe, he'll let something slip he didn't intend to."

"You've got a point there," Jason noted.

"We should read a book or something? On detective work?" Matt asked, his sarcasm showing through.

"It's all just common sense. Assuming we have any," Jason said finally.

Before parting for the day, the boys agreed they should each think up questions for the next interview. They would then compare notes and decide on the best ones to ask.

On his way home, Jason could not stop thinking that his band of detectives was missing something...something very important. He just could not put his finger on what it was.

Chapter 15: Amy Helps Out

In preparation for the interviews with Jim Wright and Will Daman, Jason sat in his room and read through the newspaper clippings once again. He learned that Jim had been a star football player in college many years ago and had led his team to the championship against their rival school in both his sophomore and junior years. In his senior year, however, just before the big game, he injured himself during practice and had to sit on the sidelines and watch his team go down in defeat. After college, Jim got a job coaching athletics for his local high school, and in his spare time, he organized the American Athletic League to promote an interest in athletics among young boys and girls in primary education. Then, suddenly, the newspaper stories about him ended.

Jason noted all of this on a small pad of paper for future reference.

Will Daman, according to the newspaper accounts, had been both an excellent and an inspiring coach. Nothing in his background raised any suspicion as to his honesty or his dedication to serving the children who were lucky enough to know him. Yet, just three years ago, shortly after his track team won the league championship and earned the trophy, Will was asked to resign by the school principal. Will did so, and although he still lived in town, he went into self-imposed seclusion and would not have anything more to do with the school.

“Weird...” Jason said to himself. “Just weird.”

There came a knock on his bedroom door.

“Can I come in?” It was Amy.

“Not right now. I’m busy!”

“I’ve got something to tell you.”

“Not right now, I said.”

“It’s about the trophy theft...”

“Oh, well, then I guess it’s okay. You may enter.” Jason shot up and opened the door.

“Welcome to the detective’s inner sanctum,” he said, smiling.

“The *what?*”

“The *inner sanctum*. The room within rooms. The wolf’s lair. The lion’s den. The...”

“And you let me in? To what do I owe this honor?”

“I don’t know. Get in here before I change my mind.” Jason stepped back and let Amy cross the threshold.

Amy looked around at his electronic equipment and mechanical gadgets. “I know that you’ve been mucking around the library, trying to find something on the trophy theft, and—”

“I wouldn’t exactly call it ‘mucking around.’”

“Whatever. After you guys left the library, Karen and I went in and mucked around ourselves. We found something that might help you.”

“You’re finally gonna tell me?”

Amy handed Jason a copy she had made of a three-year-old newspaper article. “We found this.”

Jason glanced at it. It was issued exactly three years from the date the last soccer trophy was awarded. There was a story about the soccer game, with a picture of Will Daman, the coach, holding the huge trophy cup. On that very same day, the cash box in the principal’s office at the Fairview Elementary School was broken into, and an undisclosed amount of cash went missing.

“This is interesting!” said Jason, looking over at Amy.

“Good stuff, huh?”

“Could it be Mr. Daman was involved in this crime?” Jason wondered aloud.

“Not likely,” replied Amy. “If he were, he would have been sent to jail instead of just losing his job.”

“I’ll bet there’s a connection just the same.” Jason’s detective instincts were kicking in, and he was on a roll. “I need to talk to Dr. Bassett,” he said simply. “This may be just the break we were looking for.”

“It was my idea,” Amy said proudly. “Does this mean that Karen and I can join your detective team?”

“I’m sorry, sis. Detective work is...um... a boy thing.”

“*What?* We bring you your first lucky break and you call it a ‘boy thing’?”

“My partners wouldn’t go for it.”

“Not fair!”

“I’ll tell you what. When we get stuck or need help in some way, we’ll give you an assignment.”

“Assignment? What do you mean *assignment*?” Amy threw up her hands.

“You know. We’ll give you a job to do.”

“Geez, thanks for throwing us a bone, but we don’t need your handouts. We’ll investigate the crime ourselves,” Amy said angrily, staring fiercely at her older brother.

“Okay, just be careful,” Jason cautioned her.

“Careful? Pooh! We don’t need *you*!” Amy turned and stormed out of the room.

Jason's eyes followed her for a moment. Then he turned his thoughts again to the newspaper articles. He needed to focus on the important details in preparation for the interviews. He called his friends, but he didn't mention the newspaper articles Amy showed him because he didn't know what to say about them. He simply asked Matt to contact Mr. Wright and Luke to contact Mr. Daman to set up appointments. He decided to talk to Dr. Bassett alone because he suspected she just might open up if he could gain her trust. He picked up his cell phone and dialed her office.

"Hello?" a woman answered.

"May I please speak to Dr. Bassett?" he asked politely.

"This is she. It's after five and the secretary's gone."

"Oh." Jason hadn't recognized her voice. He hoped that wouldn't be a strike against him. "Well, Dr. Bassett, this is Jason. Jason Brooks. We came to see you this morning about the trophy theft..."

"Yes, Jason. I know who you are. What do you want now?"

"We have just a few more questions, if you don't mind."

"Go ahead. Ask them if you must."

Jason thought he could detect irritation in her voice. "I don't mean any disrespect, ma'am, but there is an issue that came up in our research. We learned that Coach Damon was asked to resign. Could you please tell us why you fired him three years ago?"

"I didn't fire him. He quit."

