

JASON AND THE DETECTIVES

The Case of the Burning Schoolhouse

By Karl Milde

Prologue

George lifted his office phone and dialed a number. The call was picked up on the first ring.

“George, what’s up?” came a curt voice.

“Ben, things are getting too hot over here. We’ve gotta bail. But I’m worried.”

“About?”

“Mondeo has hired a detective, and he’s sniffing around.”

“I told you not to use that computer!” Ben snapped. “Damn it, man. Delete everything.”

“I...I can do that. But it’s the damn cookies. If I delete them, the detective will know.”

“Yeah. That’s just what I was worried about. We have a plan, remember?” There was a pause before Ben continued. “The measures we talked about.”

“You mean...?”

“Yeah. It’s time.”

“I don’t know, man...”

“Do it! And do it now!”

Chapter 1: The Start of Middle School

Jason Brooks, Matt O'Connor and Luke Garner sat together in the middle of the school bus, watching for Fairview Middle School to come into view.

"Sixth grade," Jason said. "It's weird going to a new building. But I'm also excited." The three of them were committed to staying close friends but were also looking forward to the prospect of making new ones.

"Where's your homeroom?" asked Matt, rummaging through his folder. "I've got the English teacher, Ms. Golden."

"Room 210," Jason answered. "Mr. McLaren. How about you, Luke?"

"Mr. Hackett. I can't believe it. He teaches math, my favorite subject."

"Jason, I'll bet you're glad to have a science teacher," Matt continued. "With all your inventions and stuff."

"Yes, I think we all got what we wanted: You with English, Luke with math, and me with science."

"We're all kind of different," noted Matt.

"Yeah. I hate English," Luke responded. "I find it a bummer to write stuff."

"And I can't stand math. It's so...what's the word? *Dry*," Matt said firmly.

"Not to me. It's...it's...I don't know how to say it. It's...elegant!"

"Okay, Jason, you settle it. Which is better: English or math?" Matt challenged.

"Define 'better.'"

"You know...More important. More important to the world."

"More people speak Mandarin Chinese than English. Math is universal."

“So *there*,” Luke said smugly.

“On the other hand, no one could communicate at all without some common language. So, if you asked me to compare a written language with math, well...” Jason paused for effect. “I’d have to pick the language.”

“*See*.” Matt elbowed Luke. “You think you’re so smart.”

“Come on, guys. We should be glad we don’t have to invent all this stuff from scratch. There was a time when there was no math or language. Life then must have been pretty boring.”

“And no video games either!” Luke pointed out.

The bus finally halted in front of the school with a jerk and a loud squeak of the worn-out brakes. The boys filed out to go their separate ways. Jason headed up the stairs to find room 210. He had been in the middle school once before on an elementary school field trip to become familiar with the sprawling layout of the building, but he had never met any of his teachers.

As he entered his homeroom classroom, he saw three noticeably taller, older-looking boys gathered in a back corner, talking. Other boys and girls, none of whom he recognized, were choosing desks next to their friends. Jason surveyed the room, chose an empty desk near the middle, and sat down.

Just after the bell rang, a thin boy entered, lugging a heavy backpack. The boy stared at no one in particular with an anxious look, then moved toward an empty desk by the door. Looking around, Jason saw the three older-looking boys, who had taken seats near the back of the room, staring at the new boy with disdain.

“What is your name?” Mr. McLaren asked, addressing the newcomer.

“Uh, who, me?” The boy turned his head nervously from right to left as if looking for help.

The classroom responded with a light titter.

“Yes. Welcome to our class. You may take any seat you wish. I just need to know your name.” Mr. McLaren’s voice was calming and friendly.

The boy sank into the seat at the empty desk. “My name is...Jamal. Jamal Al-Kazim.”

Another titter filled the room, this time somewhat louder.

“Thank you, Jamal. Now, everyone, relax. This first day is mainly for getting acquainted and learning what’s expected of you. I’m Ted McLaren, your homeroom teacher. You can call me Mr. McLaren. You’re to gather in this room every morning after you first arrive. I’ll give you the latest information about school and any other topic that’s important to us. After about fifteen minutes, the bell will ring and you can leave for your first class, though many of you will stay right here for your science class.”

