

THE ~~not so~~ SECRET

case files
of

BILLY
VALE,
p.I.

revealed by

nATaShA
DEEN

“You don’t understand the danger,” I said. “A bully, a mean teacher—”

She sighed. “I’ll pay you double.”

That caught my attention. “Double?” I said it like I couldn’t believe she’d offered.

She raked her hands through her hair. “I’m desperate! Okay, fine, triple!”

Triple! Three bucks a day? The skateboard would be mine by the end of the month. The bell rang.

She looked at me, anxious. “Do we have a deal?”

I should have said no. She was crazy and the case was beyond dangerous, but I couldn’t ignore the money. “Okay, fine. Deal.”

Of course, had I known that by the end of the day, I would end up dangling over a swirling toilet, I might have charged her extra.

~ The Case of the Clingy Client

Also by Natasha Deen

Sleight of Hand

Burned

At Dock's End

Guardian

True Grime 2: Angel Maker

True Grime

The Not So Secret
Case Files of Billy
Vale, P.I.

by

Natasha Deen

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

The Not So Secret Case Files of Billy Vale, P.I.

COPYRIGHT © 2015 by Natasha Deen

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission of the author.

Contact Information: natasha@natashadeen.com

Cover Art by *Nicola Martinez*

Publishing History

First Edition, 2015

Print ISBN 978-0-9867419-9-9

Digital ISBN 978-0-9948763-0-0

Published in the Canada

*With much thanks to Johanna Melaragno,
Alana Eaton, and Nicola Martinez*

The Case of the Clingy Client

In a school as big as Sir John A. MacDonald Elementary and Junior High School, things can get lost. When they do, I'm the guy who finds 'em. I'm not talking about the usual stuff like mittens or sweaters. I'm talking strange stuff, personal things. The kind of goodies that can get a kid grounded or land them in social skills. I'm good at my job and I know how to keep secrets.

The morning started off like any other. I swallowed my oatmeal and orange juice. Then I put on my uniform: jeans, T-shirt, a trench coat, and sneakers. I tossed the fedora—that's a cool hat detectives wear—on my afro, and I was good to go. Usually, I biked to school, but I'd popped my front tire during my last case. So, my mom drove me.

I made her drop me off a block from school. I love my mom, but she's got this thing about kissing me goodbye and yelling, "I love you, Billy!" through the open car window. It's embarrassing. A PI—that's short for Private Investigator—can't have their mom screaming about love.

It's unmanly.

I tossed my book bag over my shoulder and jogged the last block. Mom was in a real mood, today. She'd done that gross thing where she licks her finger and tries to fix my hair. Yuck. It made me late and I didn't want to get a note from the teacher.

I'm a good student. It's part of the job. The best kind of PI keeps what they call a "low profile." It means we stay out of trouble. Or try to. My job's

dangerous. Sometimes things don't want to be found. And sometimes, the people who have those things don't want to give them up. Having teachers on my side makes life easier when cases turn hard.

"Hey, Billy."

I turned and groaned.

Slimy Sal, a short, skinny kid with long, thin, brown hair. He was the seller of black market merchandise. Black market: that's the stuff kids aren't allowed to bring to school. He had a rain coat that was stuffed with candy, pre-written essays, and toys. Sal sold his merchandise at expensive rates. A chocolate bar could run a kid three or four dollars, but they paid the price. If they didn't have the cash, they took out a loan—borrowed money from him. It was a good racket Sal had cooked up. A bunch of kids were in hock to him—that meant they owed him big bucks.

"Whaddya want?" I asked.

He looked around, then flipped open his jacket. Rows upon tidy rows of pockets lined the inside. They bulged with product. "Candy sand—pure stuff. Lemon, peach, or lime. Promise, I didn't dilute it with regular sugar." He closed his jacket. "Seventy-five cents for a gram."

"What!" I could buy a whole bag for a dollar at the gas station.

"Okay, okay, since we're friends, sixty cents."

I rolled my eyes and left.