"The newspaper story said he was a fine coach but that you asked him to resign for some reason."

“Is that so? Well, it just goes to show, you can’t believe everything you read in the newspapers.”

“Could it have had anything to do with the theft of cash from the school?”

“How did you learn about that?”

“It was in the newspaper too.”

There was a short pause before Dr. Bassett answered. “I’m sorry, I can’t comment on that.”

“Oh? Why...why can’t you comment?” Jason desperately wanted to remain respectful, but he felt he needed to press Dr. Bassett to gain the truth.

“It’s...it’s personal...to Mr. Daman, of course.”

“Oh...uh...what do you mean by *personal*?”

“I mean it’s none of your business. Jason, I’m going to hang up now. This conversation is *over*. Goodbye.” The line went dead.

“Goodbye, ma’am,” Jason said, even though Dr. Bassett had already disconnected.

Jason put down his phone and pondered what he had just heard.

Chapter 16: Jim Wright, Retired

Matt and Luke arranged to meet Jim Wright and Will Daman on Saturday—Jim in the morning and Will in the afternoon. They remembered to ask for directions to their houses and carefully wrote them down. Early Saturday, Jason mounted his bike and rode to Matt's home, where Matt and Luke were waiting with their bikes.

Jason and Luke followed Matt single file as he guided their convoy through the village and then out again on the other side of town. After several turns onto narrower and narrower roads that led into the countryside, they eventually followed a back road for about a mile until they came upon a pole-mounted mailbox bearing the name "A.J. Wright." They stopped and pushed their bikes up a dirt driveway until they came upon Mr. Wright's house, a cute bungalow nestled deep in the woods.

"I wonder if anyone's home," remarked Luke, breathing hard from the bicycle trip.

"Should be. I made an appointment," replied Matt.

Just then, a bearded man came out the front door of the house. "Hello, boys. Good to see ya. Don't often get visitors."

"Hi, Mr. Wright. I'm the one who called. My name's Matthew. These are my friends Jason and Luke."

They shook hands all around. "Understan' ya want to know 'bout the trophy burglary at school."

"Yes. That's right. We're trying to help the school get the trophies back," Jason replied.

"Sure is a good thing ta do, boys. Don't know how I can help though."

“We learned that many of the trophies came from a support group you founded. The American Athletic League?”

“Most of ’em did, yeah. I’m no longer involved though. Resigned from the AAL some three years ago. Can’t say as I miss it.”

There’s that three-year timeline again, Jason thought. “Why did you resign?”

“Well, let’s jus’ say I retired.”

“Did it have anything to do with Will Daman?” The boys took turns asking questions. As they had agreed beforehand, whoever thought of a question felt free to ask it.

“What do you know about Will?”

“We think he may be involved,” Jason said.

“Izzat so? Let me tell you somethin’, boys. He got a raw deal, he did.”

“How so?”

“The school principal fired him for no good reason.”

“She says he quit.”

“If she says that, she’s lyin’. I’m not surprised though. She’s a piece of work, that one.”

“You don’t believe her?”

“Heck no. Will was the best coach that Fairview ever had.”

“So you resigned out of protest?”

“Somethin’ like that. You boys sure ask some questions.”

“We’re just trying to figure this out, who might have broken in and stolen the trophies. Is there anything else you can tell us that might be helpful?”

“All I know is, if you think Will did it, you’re barkin’ up the wrong tree.”

Jason let out a long breath he hadn't realized he was holding. It wasn't the response he had expected to hear, but that didn't mean their conversation with Will would be pointless.

"Well, we're on our way to talk with him now."

"Oh, really? Then please give him my warmest regards. I do think of him often."

Jason nodded. "We will. Goodbye, Mr. Wright."

"Goodbye, boys. Sure was nice to talk to you boys."

The three boys mounted their bikes, ready to ride.

"Jus' one more thing," Jim Wright said.

"Yeah? What's that?"

"Those trophies were hollow, ya know. Seems t' me they'd make a mighty good hiding place for somethin'."

Hollow trophies? I wonder who knew about that? Jason thanked Mr. Wright, and then he and his friends were on their way.

Chapter 17: Will Daman, Retired

Jason, Matt and Luke made their way back to the main road and stopped for a moment while Luke retrieved the directions to Mr. Daman's home from his back pocket. The directions were lengthy and complicated, but the boys followed each step until, at last, they found themselves on a country road in front of a small white cottage with blue shutters. They parked their bikes, walked up to the front door and knocked.

An elderly balding man opened the door. "Hello. Can I help you?"

"My name is Luke. These are my friends Jason and Matt. I called you a couple of days ago and—"

"Of course. Of course. Please do come in."

The boys entered what appeared to be a one-room house and were directed to sit on a couch along one wall opposite a fireplace. Dry wood cracked in the fireplace and filled the room with a pleasant aroma.

"Can I get you boys anything to drink? A soda perhaps?"

"Yes, please!" Matt said. "It's been a long trip on our bikes."

Jason suddenly realized how dry his mouth felt and was grateful for the offer.

"Just a moment then." Mr. Daman went to a refrigerator in a small kitchen area and returned with three cans of orange soda. He passed them out to the boys. "So, what can I do for you?"

Jason thanked him for the soda before diving right in. "You've heard of the trophy theft at our school? Fairview Elementary?"

“Yes, I’m afraid I have. I’m terribly sorry.”