He returned to his desk and located a sheet of paper. “The first thing I’ll do is call the roll. You can sit anywhere you want today, but starting tomorrow, I want you to take the same seat every day. That’ll make it easier for me to see if you are here each morning. If you’re missing school, I’ll report you to the school office.

“When I call your name, let me know that you’re here and come forward. I’ll give you each a piece of paper with your locker number and combination. You can then go out in the hall, find your new locker, open it, and store your stuff. If any of you have any trouble, come back and see me. Now, let’s see who’s here.”

Mr. McLaren looked down at the sheet and began to read each person's name in alphabetical order. "John Abrams."

"Yo," one of the older boys in the back row shouted.

"Come on up and get your locker paper."

John sauntered to the front desk and Mr. McLaren handed him a sheet from the top of the stack. John, aware that all eyes were upon him, walked out with a swagger to find his locker.

"Jamal Al-Kazim."

"Present," Jamal acknowledged. A suppressed laugh could be heard from the class as Jamal came forward, took the paper, and left.

Mr. McLaren continued reading from the list of students, and one by one, each received his or her sheet of paper. He soon came to "Jason Brooks."

"Here."

Jason went up to the front and took his sheet. As he was walking out, he heard the next name.

"William Chandler."

"I'm here! Everyone calls me Billy," a boy in the back said, raising his hand. He stood up and waved to the class, causing more chuckling.

Jason was walking into the hall when someone slapped a desk behind him. He turned in the open doorway to see a pencil rolling across the floor. Billy was bent over, picking up the pencil, one hand gripping his desk. Jason shook his head in reproach as the remaining students in the classroom burst into laughter.

Regaining his posture, Billy went forward to Mr. McLaren, who smiled as he handed him the piece of paper.

“Lockers are right outside. I think yours is on the top row.”

“Yessir.”

Jason turned away from the scene as Mr. McLaren went on to finish the list of names and pass out the locker sheets. In the hall, Jason found his locker and followed the instructions to open it: rotate clockwise two complete turns and then stop at thirty-two; rotate counterclockwise one full turn and then stop at ten; and then rotate clockwise and stop at twenty-nine. Jason lifted the handle and opened the locker door. He squeezed his backpack inside the small compartment and closed the door again, twisting the combination lock and checking to make sure it was locked. He then stuffed the sheet of paper with the locker combination in his back pocket and headed back to the classroom.

On his way, he noticed Jamal struggling to open his locker.

“Darn this thing!” Jamal was almost crying because, try as he might, after rotating the combination lock, the handle would not lift, and he would be expected back in the classroom soon.

Pity overtook Jason. He knew from his experience with inventing how frustrating mechanical things could be. He stopped near Jamal. “Can I help?” he asked politely.

“I don’t think so. It’s probably broken. Just my luck to get a bad one.”

“Let me try.”

“Okay, sure.”

Jason could see that Jamal was holding back tears.

Jason took the piece of paper from Jamal and followed the instructions carefully. The locker still would not open.

“You’re right. There is something wrong with this lock.”

“At least it’s not me.” Jamal sniffed in relief, feeling better from the confirmation and support from Jason.

“Not at all. They ought to check these lockers before they assign them to us. You should tell Mr. McLaren.”

“I should...except...except...” Jamal hesitated.

Jason looked at Jamal, waiting for him to finish.

“C-could you help me? I mean, could you tell Mr. McLaren about the lock for me? I-I don’t think he would believe me if I told him the lock was broken.”

Jason noticed a certain sadness in Jamal’s voice and on his face and again took pity. “Sure, I’ll tell him,” he agreed as they walked back together to the classroom.

Jamal took his seat as Jason walked up to the front. “Mr. McLaren,” he said as confidently as he could. “Jamal’s lock is broken. We both tried it, and it just won’t unlock.”

“I’m not surprised, Jason. Every year a few lockers won’t open. I’ll report it to the custodian, and I’m sure it will be fixed by tomorrow morning.” Mr. McLaren looked at Jamal. “My apologies, Jamal. You’ll have to carry your things around today. Or you can leave them with me if you wish.”

