

The Mad Hacker

Susan Brown

Anne Stephenson



An Amber and Elliot Mystery



Chapter One

Doom and Destruction

The halls of Ash Grove Junior High should have been deserted as the students settled into the last class of the day. Instead, they echoed with racing footsteps. Amber Mitchell and Liz Elliot had business to attend to.

“You do the talking,” Liz urged as they stopped just short of their destination. “You’re better at handling Jaws than I am. I think I’ll just wait out here.” She leaned casually against the wall.

“Chicken!” Amber teased.

“Discreet,” countered Liz. She wound a strand of long, dark hair around and around one finger. “Go for it! Our future is in your hands.”

“Gee, thanks. Here goes nothing!” Amber inhaled deeply, tossed her copper-red hair, and resolutely walked into the classroom. Mr. Eugene Sharkman, better known as Jaws, was busy at the whiteboard, writing out assignments for his next day’s computer science classes.

“Excuse me, Ja..I mean, Mr. Sharkman.”

“What? Oh, Amber. What can I do for you?”

Marker in hand, Mr. Sharkman peered at her over his old-fashioned, wire-rimmed glasses.

“Liz and I were wondering if we could have some extra time on the computers to test our new app.”

“Ah, yes. *Whodunnit*. Your mystery game. Why? Are you having a problem?”

“Yes. It’s Aunt Agatha. She keeps killing the butler. Over and over again. With the knife in the parlour, the rope in the kitchen, the machete in the bedroom...”

“She sounds like she is a problem.” His mouth twitched with amusement.

“Definitely,” Amber agreed. “But Jonathan Weiss told us how to fix it. If we could have just one more hour on the computer?”

“I suppose that can be arranged,” answered her teacher, walking over to his desk and checking the spreadsheet on his laptop. “But just this once. You know our agreement with Eastern Technology is for normal class work only. How would four o’clock be?”

“That’s great. Thanks.”

Elated by her success, Amber raced out of the room.

“We’ve got it! We can use the computers for an hour after school today.”

“Thank goodness,” Liz said. “I hope *Whodunnit* runs smoothly this time. I lie awake at night worrying about that poor butler.”

“Right. We’ll get an F on our project and I’ll be grounded for a thousand years, but he’ll make the *Guinness Book of World Records* – the only butler who didn’t do it.”

“Very funny, Amber.”

“I thought so.”

Liz checked the time on her phone then frowned in frustration. “I wish there was better reception around here.”

“We have to hurry. We’re at least ten minutes late for gym.”

Liz pocketed her phone and the girls started running down the empty hall toward their next class. Suddenly a high screech echoed from behind.

“Amber Mitchell! Liz Elliot! Stop right there!”

The girls skidded to a halt.

“Oh no!” whispered Amber. “Why is it always Miss Belcher! If we get a detention now, we’re finished. Jaws will never give us another chance.”

“Well, think of an excuse quick.” Liz looked back over her shoulder. “Here comes the dragon lady, and I see smoke coming out of her nostrils.”

“Ladies – and I use the term loosely,” snapped Miss Belcher as she drew level with the girls, “we walk in the halls of Ash Grove. This is the second time today I’ve had to remind you.” She stretched her tall frame to even greater heights and fixed the two offenders with one of her most withering stares. “Must I give you a detention to implant that in your minds?”

“Miss Belcher, you can’t,” Liz protested.

“It’s not our fault,” Amber pleaded.

“Is it ever?”

“No...I mean,” Amber stammered, “You see, Jaws – I mean Mr. Sharkman – met us between classes to discuss our term project, and we were late, so he told us to hurry to our next class.” She smiled winningly.

“Oh?” replied Miss Belcher. “Somehow I doubt Mr. Sharkman intended for you to run to your next class. However, I’ll let it go – this time. But I’d walk if I were you. From now on, I’ll be watching.”

“Yes, Miss Belcher,” Amber said, still smiling.

“Thank you, Miss Belcher,” Liz added.

They solemnly turned and walked down the hall, avoiding each others’ eyes. But once they rounded the corner to the gym, they collapsed against the wall.

“Amber,” Liz asked. “Why us?”

Amber grinned. “Just lucky I guess.”