“We wonder if there is anything you might know that could help us find out who did it,”

Jason said.

“I’ve been over this ground with the police and...Detective Howell, I believe. I wish I knew something that would be helpful, but I don’t.”

“What questions did he ask you?” Again, the boys took turns asking questions.

Mr. Daman’s hands rested on his knees, his fingers tapping idly. While he seemed open enough, Jason noticed he also appeared slightly guarded.

“Nothing much. He asked why I quit coaching.”

“Did you tell him?”

“No, it was personal, between me and the principal, Dr. Bassett.”

“Did you really quit?”

Mr. Daman chuckled dryly. “Let’s just say we mutually agreed to part ways.”

“Could you tell us about it?”

“I’m afraid I can’t.”

The boys exchanged a glance, their curiosity undeterred. “Mr. Wright told us that you were the best coach ever and that Dr. Bassett fired you without any good reason.”

“He told you that?”

“Yes, he did.”

“All I can say is, I’d like to agree with him.”

“So why did you quit...or get fired?”

The former coach leaned back in his chair, staring at the ceiling as though the answer

might be hidden in the peeling paint. “I suppose you could say I had my nose in some of her business and she showed her teeth. Since she’s the boss, I had to leave.”

“What business was that?”

“I can’t say. We’re both sworn to secrecy.”

“And you’ve kept the secret all these years?” Jason asked.

“Of course. I never break a promise.”

“Did you ever think of fighting back?” Jason pressed. “She ruined your career.”

“Easy come, easy go. No, I can take my medicine.”

“But all the kids loved you.”

“That’s the hard part, giving up my work with all you good kids. But I understand Dr. Bassett found a new coach right away.”

“Coach Buck. Yes, he’s pretty good and we like him.”

“Well, I’m glad. You made my day by coming way out here. But you had better get on your bikes and ride now. You’re way out of town, you know, and your parents will be expecting you back, I’m sure.”

“I guess you’re right.” Jason moved with the others toward the door. “Thank you very much.”

“You’re quite welcome. Come back any time. You don’t need a reason, you know. Just get home safe.”

Jason, Matt and Luke climbed on their bikes and started their long trip back home.

Chapter 18: The Long Ride Home

The boys rode single file in silence. The road was narrow and, for the most part, desolate. Now and then a car passed by. As the sun sank slowly behind the trees, the shadows lengthened and what few cars were there had their headlights switched on. This made the vehicles easier to see and avoid.

The road wound through dense woods, and the reduced daylight made dusk appear to come early. The only sounds were the heavy breathing of the boys as they pedaled along at a relaxed but fairly rapid pace. Jason was riding his bike with the air-powered assist, but that was of no advantage on the relatively level terrain.

Just then, practically without a sound, another person on a bike sped past them and disappeared in the darkening shadows ahead. Jason caught his breath and felt a shudder. It had happened so quickly and unexpectedly that it startled him. Out of the corner of his eye, he had caught a glimpse of the bike as it whizzed by. A red racing bike.

Jason pedaled on a short distance and then braked to a halt. “Did you see that!” he exclaimed as his two friends pulled up and stopped next to him.

“See what?” Matt and Luke wanted to know.

“The red bicycle... It...was...in the *race*.” Jason stood there in silence for a moment, staring blankly into space. He could feel his friends watching him.

“What’s the matter?” Matt said.

“Something feels off,” he said, returning his friend’s gaze.

“What do you mean?”

“The red bicycle that was in the race is all the way out here. There’s a connection. I’m just not sure what it means.” Jason nodded to his friends, indicating he wanted to continue riding.

The boys continued on in silence. Minutes passed as they concentrated on pedaling and steering their bikes along the back country road as the blue hour of the evening descended. Jason’s mind was busy, quietly considering the significance of the red bicycle traveling on the same remote country road as they were.

Then, in the far distance ahead of them, almost imperceptibly at first, Jason heard the rise and fall of a siren. A glance back at the others confirmed they were hearing it also. Since he was in front of the small convoy, he pulled off to the edge of the road, and the others followed his lead. They craned their necks in the direction of the sound. The siren’s sound quickly increased in volume as its source approached, apparently at breakneck speed.

Eventually, a tiny pair of headlights appeared in the distance from around a bend in the road, and as the boys watched from a safe position off the pavement, the headlights grew rapidly brighter and farther apart as the vehicle sped toward them. By this time the sound was almost deafening. In an instant, the vehicle was upon them and passed. An ambulance! Both the sound and the sight were gone in a flash.

The boys pushed their bikes back onto the road and continued their journey home.

Chapter 19: Amy and the Detectives

The next morning was Sunday, a day the Brooks family usually slept late. Jason was up at dawn, however, because he wanted to review the newspaper accounts of Mr. Daman's "retirement."

Amy must have heard Jason pad down the hall to the bathroom because she poked her head out the door to her room. "Anything new on the crime front?"

"Nope. We talked to Mr. Wright and Mr. Daman yesterday, but we got nothing at all we can use. We're at a dead end again."

"Maybe Karen and I can help," Amy volunteered.

"I don't see how."

"You never know."

"We'll take all the help we can get." Jason was not in an optimistic mood as he went downstairs to retrieve the local newspaper, which was delivered to their door each week, rolled up and stuffed in a yellow plastic bag to protect it from the weather.