"What about some gum?" He called after me. "I've got a fresh batch of Blusey Bubble Gum. Just came in this morning and it's got new packaging. Look! The wrapper's blue and pink, now!"

"Some other time," I muttered. I got to the grade five-six classroom just as the bell rang. After putting my coat on the rack, I went to my desk. Mrs. Robertson was my teacher. She had some weird ideas about doing stretches in the middle of language arts class. Plus, she liked to sing oldies music on rainy days,

but as teachers went, she was okay.

Not like Mrs. Smith. She was a beast. Her rules. Her way. The thought of her made me shudder. She wore scratchy wool clothes and smelled of garlic and coffee. Plus, she liked to lean real close to kids when she was talking to them. I think it was just so she could blow her bad breath on us.

I sat down and listened to the principal's announcements. Then, it was silent reading, math, and social studies. I raised my hand to answer a few questions, and made sure I got a couple wrong. I'm way smarter than I pretend to be, but that's the life of a PI: pretending.

We have to blend in with everyone because that's the way we find out secrets and get information. It's what made me the best PI at the school. Of course, I was the only PI in the school, but that was beside the point.

When recess came, I grabbed my coat and ran for my office. Okay, so it was a red plastic tunnel that hung a few feet off the playground, in between the bridge and the monkey bars. It was quiet, though, and hardly anyone used it. I went inside, and took a spot in the middle. It wasn't good business to make my clients have to crawl too far to find me. Then I pulled out my notebook, pencil, and waited.

And waited.

Business had been slow. It was October, and I've found it always takes a few months for kids to need my help. I looked out one of the holes, and saw a bunch of guys I knew playing soccer. I wanted to join them, but I couldn't. A detective's always on duty.

A shadow fell across the tube.

I straightened. A client!

But then a girl climbed inside. I'd never seen her before, which meant she must have been new to school. She had brown curly hair, glasses, and freckles.

I resisted the urge to crawl away.

Girls never make good clients. Usually, when they lose something, it's a dumb item, like a necklace. If you listen to them talk, though, you'd think they lost a top of the line skateboard. To make it worse, it's usually not lost. By the time I start looking, they've realized they lent it to a friend. Then I'm out of luck and business.

I charge a buck a day. Not only is the girl finding her stuff no good for my reputation as a great PI, it's just no good, money-wise. Still, business had been bad and I couldn't ignore a client, even if it was a girl.

"Are you Billy Vale?" she asked.

"Yeah," I said, wishing I wasn't.

She crawled closer and I remembered my other reason for not liking girls. They smell funny—like berries or chocolate—and they're always worried about their hair. "My name is Allison Ranger and I need your help."

I wanted to tell her to scram. Too bad for me, I'd seen a great skateboard in the shop. If I was going to buy it, I had to take her business. "What can I do?"

In the distance, I heard the cheers and jeers of the soccer players. Sunlight beat down on the tunnel and reminded me that winter was coming. Soon, I couldn't play soccer, tag, or cement hockey. What was I, crazy? I made up my mind that no matter what she said, I wasn't going to take the case. The skateboard could wait.

"I'm in trouble," she said, "and word on the playground is that you're the guy to help."

She looked worried and part of me felt kind of bad about brushing her off. "Listen—"

"I don't know if you'll take the case, though—"

"Yeah, about that—"

"It could be dangerous."

Dang. She said the magic word. I love being a detective, but I especially love it when danger's involved. "Say that again?"

“Dangerous.”

I nodded. This wasn't going to be a case of lost barrettes or lipstick. This was going to be good. “Give me the facts, ma'am—” That was PI talk for “tell me what happened.” I dug out my pencil and opened my notebook to an empty page.

“I've lost a note.”

“What kind?” I was getting excited. Sometimes kids forged notes from their parents. If I didn't find it before the school did, she was looking at social skills or worse.

“A love note.”

“A WHAT!” The pencil and paper flew out of my hand. The notebook landed beside Allison, and the pencil ended up on top of her head.

I scrambled to get the book. It doesn't do for a PI to show emotion, but *gross*, a love note?

She nodded, not paying attention to the pencil balanced on her hair. “I wrote a note to someone and it's gone missing.”