With the ease of much practice (it happened that they were late at least once a week), Liz and Amber changed into shorts and T-shirts, slipped into the gym, and joined a queue of kids at the trampoline.

“Where have you been?” demanded Jane Dobbs, the class motor-mouth. As usual, not a strand of her straight hair was out of place, and her gym clothes

looked like she'd spent hours pressing them. "First Craig Nicholson takes off to see the nurse on some phony excuse, and then you two cruise in fifteen minutes late. This isn't a school, it's a zoo."

"And you're the star attraction," muttered Amber as she bent down to tie her gym shoes.

"We were begging Jaws for more time on our term project," admitted Liz. Painful experience had taught her that it was better to give their classmate a little information than none at all. Jane's tongue could be wicked.

"Did you get it?"

"One more hour in the computer lab. Today, after school."

"Seriously," snorted Jane. "I'd sure like to know what you two are working on. What's the big secret?"

"You'll see on Friday," Amber bragged.

Liz jabbed her friend in the ribs. "You hope," she whispered.

Forty minutes later, once again dressed in their regular clothes, Amber and Liz hurried up the stairs to the school's second floor.

"Hold it," Amber said as Liz turned in the direction of the computer room. "We'd better ask Graham to let Mom know I'll be late." Graham was Amber's fourteen-year-old brother, generally known among the girls of the school as the cutest guy in eighth grade. Amber couldn't see it.

“Why not call, like I did?” Liz had firm orders to contact her parents if she was delayed after school. “You can use my phone.”

Amber grinned. “You don’t have five-year-old twin brothers who fight over who’ll answer Mom’s phone and then garble the message. If he remembers, Graham will at least get it straight.”

They found Amber’s brother joking around with a couple of his friends beside his locker.

“Hi,” Liz said to him, and blushed.

“Hey, Graham, do me a favour and tell Mom I won’t be home until after five, okay?” Amber asked.

“What’s up?” he demanded. “You two get another detention? There was a gleam in the dragon lady’s eye.”

“We are model students,” Amber said theatrically.

“Sure.”

“Actually, Jaws gave us an extra hour on the computers,” Liz explained, “for our project.”

“The famous secret project,” Graham interrupted, grinning at his buddies. “Don’t hit any wrong keys. You two could screw up the whole school. Doom and destruction await you in the computer lab...” He hunched his shoulders and laughed maniacally.

Liz stepped back.

“Ignore him, Liz,” Amber advised. “He’s been watching too many monster movies. He senses kindred spirits.”

“Get lost,” replied Graham.

The girls laughed and ran down the hall toward the computer lab, nearly colliding with another student at the door.

“Hey, Jonathan! What are you doing here?” Amber asked.

“I...uh...I just forgot something,” Jonathan stammered, colouring to the roots of his dark hair. “Jaws unlocked the door for me. He said you were coming.”

“Do you want to watch us test-run *Whodunnit*?” asked Liz. “We’re going to make those changes you suggested.”

“No, I can’t. I’ve got to go.” He took off rapidly down the stairs.

“Wow! He’s really acting weird,” Liz said.

“No kidding,” agreed Amber. She stared after their friend with a worried frown. “Graham says he hardly hangs around with the guys any more. I think he’s taking his parents’ divorce pretty hard.”

“He must be,” agreed Liz. “He wasn’t even interested in Aunt Agatha.”

“Definitely not normal.” Amber shrugged and they went into the computer lab.

“He shouldn’t have been in here, you know,” Liz said dropping her backpack on a convenient table. “The grade eight class finished their projects last week.”

“Who cares? If I don’t get an A from Jaws, I won’t survive the D from Miss Belcher,” Amber moaned. “Do you have those notes from Jonathan?”

“Right here.” While Amber sat down at a computer and keyed in their password, Liz scrolled through her phone.

“That’s strange,” Amber said after a minute. “I can’t find the program.”

“Maybe you hit a wrong key. You’ve done it before.” Liz sat forward in her chair to peer at the monitor.

“No, I don’t think I did...”

Amber frowned, cleared her commands, and began again. The other kids might be satisfied with word and number games, but true to form, Liz and Amber had gotten carried away with the possibilities. Characters, murder weapons, and motives. The player was supposed to discover “*Whodunnit*.” The trouble was, Aunt Agatha kept doing it.