As he brought the newspaper into the house and unwrapped it, he glanced at the headlines. What he saw stopped him dead in his tracks. The main headline blared: "RETIRED FAIRVIEW COACH SURVIVES BRUTAL ATTACK."

"Amy!" Jason screamed upstairs.

Amy came to her door. "Shhh! Mom and Dad are sleeping."

"You gotta see this. We just got our clue, big time." He ran upstairs and showed her the front page, then quickly scanned through the newspaper story.

“Will Daman, former coach at the Fairview Elementary School, received severe blows from a blunt instrument by an unknown assailant yesterday afternoon. The assailant left him for dead, but he managed to place a call for help before lapsing into a coma. As luck would have it, an ambulance happened to be in the area near his home when it received the call, and prompt action by the medical team saved his life. Mr. Daman was rushed to the community hospital and is in critical but stable condition...”

Jason dropped the newspaper and stared at Amy. “We were just there yesterday!”

“This is scary. You could’ve gotten *killed*.”

“What should we do?”

“You’ve got to report this...to Detective Howell,” Amy said definitively.

Jason nodded and called Matt first.

“Have you seen the paper?” he asked Matt.

“No, but my dad saw it on the television news. It’s really scary.”

“We must have been there just minutes before it happened.”

“Lucky we left when we did!”

“Or we could have helped him. If we had only known.”

“Yeah. What should we do now?”

“Call Luke. You should both come over. Let’s all go see Detective Howell and tell him what happened yesterday.”

“Okay. Sounds like a good plan. I’ll call Luke and be right over.”

Jason hung up and immediately called the police station. A desk sergeant answered.

“Hello, my name is Jason Brooks. May I speak to Mr. Howell, please?”

“What’s it about?”

“It’s about Mr. Daman, who was just almost killed. We have some information for him.”

“I’ll put you right through.”

Detective Howell’s voice came on the line. “Hello. Detective Howell speaking.”

“Mr....I mean, Detective Howell. My name is Jason Brooks. I—”

“Yes, yes. What can I do for you? I’m very busy right now and—”

“We have some information about the attack on Mr. Daman.”

“What? You do? What information?”

“My two friends and I would like to speak with you. Can we come over to see you, right now?”

“Can’t you tell me over the phone?”

“I’m afraid it’s a bit involved. We need to see you.”

“Then by all means, come right over. I just came back from seeing Mr. Daman at the hospital. Terrible crime. I’ll wait here ’til you come.”

Matt and Luke arrived shortly at Jason’s house. Amy let them in.

“Can I come along?” she pleaded as they assembled.

“Sorry, Amy. We’re going to ride our bikes and we’ve got to get there fast.” Jason put on a light jacket for the trip.

“I know. I know. It’s a boy thing...again!”

“I’ll tell you all about it when we get back,” Jason promised.

The three boys pedaled as fast as they could to the police station. They were received by the desk sergeant and were quickly ushered into Detective Howell’s office—a small room with a

metal desk and a single bookshelf stuffed with papers. Detective Howell stood up and shook their hands, then settled back in his chair with a reflective puff on his pipe. Jason noticed Luke hesitate a moment before slipping quietly into the seat farthest from the desk. He felt a pang of sympathy for his friend for having previously been considered a suspect and questioned by the detective.

“Have a seat, boys. There are just enough chairs for the three of you. Glad there’s not four. Couldn’t squeeze another chair into this room if we had to.”

“Detective Howell,” Jason began. “The three of us were at Mr. Daman’s house just a few minutes before he was attacked.”

“*What?* You were *what?*” Detective Howell’s eyes bulged out and he almost choked on his pipe.

“We had visited Mr. Daman to ask about the trophy theft at the school.”

“Oh, really? Go on...”

“Well, we left his house over an hour before dark. It’s a really long trip and, as we were riding home, this guy passed by us on a red racing bike. He was going pretty fast, but I’m fairly sure it was the same bike that raced in the Great Bicycle Race a couple of weeks ago.”

“Did you catch a glimpse of the rider?”

“Not really. It happened so suddenly, and we only saw him from the back.”

Matt and Luke nodded to show they agreed with Jason’s statement.

“Did you see any other cars or bikes pass you during that time?”

“There was hardly any traffic,” Jason responded.

“Any cars going toward, or coming from, the direction of Mr. Daman’s house?”

“No, sir. I mean, we saw a few cars after we’d been pedaling a while, but we didn’t see any cars early on.” Jason answered respectfully. “But then, about ten minutes later, we saw an ambulance zoom by us in the opposite direction toward his house.”

Detective Howell stared at the boys and puffed thoughtfully on his pipe. Jason stared back and wondered what he was thinking. Eventually, Detective Howell spoke.

“I just came from investigating this crime. First, I visited the crime scene. It was a bloody mess, but I doubt we’ll find any prints. Or the weapon, for that matter. It was a clean, professional job by someone who knew what he wanted to do, came prepared, and did the horrible deed. Then I interviewed Mr. Daman at the hospital and learned he doesn’t remember anything that happened. He took some pretty heavy blows to the head. What I’m telling you is that we have no leads, except what you just said. But you haven’t given me enough hard evidence to even get a warrant to search the guy’s place—whoever he is—not to mention anything that would be useful in court...assuming this guy’s guilty, that is.”

“Can’t you ask him questions?” Jason asked.

“I can, and I will. First, we have to find the guy.”