I reached up and took the pencil. Then I flipped my book shut. “You're on your own,” I growled. “I'm a PI, not a love doctor.”

“Please.” She moved closer and sure enough, she smelled like strawberries. “You don't understand.”

She had that same pleading tone my mom sometimes used. It was hard to resist. I sighed. “Fine. Tell me.” I held up my hand. “I'm not saying I'll take the case, but I'll listen.” I didn't open my notebook, though. I didn't need anyone finding out I had taken on a *love* client. “Start from the beginning.”

“I just moved from BC.”

Speed it up, I thought. Get to the part where I run out of here and leave you on your own.

“The first couple of days of school, it was hard making friends...”

I looked out the hole and wondered why I hadn't gone to play soccer.

“...was the only one who was nice to me.”

Shoot. I'd missed an important piece of the puzzle. That's never good. Even if I wasn't going to take the case, a PI should always keep his ears open. Dragging my attention from the window, I looked at her.

“He was really nice.” She blushed hard.

“You took his niceness the wrong way—”

She looked up. “No! Nothing like that. But I did—I had a crush.”

Oh, *gross*.

“And I wrote him a note.”

Double gross. I squirmed in my jacket.

“So, what happened?”

Her eyes went wide. “Before I could give it to him, I saw what a bully he was. Then I didn't like him anymore.”

Bully. *Bully?* “Bully?”

She nodded.

“Chaz Menendez?”

She nodded again.

Oh, great. That kid may have been in grade seven, but I was sure he was lying about his age. He was huge—like twelfth grader huge—and meaner than Mrs. Smith when she's missed a cup of coffee.

“When did the note go missing?”

“This morning. It was in my backpack,” she said. “The zipper broke and—”

“Everything fell out?”

She nodded. “A bunch of kids were helping me tidy up, but when I looked in the bag, it was gone.”

“Do you know any of them?”

Her face scrunched together. “A couple, but not all.”

“Would you recognize any of the kids if you saw them?”

She shook her head.

I sighed. Girls. They were always trouble. “I can't help you,” I said. “If you can't even remember who was

there—” That wasn’t true. If it was anything but a love note, I’d have asked every kid in school. First, because I believe in doing a good job. Second, because it would have taken days and that was money in my piggy bank. But no way was I going to go to kids and ask them if they’d taken a love note addressed to Chaz!

“Oh.” She blinked. “No, a teacher took the note.”

“Really?” I frowned. “Why didn’t you say so?”

“You didn’t ask.”

Yeesh. Girls.

“She said that this was an institute for learning, not a barnyard for silly crushes and time-wasting daydreams.”

Dang. There was only one teacher who talked like that. “Mrs. Smith?”

Allison nodded. “I’m in her class and she said she’s going to read the note to everyone at the end of the week!”

That’s when I turned and crawled away. Just my luck, she followed.

“Listen,” I told her as I got to my feet. “You got to find somebody else.” The fall wind rushed past and made my ears tingle.

“There is nobody else! You’re the only detective in the school.”

Shoot. What I wouldn’t have given for some competition. “You want me to find a—” It was hard to even say the word out loud. I swallowed hard and tried again. “—love note you wrote to the biggest bully in the school, and take on Mrs. Smith.” Then a new thought occurred to me. “Plus, it’s October. No way Chaz was nice for six weeks straight. Why were you holding on to the note for so long?”

She blushed again and my gut—PIs always trust their gut—said she was holding a secret.

“What is it?” I asked.

She looked toward the soccer field. “I really liked him.”

“So? I really like ice-cream, but even I know it’ll melt if you put it in the sun. Chaz is bad news, and anyone with a brain could see that.”

Her eyes narrowed and her face went red, this time from anger. “I was giving him a chance! To realize he’s really good and be nice to people.”

I rolled my eyes. Great. A girl *and* a bleeding heart.

She sighed, like she knew I was right. “I knew Chaz and I couldn’t be friends anymore, but I’d kept the note for sentimental reasons.”