“That’s all right, Mr. McLaren. It’s...okay. I’ll keep them.”

As far as Jason could tell, Jamal was indeed okay despite the embarrassment of the morning. Jason also knew he had found a new friend: someone he felt at ease around, and someone who'd return the favor if he, in turn, needed a helping hand someday.

Chapter 2: Amy and Karen Join the Detectives

On the bus ride home after the first day of school, Jason and his two longtime friends swapped stories about their day.

“I had two different English classes in one day.” Jason placed his hand behind his neck and turned it from side to side. It had been a long day. “One with Ms. James and the other with Mrs. Wollinsky. Do you think my schedule is screwed up?”

“Maybe they’re trying to tell you something,” exclaimed Luke. “They think you need extra help!”

“No,” Matt said. “I have two English classes too. That’s a good thing.”

“I only have one,” Luke replied. “And that suits me fine.”

“That may be a mistake,” Matt noted. “I learned the school is emphasizing English so we can all pass the state exams.”

“Well, I admit: If anyone needs extra help in English, it’s me.”

“You had better check with the school office. If Matt is right, you need to fix your schedule,” Jason added.

“Yeah, and *soon*,” Luke remarked sarcastically. “I won’t want to miss a minute of that fun subject.”

Before they knew it, the bus was grinding to a halt at Jason’s stop.

“Oh, we’re here already?” Jason grabbed his things and hurriedly stood. “Gotta go. Bye!”

As he walked up the street to his house, he considered starting a new project in his garage workshop. He had an idea but wasn’t quite sure it would work...

When he arrived home, he shouted “hello” to his mother in the kitchen, threw his backpack on his desk and headed out to the garage.

“Have you finished your homework?” Jason’s mom interrupted his train of thought.

“Heck no. I just got home,” Jason said over his shoulder. He had almost made it out of the house.

“We’re going to start a new routine. You are to finish all your homework before you start anything else.”

“What? You don’t trust me to do it?”

“Of course we trust you. Your father and I just want you to do your homework when you’re still fresh.”

“That’s not the way we did it last year.”

“You’re starting a new year, and you’ll be home earlier every day. It’s time to start new habits.”

“Darn! How do you and Dad come up with these rules?” Jason wondered aloud.

“I heard that! You’ll know when you become a parent yourself someday,” his mother commented with a singsong voice.

Jason returned to his desk, opened his backpack and took out his notebook, where he’d scribbled down the day’s assignments. The homework for all his subjects was nearly identical: read the first chapter in the book. Jason took out the new textbooks he had received that day in his classes for English, math, science and social studies and, one by one, he zipped through the first chapter. As he finished each assignment, he flipped

through the rest of the book to see what was ahead. *It's going to be an interesting year,* he couldn't help but think.

Just as he was finishing his social studies homework, Amy burst through the back door, letting the screen door slam behind her. "Hi, everybody, I'm home!" she announced. Since Amy was still in elementary school, she had taken a later bus.

"I'm in the kitchen! I want you to tell me all about your first day of school!" her mother called out enthusiastically.

"Not 'til I say hello to Jason. I want to tell him something."

"I'm in here!" shouted Jason from his room.

Amy rushed in. "Jason, you remember that trophy case that was in the hall at Fairview? Where they stole all those trophies?"

"Yeah, what about it?"

"Well, it's gone! They took it out!"

He blinked in response to her wide eyes and animated arm gestures that were now frozen in midair. "So, what?"

A sigh. Amy let her arms fall dramatically so that her palms slapped her jeans. "Don't you see? After we solved the crime of the century and found those trophies for them, they didn't even put them back."

"And?"

"We go to all that trouble and that's okay with you?"

"They can do what they want with the trophies for all I care. It wasn't about the trophies anyway; it was about the money inside one of them."

"I know, but still...It was fun, wasn't it?"

“What was fun?”

“Solving our first crime together.”

“You weren’t in our group then, remember?”

“No thanks to you, bonehead. But Karen and I still solved the crime.”