“That should be easy. He had to register at the race. And I think he was one of the winners.”

“Let’s place a call.”

Detective Howell lifted the phone and dialed a number. After a short pause, he spoke into the receiver and introduced himself. “Can you give me the names of the winners? Yes, I need all three: first, second and third place. Hmmm.” Detective Howell jotted the names down. “Oh, and one final question. Did you make a record of the color of their bikes?”

Detective Howell stared at the boys and put down the receiver.

“I have the winners’ names here, but there’s no record of the type or color of their bikes.”

“I’ll bet I can get that information!” Jason exclaimed excitedly.

“Oh? How?” the detective asked.

“I’ll just call my sister! She was there and watched the race.”

Detective Howell handed over the telephone, and Jason called home. Amy answered on the first ring.

“Amy, it’s me. I do need some more help. Can you tell me if a guy on a red bike came in first, second or third in the Great Bicycle Race?”

Jason’s face brightened. “He did? Thanks, Amy. You’ve been a big help. Again!” Jason hung up and looked at Detective Howell. “He came in second.”

The detective referred to his notes for a moment, then reported, “The second-place winner was Ray Bassett, son of Dr. Bassett, the school principal.”

Chapter 20: Jason Solves the Crime

“Gee, I didn’t even know Dr. Bassett had a son,” exclaimed Luke.

Matt was also dumbfounded. “I guess we can rule him out as the attacker.”

“Yeah. Why would he want to hurt Mr. Daman?” Jason wondered.

“I do want to question him,” Detective Howell said firmly. “But I’m also just as sure that he will deny committing the crime. Even if we tell him that you saw him on the road, he’ll say he wasn’t there. That you made a mistake.”

“Then what’s the use of questioning him?” asked Jason.

“What do you say we set a little trap,” suggested the detective with a twinkle in his eye. “If he did commit the crime, he might fall for it. If he didn’t, he won’t have anything to worry about.”

“What kind of a trap?”

“It’s the oldest trick in the crime stoppers handbook, really. I’ll tell him that his victim, Mr. Daman, can identify him. If he confesses, I’ll say we’ll go easy on him, but if not and we prove his guilt, well, I’ll tell him he’ll be arrested, tried in juvenile court, and sent away to a place for bad boys.”

“What if he calls your bluff and asks you to prove it?” Jason wondered.

“They very rarely do. When they think you have them dead to rights, they plead for mercy. But if they call your bluff, well...nothing ventured, nothing gained.”

“Will you let us know how it turns out?” Matt asked.

“Certainly, boys. I’ll give one of you a call. And by the way, thank you for coming in to

see me. You may have provided a valuable lead.”

“Believe me, we’re glad to help,” Luke replied flatly.

The three young detectives turned to leave.

Detective Howell stood up from his chair and added, “And if you have any leads on the theft at your school, don’t hesitate to call me. My investigation reached sort of a dead end there too, except for the fingerprints.” Detective Howell looked straight at Luke when he said this.

Jason saw Luke shudder but then stare right back. Clearly, he was no longer intimidated. Jason was glad his friend felt vindicated.

Jason, Matt and Luke rode their bikes back to Jason’s house, saying nothing along the way. Although the detective had seemed genuinely grateful for their assistance, Jason couldn’t help but think that they had failed to provide any useful information about the attack. Ray Bassett? Dr. Bassett’s son? And worst of all, they had made no progress in finding the trophy burglar. And Luke still had a dark cloud over his head. Although temporarily lifted, it would continue to follow him until the thief was caught. Maybe they should get out of this detective business and do something else.

They secluded themselves in Jason’s garage workshop. The newspaper stories were scattered about on the floor where Jason had thrown them after reading them before.

“What’ll we do now?” Matt asked finally.

Jason looked down at the floor, dejected. The copied newspaper page Amy had given him caught his eye. Next to the story about the winning soccer team was a story about the theft of cash from the principal’s office. Jason picked it up and read it again to himself. He let the paper fall and breathed a barely audible sigh.

“I think I solved the crime,” he said softly and looked at his friends. “Here’s what I think happened...”

After hearing Jason’s explanation, both Matt and Luke nodded in agreement.

“We have to call Detective Howell right away,” Jason told them.

Chapter 21: The Detectives at the Hospital

The boys mounted their bikes again and rode to the community hospital, a few miles away. At the hospital reception desk, they asked for permission to visit Mr. Daman.

“He’s in Room 202,” said the receptionist, looking him up on the computer. “It says that he is still very ill. Please keep your visit short. Here is a visitor card. Return it to me when you leave.”

“We will,” Jason promised.

The boys took the elevator to the second floor and found Room 202. Jason was surprised to see a uniformed policeman standing at the door. He felt his stomach tighten and his palms become clammy.

As they entered the room, the policeman followed them inside and stood guard. The shades had been pulled, blocking most of the light and leaving the room in partial darkness.

Mr. Daman lay on the hospital bed, his bandaged head resting softly on a pillow. Jason felt a deep stab of empathy for the man who, just yesterday, had been so strong and at ease.

“Mr. Daman, it’s us—Jason, Matt and Luke.” Jason hesitated, suddenly unsure if they should have come—if this would be too much for him. “We visited you yesterday just...just before this happened.”

A lump formed in Jason’s throat as he moved closer to the hospital bed, where the scent of antiseptic cleaner seemed stronger.