I wasn’t sure what “sentimental” meant, but I knew what “mental” meant, and I was pretty sure that word described Allison.

“I’m desperate.”

“You don’t understand the danger,” I said. “A bully, a mean teacher—”

She sighed. “I’ll pay you double.”

That caught my attention. “Double?” I said it like I couldn’t believe she’d offered.

She raked her hands through her hair. “I’m desperate! Okay, fine, triple!”

Triple! Three bucks a day? The skateboard would be mine by the end of the month. The bell rang.

She looked at me, anxious. “Do we have a deal?”

I should have said no. She was crazy and the case was beyond dangerous, but I couldn’t ignore the money. “Okay, fine. Deal.”

Of course, had I known that by the end of the day, I would end up dangling over a swirling toilet, I might have charged her extra.

The rest of the morning went fast, and when the lunch bell rang, it was my time to move.

Mrs. Smith’s classroom was on the other end of the school. I scurried past the kids in the hall and made my way to her door. Allison was just coming out. Her eyes widened when she saw me.

“Stay cool,” I told her. I checked to see if anyone was looking. Everybody was busy getting their lunches. Mrs. Smith had her back to the door. Quickly, I grabbed a piece of paper from my pocket. I wadded it up and shoved it in the spot where the doorknob met the frame.

“What are you doing?” She asked.

“My job,” I grunted. “Let’s get out of here.”

We followed the kids to the cafeteria. The smell of day-old burgers and stale fries hung in the air. It wasn’t a pleasant odour, but I was starving. Working a case really makes a guy hungry.

“Where’s your lunch?” asked Allison.

“I’m buying.”

“Oh. Do you want to get in line?”

I felt in my pocket and realized I’d left my money in my desk. “Never mind,” I said, pretending I wasn’t hungry. “I’m on the job.”

“You should eat,” she said. “Lunch is the second most important meal of the day. There’s a big line-up—you should—”

Geez, she really knew how to annoy a guy. “You aren’t my mother,” I snapped, “and I’m not hungry.” Right on cue, my stomach growled. I spun around and left before she could say anything.

I went back to the class. The hallways were empty and the area in front of Mrs. Smith’s room was deserted. Perfect. The door was still open, but all I had to do was wait. When she came out and closed the door, it wouldn’t lock properly because of the paper. Then I could sneak in, get the note, get paid, and get some lunch.

A couple of minutes later, Mrs. Smith came out. Instead of locking the door, though, she glanced at the latch in the doorframe. My heart stopped. She bent down. She peered hard and a couple of seconds later, pulled my paper out.

Of all the rotten luck, she’d spotted my trap. There

went my quick solution to the case, and my lunch.

Mrs. Smith snapped upright and whirled around.

I dived behind a wall and waited. The door closed. Her heavy footsteps came my way. I ran to the garbage can. It stank of banana peels and paper. I scrunched behind it and held my breath. Mrs. Smith came closer. Closer. Then, thankfully, the sound of her steps grew distant.

I peered out from behind the can. She was moving toward the teacher's room. I sighed and crawled out of my hiding spot. Then I went to her door.

"What are you doing?"

I jumped in the air. "Allison!" I whirled around. "What are you doing, sneaking up like that? I'm a PI. Do you know what could have happened?" I took a ninja stance to show her I was always warrior-ready.

She just rolled her eyes. "You seemed like you needed help."

I snorted. Help? Not from anybody. "I'm fine."

She raised her eyebrows. "Fine. Now what?"

"Now, you go back to your lunch and leave me alone to work."

"Nuh-uh." She folded her arms. "I'm paying three bucks a day, and if I want, I'll watch."

"No one watches me work," I huffed. "Leave or I'm dropping your case."

She stared at me. "I knew it! You don't know what to do. You work or I'm telling everyone you're the worst PI, ever."

She got me in the worst spot: my pride.

"Fine," I grumbled. "Watch. See if I care." I stared at the locked door. I was completely out of ideas.

"Well?"

"Shh! I'm thinking."

"You really don't have a clue what to do, do you?"