“You helped out, you mean.”

“Are we in the group now?”

“I thought we settled that. Yes, you and Karen can be in the group.”

“Yes!” Amy made a high sign.

“But we don’t have a job at the moment.”

“I know. I know. I’m sure something will come along.”

“Don’t be so sure. This is a really safe neighborhood.”

“You’ll see. I’ll give it a month. We’ll get some business.”

Jason sat up straighter and crossed his arms over his chest. “Bet?”

“Yeah. I’ll bet we have a case by the first of October. Ten bucks?”

“Deal. I say we don’t.”

Amy ran off to the kitchen while Jason closed his books and went out to the garage.

Chapter 3: Jason's Spy Plane

In the garage, Jason carefully retrieved the remote-controlled model airplane hanging from the ceiling and removed one of its wings. Inside the fuselage, now visible with the wing off, was the radio receiver, the servos for operating the engine throttle and the tail surfaces, and the batteries.

Next, Jason searched around and found his electronic “eye” on his workbench. He plugged it into the back of a laptop computer. After opening the screen display, he pressed a button to start the computer. A minute later, the computer was ready, and Jason clicked on an icon marked “NANOCAM.” A window opened and a video image of Jason's face appeared inside a frame. Using a mouse, he moved the cursor to a button marked “snapshot” and clicked it. The computer made the sound of a camera taking a picture and froze a still shot.

Now, if only I could mount this camera on my model plane and send the image to my computer by radio. He took out some manuals and started to read.

By six o'clock, when his mother called him in to supper, he had a plan.

During supper, after everyone had a chance to talk about their day, Jason announced, “I'm working on a new project in the garage,” then paused for effect.

“Really? So, what is this latest and greatest?” asked his dad.

“It's a model airplane with a built-in digital camera. It can send video to my laptop computer, and when I see something I like, I can click the mouse to store a snapshot.”

“You can do that?” remarked Jason's mom, appearing impressed.

“Yeah, I figured out how to send the signal to the ground. I’ll need an RC transmitter in the plane and an RC receiver on the ground, but they’re commercial and not that expensive. I’ll just piggyback the digital video on the carrier that’s normally used for sending the control signals.”

“Where are you going to point the camera?” asked Dad.

“What do you mean?”

“When you fly it in the airplane—the camera—will you point it directly down? Directly forward? Where?”

“Oh, I hadn’t thought much about that. Sort of in between, I guess. Maybe at an angle down from the forward horizon. What do you think?”

“You’ll need to look directly forward so you can see what the pilot would see. That way you can fly the plane remotely, even when it’s out of sight.”

“That’s neat!” Amy chimed in. “You could fly the plane anywhere you wanted by just watching the computer screen and spy on people.”

“But I want to look down too,” Jason said, thinking aloud. “I want to use the airplane to see things on the ground you can only see from up there.”

“Like a spy plane!” Amy quickly got the point.

“Hmm. It might come in handy...for our detective work.” Jason began to see his project in a whole new light.

“Now, just a minute,” Jason’s dad said. “You have to be careful. You’re not allowed to fly those model airplanes over populated areas.”

Jason understood the potential liability concerns. “I know, I know. If the airplane hit someone on the ground, it could hurt pretty bad.”

“I shudder to think of it.”

“I’ll just have to keep it away from people,” Jason said.

“Is there any chance you could have two cameras: one for looking forward and one for looking down?” Jason’s mother asked.

“Now that’s an idea,” agreed Amy. “You could fly the plane anywhere you wanted, whether you could see it from the ground or not, and take pictures!”

“What do you think, Jason?” his father wondered.

“I don’t know. It’ll be hard to do with the equipment I have.”

“If you need help…”

“Thanks, Dad. I’ll figure out a way.”

Jason was already lost in thought. The solution would require multiplexing the two signals from the cameras before sending them to his computer.

Chapter 4: Trouble with Bullies at School

When Jason, Matt and Luke got off the school bus the next morning, they saw a crowd gathered on the lawn in front of the school. As they walked over, Jason saw John Abrams and the other two older boys from his homeroom taunting Jamal Al-Kazim. Other students just stood around, watching and waiting for something to happen.