“My goodness.” Mr. Daman winced in pain. “A sight for sore eyes.” He made eye contact without moving his head.

“We can’t stay long. We just came to tell you how sorry we are.”

“That’s awfully nice.” Mr. Daman winced again.

“You’re going to get a flood of visitors...kids who know you...when everyone finds out you’re here.”

“That would be great. I love kids. I only wish I knew what happened.”

“We think we know. We only need you to answer one question.”

“Sure, anything. What’s that?”

“Do you know a Ray Bassett?”

With the mention of that name, Mr. Daman’s eyes grew wide and he stared at the three boys. Then he winced and tried to lean forward but couldn’t. “Yes,” he said and closed his eyes for just a brief moment.

“We thought so. We just had to be sure.”

“Oh, goodness. Now I’m worried. You be careful, won’t you?”

“We promise. We’re so sorry this happened to you, Mr. Daman.”

“It is what it is. I’m feeling under the weather, as they say. So, you be off now.”

Matt and Luke now stepped forward and approached Mr. Daman’s bedside, each in turn squeezing his hand. He squeezed back with tears in his eyes.

“G’bye, boys,” he said as they left, leaving only the guard standing there.

On their way out of the hospital, Jason stopped at the reception desk to turn in their visitor card. There he noticed a young man standing in wait.

“Oh, here’s the card for Mr. Daman,” the receptionist told the young man. “You can go up now.”

The receptionist took the visitor card from Jason and gave it to the young man, who then headed toward the elevator.

Chapter 22: Jason Races Again

When Jason returned home, he found the family landline phone blinking with a new voicemail. He pushed the “play” button, and a familiar voice came through the speaker.

“Hello, Jason. This is Detective Howell. I just want you to know that I interviewed Ray Bassett, but he denied everything. I need to speak to you right away. Please call me.”

Jason used his cell phone to return the call.

“Detective Howell speaking.”

“This is Jason. My friends and I just returned from seeing Mr. Daman at the hospital.”

“Jason, I’m so glad you called. Listen carefully. I have reason to believe you may be in danger. I’d like to come over and speak with you.”

“In danger? From what? Who?”

“I’ll explain when I get there. Just stay put.”

“Okay, if you insist. But I can ride over to your office—”

“*No. Stay there!* I’ll be over in fifteen minutes,” Detective Howell nearly shouted before hanging up.

Jason felt his heart skip a beat as he walked out of the house and entered his garage. *I may be in danger?* Fear flickered within him, but so did skepticism. *Who could possibly want to hurt me? Hardly anyone even knows I’m connected to this.*

His air-powered bike was not working quite properly, so he set about finding out what was wrong. As he worked on the air hose, his hands moved almost automatically, but his thoughts continued to pummel him. *Is this a misunderstanding? A prank?* The detective’s tone

and abrupt end to their call gnawed at him. Detective Howell wasn't the type to overreact.

Within minutes, Jason saw a small leak in an air hose connection, and he tightened it down. He turned the bike toward the exit and pressed the button to raise the garage door. There, in the doorway, stood the young man he had seen at the hospital, with a baseball bat in his hands.

Jason jumped on his bike and rode out the now wide-open doorway. The young man lunged at him as he passed, but Jason veered away. In the clear, Jason sped out of the driveway and headed toward the police station.

When he felt he'd gained a comfortable distance, he glanced over his shoulder and saw the young man, already mounted on a red racing bicycle and pedaling furiously in hot pursuit. *Ray Bassett*. Although he didn't appear to still be holding the baseball bat, the determination in his glare told Jason he meant harm.

Jason started out with a commanding lead, but Ray's greater age and strength enabled him to gain ground and close the gap. Jason glanced back again, and what he saw caused him to pedal even faster.

Ray was gaining by the minute and shouted, "I'll get you, you little punk."

Ahead of them loomed the steep hill where Jason had originally tried out his air-powered bicycle. Jason wondered for a moment whether he would make it to the hill, but with an extra burst of energy he reached the bottom with Ray only a bicycle length behind. As Ray's bicycle crept up, Ray reached out his hand to grab Jason's bike, but Jason quickly flipped the switch behind him, allowing compressed air to course through the hose to power the air motor. His bike shot ahead up the hill like a rocket.

"What the..." Taken by surprise, Ray allowed his two-wheeler to lose momentum on the

incline.

Jason quickly reached the crest of the hill and started down the other side, restoring his lead and gathering speed. He couldn't see Ray yet and assumed he was still laboring up the hill after him and would reach the top sometime later.

By the time Ray reached the top of the hill, Jason was halfway down the other side. This only seemed to make Ray even more determined to catch him as he redoubled his efforts. Once Jason reached the bottom of the hill, Ray was halfway down and quickly gaining on him. Jason glanced behind and saw Ray closing the gap between them.

Just before Ray caught up with him, Jason steered his bike abruptly to the left so that Ray would not crash into him and applied both the airbrake and the safety brakes. Coming to a sudden stop, Jason quickly turned his bike around and headed back in the direction from where he came. Again, he switched on the air motor, and his bike blasted off with turbo-charged energy in the opposite direction.

"Damn you!" screamed Ray, caught unawares by Jason's sudden change in direction.

Jason looked back in time to see Ray brake and skid sideways in his attempt to turn his bike around. His bike slipped out from under him, and he came crashing to the ground.