"Stop talking," I said through clenched teeth. "You're not helping."

She sighed. “Here.” She handed me two paperclips.

I frowned. “What’s this for?”

She looked at me. “What kind of detective are you?”

“The best in the school,” I said hotly.

“The *only* one in the school,” she shot back. “Look.” She unwound the clips.

“Am I supposed to be impressed by that?”

She sighed. “It’s for picking the lock.” She glanced around, bent down. After she pushed the clips into the key hole, she poked around for a bit. We heard a *click* and her face lit up. “Ha!”

I tried not to look impressed, but that was a seriously cool trick.

She opened the door and went to step inside.

I pulled her back. “Don’t be crazy!”

She wrenched away. “It’s easy. We walk in, get the note, and get out.”

I shook my head. New kids. I gave her the line my mom always used on me. “Don’t be naïve.”

She looked confused. “What does that mean?”

I wasn’t sure, either. Every time I asked my mom, she told me to look it up in the dictionary. “Never mind that, now. You can’t just walk in there.”

“Uh, yeah, I can. It’s my room.”

I waved my hand around. “Look close. What do you see?”

She looked exasperated. “A room.”

“A clean room.” The desks were in precise lines, the walls gleamed. I think dust was too scared of Mrs. Smith to come into the class.

“So?”

“So, Mrs. Smith isn’t just tidy. She uses all the furniture and neatness as a trap, to make sure kids don’t sneak in the room and try to take stuff. It may look ‘clean’ to you and me, but to her, it’s a security system.” I pointed at the floor. “See that? How shiny it

is? When she comes back after lunch, she'll check. If there's extra sneaker prints, she'll know somebody's been in here."

Allison's shoulders slumped. "So, what do we do?"

"First, there's no 'we.' *I'm* going to take off my shoes and sneak in."

She nodded. "Okay, go ahead."

"Don't rush me! This isn't easy. If I go too fast, I'll smear the shoe prints that are already on the floor. If I go too slowly, then I'll leave heat marks. I've got to prepare myself."

"Prepare faster," she said. "Lunch is going to be over soon."

I shot her a dirty look. My stomach didn't need the reminder of its lost meal—I swear I could smell the cafeteria's famous burrito. Plus, I didn't need the extra pressure. I took off my shoes and gave myself a minute.

Allison huffed an impatient breath and shifted from one foot to another.

I gave myself another minute. Then I moved. Steady but stealthy, I crossed the floor. As I did, I tried to figure out how to solve my second obstacle. Mrs. Smith's desk. She'd angled it so the drawer that held all the contraband—that was the stuff she'd taken from kids—was pushed against the wall. I'd have to pull out the desk, but I'd have to put it back, *exactly* the way I found it.

I moved to where it stood, all the time, glancing one way then another. I thought, maybe, she'd lined her desk up with the kid's desk in front of her. I was out of luck. Her desk was to the left of it. How was I going to figure out how to put her desk back in the exact, same spot? Then I had an idea.

When I reached her desk, I took off my socks. I put one on the floor, next to the left leg. Now, I had a spot holder. Balancing on one foot, I pulled the desk

out, grimacing as it screeched across the floor. I really hoped it wouldn't leave a mark. Gingerly, I tried the bottom drawer. Locked. I used Allison's paperclip trick and got it open. I wasn't as good as she was, though, and it took me longer.

"Hurry!" She hissed from the doorway. "Someone's coming."

Man, what was it with her and always adding pressure? I opened the drawer and rifled through. There were some cell phones, dolls, pencils, and music players. I couldn't find the note. Mrs. Smith would never throw it away and that meant one thing: someone had already broken in and stolen it. I was feeling pretty lousy, but then a candy wrapper caught my eye. An *empty* wrapper. Score! Mrs. Smith would never keep trash in the desk.

I took the wrapper and stuffed it in my pocket. Now, I had a clue about who had taken the note. I fixed the desk back to its spot, pulled on my sock. Going as fast as I could without disturbing the marks on the floor, I goose-stepped for the door. Allison shut it behind me.

"Well?" she asked.