“Something’s wrong, Liz,” Amber said. Her voice had an edge to it. Startled, Liz looked at the words flashing across the screen:

FILE NOT FOUND

“Amber, what’s happened?”

“It’s gone,” Amber said tightly. “The whole thing is gone. Our project has been erased.”

The girls looked at each other then back at the message on the screen.

“Jaws is going to eat us alive!”

Chapter Two

“How Strange!”

“Don’t panic!” said Amber. She stared at the monitor. “It’s probably some little glitch. We’ll just do it again, carefully, step by step.” Holding her breath, she carefully typed in the password. The screen immediately flashed:

FILE NOT FOUND

“I knew it,” Liz said. “I knew something would go wrong. We were going to impress the whole school with *Whodunnit*, and now look at us. We can’t even find it!”

“There has to be a logical explanation...” began Amber. “But what?” Her eyes never left the screen. “It’s no use. We’ll have to tell Jaws,” she concluded gloomily.

“Why do these things always happen to us?” groaned Liz, slumping back in her chair. Suddenly she bounced forward again. “Wait a minute! Remember Jane carrying on about the name Lindsay and Heather picked for their program?”

“Yes. So what?”

“Maybe the same thing has happened to everyone else!”

“And so we didn’t mess up after all,” Amber reasoned. “Quick! Tell me their password!”

“Are you ready for this? *Barf-it.*”

“What?”

“*Barf-it.*”

“That’s gross!” Shaking her head, Amber keyed it in. The two girls hovered anxiously over the monitor. The same words flashed again:

FILE NOT FOUND

“So it wasn’t us,” Amber sighed with relief.

“That’s what the school gets for using us as guinea pigs,” muttered Liz. “The web has finally flipped out. We’d better find Jaws. This is more than we can handle.”

“You girls looking for something?” demanded an unexpected voice as the girls charged into Mr. Sharkman’s classroom. The school custodian, Chester Mallory, straightened up from behind the teacher’s desk. His scowl seemed to fill his whole face, right up to the thinning line of his brown hair.

“We’re looking for Mr. Sharkman,” Liz said.

“He isn’t here,” the custodian snapped.

“Do you know where he is?” asked Amber with forced politeness.

“I’ve got enough to do around here, cleaning up after you kids without keeping track of the teachers.” He turned and picked up a waste basket and dumped the contents into his garbage can.

“Come on, Amber. Let’s try the staff room.” Liz grabbed her friend’s arm and pivoted her toward the door. “And watch your mouth,” she added under her breath. “The last thing we need is more trouble.”

Mr. Eugene Sharkman, his glasses perched precariously on the end of his nose, was reclining in the staff room’s only easy chair enjoying the latest issue of *Technology for Teachers*. This was his favourite time of day. Everyone had gone home; the rooms and hallways were quiet save for the distant rumble of the wheels on Mr. Mallory’s garbage can. Faraway voices drifted in the window from the football field.

“Busy are we?”

“What?” Mr. Sharkman jumped in the chair, his magazine falling to the floor. “Oh, Miss Belcher!”

“I’m so glad I caught you. I want to talk to you about two of your homeroom students, Liz Elliot and Amber Mitchell.”

“Oh?” Mr. Sharkman replied cautiously. “What now? They’re not organizing another fundraiser I hope. I’m still recovering from last month’s pancake breakfast.”

Miss Belcher chortled. “They were the worst pancakes I ever tasted.”

“So what are they up to this time?”

“Just the usual – running in the halls, late for class, improbable excuses.”

“I gather you want me to have one of my famous little chats with them.”

“You’ve got your image; I’ve got mine.”

“Very true.” Mr. Sharkman stood up and retrieved his magazine from the floor. “They’re working in the computer room right now. I could...”

The door flew open.

“Mr. Sharkman!” exclaimed Liz. She and Amber stopped short at the sight of Miss Belcher.

“Hello girls,” their English teacher said.

“I was just coming to see how you’re getting along,” Mr. Sharkman said.