Truly angry now, Ray picked himself up, grabbed his bike and started to pedal in Jason's direction. "I'm going to *kill* you..."

Jason wasn't waiting around to see what happened. He was focused on the hill ahead, and to his great surprise and relief, he spotted Matt and Luke appear at the top of the hill, riding toward him like cavalry coming to the rescue. Down the hill they came while Jason rode directly toward them using his bicycle's air-powered assist. As they came close, Jason quickly braked,

turned around, and came abreast of them on the downhill stretch.

All three boys sped down the hill toward Ray Bassett, who was pedaling uphill toward them. When Ray saw them, he stopped, appearing terrified, and tried to turn around to escape. Just then, a police car came around a bend in the road, Detective Howell at the wheel. With the three boys heading toward Ray on one side and the police car heading toward him on the other, Ray stopped and put his hands in the air.

“You’re under arrest!” Detective Howell shouted as he stepped out of the car.

Chapter 23: The Detectives Learn What Happened

The news of Ray's arrest spread through the town like a brushfire. Anyone still unaware learned of the capture the next morning in the newspaper.

PRINCIPAL'S SON ACCUSED OF ASSAULT

Three Fairview Boys Assist in Capture

FAIRVIEW. Three fifth-grade boys assisted local police in arresting the son of Dr. Barbara Bassett, Principal of Fairview Elementary School, on Old Country Road yesterday afternoon. Dr. Bassett's son, whose name has been withheld because of his age, was taken into custody by Detective Howell and held without bail. He is accused of a vicious assault upon William Daman, retired gym coach of Fairview Elementary School, at Mr. Daman's home two days ago. Mr. Daman received numerous blows to the head and was left for dead. The accused is also implicated in a theft of trophies at Fairview Elementary School two weeks ago.

Detective Ben Howell pulled up to the front of the Brooks family's condo unit and stopped the squad car right in front of the garage. He had asked Jason, Matt and Luke to meet with him at a convenient place, which, he assumed, would be Jason's living room. However, as he stepped out of his car, the two-car-wide garage door slowly rose, revealing two girls standing alongside the three boys.

"We're in here, Detective Howell!" called Jason.

Ben walked over and greeted the five young detectives while the door descended

automatically behind him. “Looks like we got our man,” he said, smiling. “Thanks to you youngsters.”

“Glad to help,” Luke replied modestly. “Call us any time.”

“I do have a couple of questions,” Jason said. “Why did you post a guard at Mr. Daman’s hospital room? And how did you learn that my life was in danger?”

“Well, I had some information you didn’t have,” Ben replied. “I knew Ray had been sent away to reform school and that he just got out a few weeks ago. Names of youthful offenders are not released to the press, but as an officer of the law, I was in a position to know these things. So, when I learned that the person who sped by you on the road was Ray, placing him near Mr. Daman’s house at the time of the crime, I knew he might well be a suspect. I wanted catch him off guard and bluff him into confessing he’d attacked Mr. Daman, by telling him someone witnessed the crime.

“I knew full well it might make you boys sitting ducks for him if he didn’t confess. But I assumed Ray would have some respect, or at least fear, for authority...and that when cornered, he’d break down and beg for leniency. He knew Mr. Daman could identify him but I wanted him to think I had backup witnesses in case he found out Mr. Daman couldn’t remember, or in case...in case he, uh...”

“Mr. Daman died?” Amy chimed in.

“Yes. He was in a critical condition, you know, and could have died. And I learned Ray tried to enter his room at the hospital. He stopped when he saw the guard.”

“But then Ray Bassett called your bluff?” Matt chimed in with a question.

“Well, not exactly. When I interviewed Ray, I found out he was a tough, belligerent kid

with no fear at all. He simply denied everything, and since I had no proof, I had to let him go. He must have learned a thing or two at reform school.”

“He also must have worked out a lot while he was there,” Karen added. “That explains how he could do so well in the Great Bicycle Race.”

“That’s what I thought too when I learned he came in second in the race,” Ben confirmed. “I also figured he learned to cover his tracks when committing a crime. Wearing rubber gloves to avoid leaving fingerprints, that sort of thing. Instead of being ‘reformed’ at reform school, he just became a tougher and smarter criminal.”

“Dr. Bassett sure must have been pleased,” Luke said sarcastically.

“You know, Luke, I must apologize to you. I was way out of line to think you might have done such a thing as smash the trophy case and take all the trophies. Dr. Bassett told me you were a troublemaker, but it was her own son she was protecting.

“She knew Ray was out of control when he came home,” Ben continued. “She bought him a new bicycle, maybe thinking it would keep him busy and out of trouble. Being principal of the school, she had other priorities than caring for her kid.”

The five youngsters stood there staring back at Ben, seemingly stunned at the revelations about their principal. Ben paused a moment to let the information sink in.

“She should have told me her son might have been involved in the break-in, but she didn’t. What helped me the most was when *you* reminded me of that cash theft three years ago.”

“We have Amy and Karen to thank for that clue,” noted Jason.

“Did Ray steal that cash?” asked Matt.

“You bet. Again, his name was withheld because of his age, but that was the reason he

was sent away. The money—about two thousand dollars—was never recovered, and we know now that Ray hid it in the trophy that Mr. Daman’s team won that year.”

“Did Mr. Daman have anything to do with hiding the cash?” Luke wanted to know.