I shook my head. "Someone's already taken it."

The color drained from her face. "Why would someone do that?" she whispered.

I could only think of one thing: someone had taken it so they could blackmail her, but I didn't want to scare her. So, I just shrugged.

"But—"

"You!" The rough voice of Mrs. Smith came our way.

I looked up.

She came at us, slow and mean, her face tight. "What are you doing here? You're supposed to be outside for recess."

I held up my sneakers. "I was having trouble with my laces. Allison was helping."

Mrs. Smith gave me a hard look.

I hopped into my shoes. Then I stepped back. “We should be outside, though, you’re right.”

“Hold it,” she said. “You stay right here.” She riffled in her pocket and pulled out her keys. She leaned in real close and said, “Someone tried to mess with my door this morning.”

I blinked at the smell of garlic and stale coffee.

“You know anything about it, Vale?”

I shook my head. “I honestly couldn’t tell you anything.”

She stared at me, like she was trying to burrow into my brain and find out if I was telling the truth.

I was. I really couldn’t tell her anything—not unless I wanted social skills and to have my folks ground me.

She pushed her key into the lock and opened the door. Turning to me and Allison, she commanded, “Stay right here.” She went inside and looked around the room. Mrs. Smith took her time, moving precisely and with purpose. She bent down—slow and painful—and checked the floors. Then she closed an eye and stuck her arm out, like she was lining everything up inside her head. When she got to her desk, she inspected it, and took an extra-long time.

I stopped breathing. So did Allison.

Finally, Mrs. Smith turned to us. She stared at us for what felt like hours, then said, “Go outside. And don’t let me catch you in the hallways, again.”

I nodded and Allison gasped, “Yes, Mrs. Smith,” then we beat it down the hallway.

At the computer room, I stopped to catch my breath.

“That was close,” panted Allison.

Too close, not that I’d admit it. “All in a day’s work.”

“What next?”

I looked at the clock. “Bell’s going to ring in a

couple of minutes. I'll have to go to Plan B."

"What's that?" she asked.

"Confidential," I told her. "That means it's private."

She rolled her eyes. "I know what it means. I'm not an idiot." She said it like maybe I was. "I'm the client. You can tell me."

"Don't be clingy." That was PI talk for 'give me some space.' "It's for your own protection."

"You don't have any idea, do you?"

"Yeah," I said hotly, "I do. I'm just trying to keep you safe!"

"Fine." She shook her head in disgust. Allison reached into her jacket and pulled out a beef and cheese burrito. She handed it to me. "Here, for you."

"What?"

"You didn't have lunch. I figured it was the least I could do, since you're helping me."

I took the burrito. "Thanks." Maybe she wasn't such a pain, after all.

The afternoon went slow. I was anxious to get started on my next clue, but it seemed like the clocks were going backwards. Even gym, which I love, was torture. As soon as the afternoon recess bell rang, I was out of the classroom and heading to Sal. I found him by his usual spot. He liked the grove of trees that stood at the back of the school. It gave him protection from the teachers and allowed his clients privacy.

"Sal."

A chubby red-headed girl was with him. She turned, startled at the sound of my voice, then ran off.

Sal wasn't pleased. "Look at what you did! She was about to be a paying customer."

"That's exactly what I want to talk to you about. A customer."

His squinty eyes narrowed. "What about them?"

"I need a name."

A slimy smile spread across his face. “I don’t give out names.” He gave me a meaningful look. “Not for free.”

“I’m not buying information!” Actually, I would have. I needed the identity of the kid, but I didn’t have any money on me.

“Then you’re out of luck, Mr. PI.”

I folded my arms. “I don’t think so.”

“Yeah?” He sneered.

“Yeah. You give me the name or tomorrow, I’ll be in the trees with you. Only I’ll be selling candy and toys, too, but at lower prices.”

His face went white. “You wouldn’t!”

“Try me,” I said in my best tough-guy voice. I hoped he wouldn’t call my bluff—how was I going to compete with him?

Luckily, threatening his business was the thing to do, because he said, “Okay, okay. Who do you want?”