“Just leave me alone,” cried Jamal, trying to back away. The three older boys had him surrounded. “I didn’t do anything to you.”

“You look different, and we don’t like different,” John stomped foot in Jamal’s direction, making him jump. “Aw, you look scared,” Then his face darkened. “You’re going to get punished for living,” John snarled. “You’re so annoying. We can’t stand having you in our class.”

One of the older boys shoved Jamal toward the other one, and Jamal lost his balance. As he stumbled, he reached out to prevent his fall and groped the other boy. Pretending to be annoyed, the other boy pushed back hard, slamming him to the ground.

“Oh my God! We have to *stop* this,” Jason said.

“Who is it?” asked Luke.

“Jamal. Somebody from my class.” Jason pushed his way to the center of the crowd and stared down the attackers as Jamal clambered to his feet. “Come on, Jamal.”

“What the... You his brother or somethin’?” John Abrams wanted to know.

Jason ignored him and placed an arm on Jamal’s shoulder. “Let’s get out of here.” He started to walk off.

“I’m talkin’ to you, stupid,” John snarled. “Come back here!”

Jason and Jamal kept walking. Matt and Luke stepped in behind them and walked at the same speed to protect them from being tackled.

“Whew. That was a close one,” whispered Luke. “Those guys are *mean*.”

The three older boys stayed back with the crowd, probably enjoying being the center of attention.

“That’ll teach that kid,” John remarked loudly for everyone to hear. Some in the crowd nodded their approval, while others shook their heads. They dissipated quickly when the school bell rang.

On their way to their homerooms, Matt and Luke started to peel away from the group, leaving Jason and Jamal to head toward theirs.

“Bye, you guys. Keep away from those bullies!” Luke said hurriedly.

“You guys came just in time,” Jamal said. “I can’t thank you enough.”

Jason suddenly remembered his manners. “Oh, Jamal. I’m sorry. These are my friends Matt and Luke.”

“Hi, Jamal. Gotta go!” shouted Matt as he and Luke bounded off.

“I don’t know what I’d have done without you,” Jamal was clearly shaken and grateful to Jason.

“I’m just glad we were there. Next time, they might find you alone.”

“I know.” Jamal shuddered.

Back in the classroom, Jason paid attention when Mr. McLaren called the roll. It turned out that John’s two friends were Bryan Kelly and Ivan Ullman. John, Bryan and Ivan. Three tough guys he would have to reckon with sooner or later. Jason could almost

feel the heat of their eyes on the back of his neck as they glowered at him from the back of the room.

When lunchtime finally came, Jason went quickly into the restroom to wash his hands. As he was leaving, he ran right up against the three bullies as they entered.

“What’s your name, dumbass?” John demanded to know.

“Jason Brooks. What’s yours?”

“What’s it to you? I’m the one who asks the questions.” John approached Jason, forcing him backward until his back was against the wall. Bryan and Ivan closed in also.

Jason didn’t know what else he could do except scream for help, but by the time help came, it would be too late anyway. He tensed up, bracing for John to make his move.

John’s fist swung forward. Then Jason saw stars.

The next thing Jason knew, he was sprawled out on the restroom floor and the three boys had vanished. He winced as he touched the tender spot where he’d been cuffed, but his pride was hurt worse.

Surprisingly, no one else had entered the restroom. Jason slowly picked himself up and shook his head to clear his mind. After he had a chance to compose himself, other students came into the restroom, laughing. Jason smiled at them before walking out into the busy hallway.

As Jason headed toward the lunchroom, Jamal caught up to him from behind.

“Have you seen those guys anywhere?” he asked nervously.

“I’m afraid so. I met them in the restroom,” Jason said in a warning tone.

“Oh my God. You did? What happened?”

“I don’t really know.” Jason felt his head again. “I think they slugged me.”

Jamal’s face paled, and Jason noticed him gripping his backpack tighter. “I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t be. I’m all right. And besides, it’s not your fault at all. This morning, you were on the receiving end, just like me.”