“Not very well actually,” said Amber breathlessly. “We’ve run into a problem. We can’t retrieve our program.”

“And we can’t find anyone else’s either,” put in Liz. “The monitor keeps flashing ‘file not found’ whenever we try to load our project.”

“How strange,” replied Mr. Sharkman, handing his magazine to Miss Belcher and reaching for his inevitable plaid jacket. “This should not be. Follow me, girls. We’ll investigate.”

He strode out of the room, leaving Miss Belcher shaking her head in disbelief.

“Keep me posted, Eugene,” she called out after him.

“*Eugene?*” Liz whispered.

Amber stifled a giggle.

They fell in behind Mr. Sharkman.

“I wonder if Jonathan knows anything about the missing programs?” Liz whispered to Amber.

“He was acting strange when he came out of the computer lab,” Amber had to admit.

They didn’t notice Chester Mallory slowly pushing the trash can just outside the staff room door. He’d heard every word.

“Now, let’s see what this is all about,” said Mr. Sharkman, lowering himself into the chair Amber had vacated a few minutes before. “What’s the name of your program again... *Whodunnit?*”

“Yes,” Liz said. “W-H-O-D-U-N-N-I-T.”

Jaws placed his long knobby fingers on the keyboard and typed in the necessary commands. The results were the same:

FILE NOT FOUND

“Now that is strange,” he murmured. “Are you sure that’s the correct spelling?”

“Yes,” Liz replied. “That’s it.”

“Hmm...And what makes you think your classmates are having the same problem?”

“We tried someone else’s password,” explained Amber.

“And it is?”

Silence. Mr. Sharkman looked up from the screen.

“Girls?”

“Uh, we’d rather not say, sir,” replied Liz. She shifted from one foot to the other and looked to Amber in silent appeal.

“Come on, girls. You’re wasting time,” admonished Jaws.

“It’s *Barf-it*, sir,” mumbled Liz. Amber stared thoughtfully at the ceiling. Liz scrutinized the floor.

“What did you say?”

“*Barf-it*, sir.”

“What kind of password is that?” Jaws shook his head and turned back to the keyboard. “I can’t wait to see these games,” he said under his breath.

“How strange!” he said again as the now familiar message appeared. “You were right, girls. We definitely have a problem on our hands!”

“I’m home,” yelled Amber, as the screen door slapped shut behind her.

“Just in time for dinner,” answered her mother from the kitchen. “Wash up, and then you can tell me why you’re so late.”

“Sorry, Mom.” Amber hung her knapsack on a peg in the back hall, then threaded her way expertly past the sprawled twins and their scattered belongings on the family room floor. “I couldn’t help it,” she called. “You won’t believe what’s happened.”

“Tell me at the table. Come on boys, tidy up. Five minutes before dinner is served. Call Graham and your father, please.”

Timmy and Tommy ignored the tidy up order, but careened around the house, loudly summoning their older brother from his attic bedroom and their father from the basement laundry room.

“Are we all here?” Dr. Mitchell asked a few minutes later as he sat down at the table. As always, he looked slightly ruffled and his hair was a mess. And as always, dinner began with his asking if they were all there...

“So,” began Mrs. Mitchell as she dexterously intercepted Tommy’s grab for the butter, “what was the problem at school, Amber? Graham said you and Liz were doing extra work on your project for Mr. Sharkman.”

“Is that Jaws?” asked Timmy. “No peas. Yucko!” He glared as his father served him a small portion.

“What does he look like?” demanded Tommy. “Big teeth?” He snapped menacingly at Amber.

“Creep,” Amber whispered.

“A shark in a plaid sports jacket,” answered Graham. He grinned at Amber as he heaped potatoes onto his plate.

“Don’t egg your brothers on,” advised his father. “The last thing these two need is encouragement.”

“Now Amber,” Mrs. Mitchell smiled wryly, “what were you trying to tell us?”

“It’s our on-line game. Aunt Agatha keeps killing the butler, so Mr. Sharkman gave us some extra time in the computer lab today after school.”

“Who’s Aunt Agatha?” asked Timmy.

“Amber,” Tommy eyed his sister seriously, “shouldn’t you call the police?”

“No, boys. It’s only a game,” said Dr. Mitchell.