I held out the gum wrapper. “Who did you sell to?”

He gave me an annoyed look. “Blusey Bubble Gum? That’s one of my most popular products. Do you know how many of those I sell in a week?”

“No, and I don’t care.” I held up the wrapper. “This is the new packaging. You said you got it in this morning. All I need to know is who did you sell to today?”

His face wrinkled. “A couple—maybe four kids.”

“Names.”

“Aw, man.” He dug into his pocket and pulled out his notebook. That book was as precious to him as his mother. In it, he kept all his records about who owed him money, and what candy was selling best. Sal whipped out his pencil and wrote down the names.

“Thanks.” I walked away.

“What do you have?”

My head jerked up. Allison. Man, that girl was harder to lose than a shadow. “A clue,” I said, like she shouldn’t ask any more questions.

Of course, she did. “What is it?”

I sighed. “A list of names. Potential suspects for who stole your note.”

“Let’s see.” She reached for it, but I pulled away.

“This is my job,” I said. “Let me do it.”

She rubbed her arms like she was cold. “Okay, sorry. I guess I’m just worried.”

I looked at the names. Right off, I knew I could cross two of them off the list. Ruby and Jesse were kindergarten kids. No way they’d sneak into Mrs. Smith’s room. The third name, Joe Fontane, was a possibility. He was the football quarterback, and liked to play pranks. It was the fourth name, though, that sent a chill through me.

Hank Shipley. Chaz’s henchman. Hank wasn’t smart, but what he didn’t have in brains, he made up for with meanness and muscles. He loved beating kids up and pulling pranks. If someone had snuck into Mrs. Smith’s room, it was a good bet that it was him. My heart sank. I didn’t have a choice but to face him. I only hoped I’d have a face left, after he was done with me.

Allison saw my expression. “What is it?”

“Hank. He’s probably the one who took it.”

Confusion clouded her face. “Hank? But why—” She snapped her fingers. “Hey! He was there, this morning, when my bag broke. He must have seen Chaz’s name on the note.”

I nodded. “And he told Chaz.”

Color drained from her cheeks. “Does that mean he already has it?”

I shook my head. “No. Chaz is in social skills, so he doesn’t get recess breaks. He won’t get the note until the end of school.”

Allison grabbed the lapels of my coat. “Billy! You have to get it back!”

I pried her fingers off me. “I will. Yeesh.” I may have been acting cool, but the truth was, I was scared

out of my mind. It was bad enough to take on one of those guys alone. Each of them was three times my size. But taking on the two of them at the same time? I'd be lucky to have any teeth left.

If the time before afternoon recess had dragged, then the time after it went by too fast. Before I knew it, the home bell had rung, and I had to face the two meanest kids in the school. I wanted to sit in my desk, take my time, but the minutes were ticking. If I didn't get to their meeting spot, soon, I'd lose my case, my fees, and my skateboard.

I shoved my homework into my book bag, slung it on my shoulder. Then I raced for the boys' bathroom—the one by custodian's office. That's where Hank and Chaz always met up. Sure enough, I saw them going inside. Hank turned, checked out the hallway. I ducked behind a wall, counted to five, then peered around the corner. They were gone.

I stowed my bag in the lost and found box, then prepared to go inside the bathroom. A hand fell on my shoulder. I yelped—a manly yelp—and spun around. “Allison!” I clutched my heart, too freaked out to adopt my ninja pose. “What are you doing?”

“I came to help.”

“How? By giving me a heart attack?” I dropped my hand. “This is a dangerous and delicate operation. You can't be here!”

“But it's my case.”

“No,” I corrected her. “It's *my* case.”

“But—”

“Just leave,” I told her. “You're just going to mess things up.” I straightened my jacket and went into the bathroom. After making sure I closed the door quietly, I snuck along the brick wall and listened.

“—thought you should see it.” I heard Hank say.

“You sure it was for me?” Chaz asked.

“Look.” I heard the rustle of paper. “Your name's on it.”