“He certainly knew about it because he was a mentor to Ray. That’s why Dr. Bassett fired him. She figured he was corrupting her son. In fact, the opposite was true. He was only trying to help the boy stay *out* of trouble with the law. He thought he could work with him to help straighten him out. But Dr. Bassett didn’t see it that way and ruined his career.”

“And now he’s in the hospital. Some thanks he got for trying to help Ray,” remarked Matt.

“He’s some kid, I’ll tell you. And I think Dr. Bassett knew all along that he broke into the trophy case.”

“Why is that?” asked Jason.

“She had a key to the school but not to the trophy case. She probably realized her son had taken her set of keys. He used them to get into the school, but when he looked for a key to the trophy case, it wasn’t there. That’s why the trophy case was smashed.

“She also knew he had a motive,” Ben added. “You see, she discovered along the way, probably three years ago, that he hid the money in the trophy. She never told anyone though. She finally told me yesterday she took the money back. It belonged to the school.”

“That was why he came after Mr. Daman!” Amy said.

“Exactly. Ray thought Mr. Daman was the only one who knew where he hid it. After stealing the trophies, Ray found the money missing and thought Mr. Daman had taken it. After the bicycle race was over, he laid low for a while, then headed straight for Mr. Daman’s house.”

“Wow! And to think we were there too!” exclaimed Jason.

“You probably saved Coach Daman’s life and didn’t even know it. We learned later that Ray was there when you came. There were footprints at the back of Mr. Daman’s house that matched Ray’s sneaker tread. We also found a stick of firewood with blood on it. That was the weapon he used.”

“We had no idea...”

“When Ray arrived, he looked around and was just about to go in when you boys showed up. This really unnerved him. He thought he had all the time in the world to torture Mr. Daman into confessing that he took the money. When you were there, he listened to the whole conversation through the back window. Something he heard must have convinced him that Mr. Daman only had his interest at heart, so he didn’t torture him.”

“Then why did he try to kill him?”

“Just plain vindictive, I guess. He was there and he was angry that the money was gone. He snuck in the back door and hit Mr. Daman from behind. He knew Mr. Daman never saw him, so he knew I was bluffing when I said he did.”

“Then why did he go see Mr. Daman at the hospital?”

“Because Ray knew we were onto him, and he thought Mr. Daman would eventually figure out he was the one who slugged him. He thought Mr. Daman would then spill the beans about Ray’s hiding the money in the trophy, and the break-in at school would start to unravel.”

“And he also wanted to eliminate us as witnesses,” remarked Luke with a shudder.

“Do you have enough evidence to convict Ray?” asked Jason, not wholly unconcerned that if Ray were set free, he would come after him again.

“Rest assured. This time we got a complete confession. And by the way, the school board is meeting this afternoon to review the entire case and to consider whether Dr. Bassett is fit to continue as the principal.”

“I’ll bet their answer will be ‘no’,” Jason commented wryly.

“Well, now that you know the whole story, let me thank you again for helping me out. I couldn’t have solved this case without you. All of you.” Ben gave a nod to the girls.

“We’re just glad it’s over,” remarked Matt, “but it was fun to play ‘detective.’”

“Sometimes it was boring, though,” added Luke, winking at Matt and Jason.

“Not for me. I love this job,” replied Ben. He gave a final puff on his pipe, shook hands all around and left through the side door of the garage.

Chapter 24: Dr. Bassett Receives Her Reward

“Man!” said Matt. “That was an *adventure!*”

“Yeah. It’s something to tell our grandkids about!” Luke exclaimed.

“Maybe we can work together on another crime,” Amy said optimistically.

“You know what the best thing is?” Jason asked reflectively. It seemed like just a few days ago that he’d gone to school and found the trophies were missing. He’d never done any detective work before, but he found he had a knack for it. And so did his family and friends.

“No. What?” Matt asked.

“It brought us all closer together. We’re fast friends now. We even have Luke.”

“You’re right—and also with our sweet little sisters,” added Matt.

“You can drop the ‘sweet little,’ if you don’t mind,” Amy said.

Karen nodded her agreement.

“That’s just a guy thing,” Jason noted with a grin.

* * * *

The next day, the newspaper ran a story reporting on the outcome of the school board meeting.

SCHOOL PRINCIPAL RESIGNS. COACH REINSTATED AND GIVEN BACK PAY

FAIRVIEW: The Fairview School Board accepted the resignation of Dr. Barbara Bassett, Principal of Fairview Elementary School, allowing her to retire with full pension benefits. This compromise was reached behind closed doors amid charges that Dr. Bassett wrongfully forced

Coach William Daman out of his job three years ago. At the same time, the school board reinstated Mr. Daman as coach at Fairview Elementary and awarded him full pay and benefits retroactive to the date of his resignation. Mr. Daman accepted the reinstatement “with gratitude” and agreed to serve together with the present gym coach, Bill Buck. “What I missed most of all,” said Daman, “was to be together with the children at the elementary school.”

Two months later, Ray Bassett was charged as an adult with the crimes of both breaking and entering and assault and battery. Ray pleaded guilty and was sentenced to five years in the state penitentiary.

As the school year wore on and the fall season evolved into the dead of winter, Jason’s thoughts naturally turned to what lay ahead: sixth grade and the move to the middle school. He and his two friends, Matt and Luke, would be moving up, and big changes were heading their way. Jason couldn’t help but wonder what their next adventure would be.

THE END