“It *was* a game,” Amber said. “When we tried to load it this afternoon, the computer said it was gone.”

Graham frowned. “Are you sure?”

“Yes. But what’s really weird is that the same thing has happened to the whole class.”

“The whole class! Does Jaws know?” Graham stopped eating to stare at her.

Amber nodded. “We told him somebody else’s password. When he couldn’t get in, he ran the directory.”

“What happened?”

“Nothing. He was still sitting in front of the computer, muttering ‘How strange’ when Liz and I left.”

“Somebody must have messed with your projects,” her brother said.

“I’d hate to think one of your classmates would do anything so malicious,” said Mrs. Mitchell. “You’ve been working on those projects for months. Could it have been an error?”

“No,” Graham said. “It wouldn’t be easy to erase those programs, and there’s no way a whole platform could be wiped out by mistake. That’s supposed to be one of the advantages of this system. Also, now I come to think of it, if the programs had been erased, they wouldn’t appear on the directory any more.”

Amber picked up her fork and pushed a few peas around on her plate.

“Liz and I saw Jonathan coming out of the computer room after school,” she said finally. “He got all red in the face and wouldn’t even look at us before he took off.” Amber paused, then looked up at her parents. “He wasn’t supposed to be there.”

Everyone was silent while the implications of what Amber had said sunk in. Jonathan was a friend of Graham’s. He’d been a fairly regular visitor to the house before his parents’ divorce.

“Well, that’s crazy,” her brother said after a minute. “Jonathan may spend all his time programming these days, but he’d never do anything like that.”

“Then who did? The apps were all there after lunch when we had our class.” Brother and sister glared at each other.

“What’s for dessert?” asked Timmy.

“Chocolate pudding,” his mother answered absently, her attention on the two older children. “You have to clean your plate first.”

Timmy and Tommy exchanged looks of disgust across the table.

“Amber, for all you know, he could have been there for a legitimate reason,” suggested Dr. Mitchell.

“I think you and Liz should keep this to yourselves,” added Mrs. Mitchell. “It would be terrible if you mentioned Jonathan was there,

and then it turned out he had nothing to do with it. Besides, Mr. Sharkman may already have discovered what was wrong.”

“Now can we have dessert?” Timmy and Tommy were getting impatient.

After dinner, as Graham and Amber tackled the dishes, their conversation went back again to the missing programs.

“You didn’t say anything to Jaws about Jonathan, did you?” Graham demanded as he added the soap to the dishwasher.

“Of course not,” Amber snapped. She rinsed a handful of cutlery under the tap and passed it to him. “Graham,” she said, “can you ask Jonathan why he was in the computer lab?”

“No way. I’m not sticking my nose into his business,” he told her bluntly as he loaded the knives and forks into the dishwasher. “Besides, unless I have more proof than you two technowizards seeing him leave the computer lab, I’m going to assume that *if* anything funny is going on, he has nothing to do with it.”

“You’re probably right,” Amber said, drying her hands. “But just the same, the whole thing seems very strange.”

Chapter Three

What's Happening?

The rain dripped and plopped through the thick branches of the old maple, straight onto Liz's head. It ran down her forehead and collected on her eyelashes.

"Seven minutes," she muttered, looking at her watch. "Amber is never this late." She shifted her backpack, leaned against the rough bark of the tree and impatiently watched the road.

"Sorry," Amber said breathlessly when she arrived a few minutes later. "I just couldn't get going this morning. I kept thinking about *Whodunnit* and wondering what happened."

Liz carefully negotiated a large puddle, then shrewdly eyed her friend. "You mean you can't stop wondering why Jonathan was in the computer lab when he wasn't supposed to be, and whether he knows what happened to our class projects."

Amber pushed a wet strand of hair from her eyes. "Maybe it was an accident."

"Maybe," Liz said slowly.

“You can’t really suspect Jonathan.” Amber stopped dead in the middle of the sidewalk and glared at her friend. “He was the one who helped us program *Whodunnit* in the first place.”

“I remember,” Liz returned evenly. “But if this gets around the school, everyone will blame him – especially since he’s turned into such a loner. We should keep that in mind.”