Oh, oh. He was going to open the note and I was going to be out three dollars. The potential loss of a really cool skateboard can make a guy do crazy things. I jumped out from behind the wall and said, “Don’t touch that! It’s mine!”

Chaz looked horrified. “You wrote me a note?”

Now it was my turn to look horrified. “What! No! I’m working on behalf of a client. Give it back.”

That took him a bit to process. Then a grin slid across his face—the kind he usually got right before his fist connected with a kid’s gut. “No. It’s addressed to me.”

“If she wanted you to have it, she would have given it to you.” I held my hand out. “Now, give it.”

He looked at Hank, then at me. Smiling, he said, “Okay, I’ll give it to you.” He walked toward me. So did Hank.

My knees were quaking, but no way was I going to show any fear. Just as Chaz went to hand me the note, Hank grabbed me. The bullies laughed.

“You heard what he said—” Chaz turned to Hank. “Give it to him.”

“Your hair looks like it needs washing, PI.”

I struggled, flailing my arms and kicking, but those guys were too big. They picked me up by the feet and moved to a toilet. I jerked one way, then another. Hank fell against the stall door. He lost his grip on me and I got my leg free. I wriggled, hard. Chaz dropped me. Then I did the kind of dangerous stuff that made me the best PI in the school. I snatched the note from his hand and ran for the door.

Too bad for me, Chaz has long legs and longer arms. He grabbed me by the collar of my coat.

“Fine,” He ground out. “We’ll do it the hard way.”

He dragged me back to the toilet. Hank picked one leg, Chaz took the other. Oh, man, I was going to get a swirly for sure. There was only one thing I could do. I popped the note in my mouth. My plan was to spit it

into the toilet. The water would wreck the note. I wouldn't be able to get it back to Allison, but hopefully, she'd realize that destroying it was my only option.

"Ready, little man?" Chaz put his hand on the handle used to flush the toilet.

"Stop!"

Oh, man. That girl really *was* harder to lose than a shadow! But this time, I was glad for the distraction.

They jerked at the sound of Allison's voice. She came into view. "Put him down!"

"You can't be in here, you're a girl! Chaz sounded shocked.

"You can't be doing that," she responded. "You're human."

From my view, I saw him frown. I tried to tell her that he didn't get what she meant, but my mouth was full of paper. All that came out was "mummp, mumph, munf."

"Put him down, Chaz, and I'll tell you what was in the note."

He watched her for a minute. "Fine."

Chaz and Hank stepped out of the stall and dropped me on the tiled floor.

Allison looked at Hank and me. "Privately. I'll tell him privately."

I went back to the toilet, spit out the note and flushed it. "Fine by me," I said. "This bathroom stinks."

I went outside. So did Hank. We waited...and waited.

"What do you think they're talking about?" he asked.

"Believe me, buddy, you don't want to know." I folded my arms and leaned against the wall. A couple of minutes later, they came out. Allison looked okay, but Chaz looked sick, like he'd lost something valuable.

I shook my head. Poor schmuck.

The bullies moved down the hallway and Allison

came to me.

“Sorry I couldn’t save the note,” I said.

She shrugged. “It’s better this way.”

“So...I mean, how are you—?”

“Okay,” she said. “I told him we couldn’t be friends or anything else because he was too mean to everybody, and even though I had liked him—”

“No, no.” I waved my hands in the air. I didn’t need to hear any of that. Really, *really* didn’t need to hear it. “I meant, how are you going to pay me?”

“Oh.” She blinked. Dropping her book bag from her shoulder, she reached into one of the front pockets and pulled out a five-dollar bill. She handed it to me.

“I’ll have to bring you the change tomorrow,” I said. “I don’t have anything on me.”

She looked at the money for a minute. “Keep it,” she said. “You earned it.”

“Oh.” I stepped back, surprised. “Uh, thanks.”

She nodded. “You, too. Thanks.” Allison slung her bag over her shoulder and went out the exit. I followed and through the window in the door, watched her for a minute. The five dollars felt good in my hand. So did helping out a client. I looked at the bill, then back at her retreating figure.

Maybe girl clients weren’t such a waste of time, after all.