“Jonathan couldn’t have done it,” Amber reassured herself, adjusting a strap on her bag. “But what was he really doing in there? I thought he’d already finished his project.”

“We need to find out – somehow,” Liz said.

“The sooner, the better,” Amber agreed.

Liz nodded silently. They had reached the school, and in the crowd of hurrying students, the subject had to be dropped.

Amber pulled open the heavy double doors leading into the busy main hall, then headed for their shared locker, not far from the drinking fountain where students congregated.

“Let’s find Jaws first and see if he’s fixed the problem,” Liz suggested as she spun the combination lock. “Maybe we’re worried about nothing.”

Amber threw her knapsack into the locker and glanced over her shoulder. “Yes, and fast. Here comes the motor-mouth. The last thing we need is for her to find out about this mess.”

Liz glanced down the hallway. Sure enough, there was Jane, bearing down on them with four

other students from their computer class – Craig Nicholson, Jason Goldstein, Lindsay Watson and Heather Simpson. They looked angry, especially Craig; his brown eyes fixed belligerently on the girls. He liked to come across as tough, despite his clean-cut look.

“It’s already too late,” Liz muttered.

“Amber! Liz!” Jane called in her high-pitched, nasal voice.

Amber groaned and hid her head in the locker. “Tell her I have smallpox.”

“You mean chicken pox,” Liz replied, pulling her friend back out. “Come on, just flash your braces and make nice.”

Amber smiled, exposing the maximum amount of metal and rubber bands.

“Is it true?” demanded Jane, oblivious as usual. “Is there really a mad hacker at Ash Grove?”

Amber stopped smiling. Liz carefully wiped her nose with a soggy tissue pulled from her coat pocket.

“A what?” Amber demanded tersely.

“You heard me! A mad hacker. Someone wiped out our term projects. We think it was that computer creep.”

“What creep?” Liz had a sinking feeling that a riot might be imminent.

“Oh come on, Liz,” sneered Jane, hitching up her books.

“Don’t act dumber than you are,” Craig Nicholson said loudly.

Liz ignored him. He was always trying to be the centre of attention and she wasn't about to help him get what he wanted.

"Everyone knows you saw Jonathan Weiss leave the computer lab," Craig continued.

"It's obvious he did it," Jane said. "The projects were okay after lunch."

"Anyone could have done it!" Amber retorted, stepping forward.

"Seriously!" Craig scoffed. "It's not easy to erase a series of programs. I should know." He paused for effect. "After all, the platform was developed by my father's company."

"So maybe they aren't gone," Liz said, forcing a smile. "It was us! What could possibly go wrong?"

She leaned dramatically against the locker. Unfortunately, it was still open.

"Like you said, Liz, what could possibly go wrong?" Craig teased when the laughter died down. "Let's go," he said, turning to the others. "With the dynamic duo on the job, why should we worry?"

Still laughing, the rest of the students headed for their lockers. Jane glared at Amber and Liz, then turned on her heel and followed Craig.

"Saved by comic relief," Liz remarked as she struggled out of the locker. She stuffed Amber's gym clothes back into a corner.

"I suppose you're going to tell me you fell into that locker on purpose?"

“Maybe. Maybe not,” Liz replied, grinning. Then her expression sobered. “Who could have told Jane about the missing programs?” she said.

“We know it wasn’t us,” Amber pointed out.

“And it wasn’t Jaws – that’s not his style. So how did Jane know they were gone?”

“That, my dear Elliot, is the big question.”

Hunched over a book in her first study period, Liz pretended she couldn’t hear the angry mutters from her classmates as the news spread.

Jonathan’s name floated by with sickening regularity.

Down the hall in the music room, Amber morosely played scales on her oboe. Jane Dobbs was sitting beside her. As inconspicuously as possible, Amber edged her chair towards the door so she could see into the computer lab across the hall.

Jaws, his plaid jacket draped over a chair and his sleeves rolled up, was seated in front of a computer, frowning. Obviously the problem had not been solved.

Suddenly Amber drew back. The principal, Mr. Cline, was coming down the hall. He headed straight for the computer room, walked in, and started talking to Jaws. Amber couldn’t hear what he was saying, but she saw Jaws shake his head in response. So did Jane.

“So much for Jaws to the rescue,” she hissed.

Amber drowned her out with her oboe. She saw Jaws pick up his jacket before he and the principal moved out of the lab, still discussing the situation.

“As far as I can tell,” Jaws was saying, his voice loud enough for Amber to hear every word, “someone has written a new program that overrides the other command codes. Until I can break into it, the projects are, in effect, lost.”

The principal stopped walking and turned to face Jaws. “Are you sure, Eugene?”

There was a pause. Jaws sighed, adjusted his glasses and looked back at the principal. “Yes. We’re going to have to call the police.”

“The police!” Mr. Cline appeared startled. “Isn’t that a little drastic for a student prank?”

“We can’t treat this as a prank,” Jaws said slowly. “Computers are the tools for these children’s futures – and the weapons. If we admire the genius of the child who hacks into secure systems, we are overlooking the crime. We must call the police.”

“Well, Eugene,” Mr. Cline said reluctantly, “if you feel that strongly, I’ll take the appropriate action.”

Jaws nodded and the two men walked down the hall, out of earshot.

“Did you hear that?” demanded Jane. “Now the sparks are really going to fly!”

“I didn’t hear anything,” Amber growled. “Not a single, blasted, stupid thing.” She put her oboe

to her lips once again and reeled out the scale – entirely off-key.

By lunch time it was all over the school.

“I can’t believe they’re going to call the police,” Liz said as she and Amber looked over the day’s selections in the cafeteria line. She picked up a slice of pizza and sniffed it cautiously.

“You’re risking your life with that one,” Amber commented. “The crust is toasted foam rubber.”

Liz put it back in favour of a second piece of chocolate cream pie. Amber shook her head in disgust.

“Made with milk,” Liz explained. “Calcium’s great stuff.”

They headed to their usual table where some of their friends were already seated.

“Did you hear what’s happened?” Lindsay demanded. “Jaws has called the cops!”

“Jonathan’s really in for it now,” called Jason from the next table.

“No,” Liz exclaimed, “that’s not it...”

“Hasn’t anybody ever heard of ‘innocent until proven guilty?’” Amber demanded, her red hair seeming to snap with anger.

“I suppose you’re talking about me.”

A hush fell over the group. No one had seen Jonathan come in.

He stood in front of them, gripping his lunch tray so hard that his knuckles were painfully

white against the black plastic. Liz noticed he was trembling slightly.

“You all think I sabotaged your programs,” he said tautly. “I didn’t.”

“Then what were you doing in the computer lab after school yesterday?” challenged Craig.

“None of your business,” retorted Jonathan. He gave Amber and Liz a shriveling stare.

“Someone wrote a new program,” continued Craig, leaning back in his chair. “Now none of us can retrieve our projects. That would take some pretty hard-core programming.”

“So?”

“So, you’re the genius who’s supposed to be able to program anything he wants. You tell me.”

“Craig, that’s rotten!” Amber exclaimed. “Just because your dad set up the beta testing at Ash Grove...”

“Forget it Amber,” Jonathan interrupted, his face flushing red. “He’s right. I can do anything I want on a computer. But if I did override those programs, you’d never know it was me.”

“Who else could have done it?” Jane demanded. “You have the brains and you had the opportunity.”

“I didn’t do it!” Jonathan shouted suddenly, slamming his lunch tray onto the table. The silence was absolute as he raced out the door in a blind fury.

Eugene Sharkman, checking out the lunch menu, overheard the tail end of the confrontation.

He stared thoughtfully at the students, and then silently slipped out.

“Did you see that look Jonathan gave us?” Liz said in a bewildered voice. “He thinks we told on him!”

Amber scowled at her classmates. They had gone back to eating their lunches as if nothing had happened.

“What a bunch of...of...zombies!” She shoved back her chair and grabbed her tray. “Come on Liz,” she said furiously. “All of a sudden I’ve lost my appetite. We’re going to find out what’s happening around here!”

“I see trouble coming,” moaned Liz, giving her uneaten chocolate pie a last, wistful look before depositing it in a nearby garbage bin.

“I don’t care,” Amber declared militantly as she emptied her tray. “We have to help Jonathan.”