“That makes me worried. They’ll never stop!”

“We’ll figure out a way.”

“What chance have we got against them?”

“Those characters don’t know who they are dealing with.”

“Yes, they do. They know we don’t stand a chance!”

“That’s what they think. We, on the other hand, have the advantage.” Jason rolled his eyes in anticipation of what was to come.

“Advantage? What advantage?”

“We have time on our side.”

“What do you mean?”

“We can take as long as we like to prepare an attack.”

Jamal looked at Jason, aghast. “What attack?”

Jason sensed Jamal’s nervousness at the thought of another engagement with the bullies. “We’ve got to strike back. If we let them get away with their bullying, they’ll keep it up.”

“Now wait just a minute...” Jamal seemed almost faint with fear. “I can’t...”

“Don’t worry, Jamal. We’ll figure something out.”

“I have a really bad feeling about this.”

Chapter 5: More Trouble at the Middle School

On the bus ride home, Jason told his friends about the bullies' attack in the restroom.

"I can't believe this is happening." Matt shook his head. "This sure is different from elementary school."

"Not a very friendly place all right," Luke agreed. "Turns out I've been having some trouble too."

"What's that?" Jason and Matt asked together.

"Well, you know how everyone has two different English classes on their schedule—one for reading and writing and one for grammar and spelling? And I just got the reading and writing class? I inquired at the office like you said, and she told me it was a mistake and that the school computer was down, so they couldn't rearrange my schedule."

"They need a computer to rearrange your schedule?" Jason asked, annoyed.

"What happened to the way they used to do it? They arranged schedules for the last two hundred years by hand!"

"If anyone needs spelling and grammar classes, it's you, Luke," Matt agreed.

"Believe me, I know. But in our great middle school, no one seems to care."

"Maybe it's time for you to see the principal," Jason suggested.

"I tried that," Luke replied. "I went back to the school office, but the secretary referred me to the assistant principal, Mr. Gottlieb."

“You saw Mr. Gottlieb?” Matt asked. Mr. Gottlieb was infamously difficult to get along with.

“Nope. I couldn’t get to see him.”

“Why not?” asked Jason.

“Because his secretary wouldn’t let me.”

“Oh?” Matt was clearly astounded.

“Yeah, she said he doesn’t see students unless there’s an emergency.”

“So, what were you supposed to do?”

“She told me to see the guidance counselor, Miss Flaherty.”

“So, what did Miss Flaherty say?” Jason asked.

“I knew you were going to ask that. She couldn’t help me either because the computer was down. She referred me back to the principal.”

Just then the bus screeched to a stop, and it was time for Jason to get off.

“This story will have to be continued tomorrow morning. Gotta go!” Jason picked up his backpack and headed for the door.

“That’s all there is!” Luke shouted, holding his hands high to show they were empty.

The bus door closed behind Jason, and the hefty vehicle moved on with a roar of its diesel engine. Jason stood on the side of the road for a moment, reflecting on the events of the day, then slowly walked toward home. Halfway there, his thoughts switched to his model airplane, and he picked up speed in anticipation of the afternoon’s work ahead. He was in luck this one day, because he knew his mom would be taking an adult course in word processing.

One hour later, he was totally involved in installing the cameras in the cockpit of his plane. The problems of the school had been replaced by the complexities of designing and building his “spy plane.” After building in the cameras, he installed a wireless transmitter in the plane, which sent pictures to his laptop computer through a wireless connection. By supper, he had the system working well in a bench test.

After supper, Jason immersed himself in his school homework for nearly two hours before climbing into bed.

Chapter 6: Jason Tests His Spy Plane

Jason could hardly wait for the weekend. He fussed with his model plane, getting it ready, and when Saturday finally came, he was ready to run his first field test. He told Matt and Luke to meet him at the school playing fields at 7:00 AM, just after sunrise and before any sports practice was scheduled to begin. Jason's dad drove him, with his airplane and his equipment, to the agreed-upon spot. After Jason unloaded the car, his dad drove home.

Left alone, Jason surveyed the open field and prepared for his first flight. He set up a folding chair and a small card table, on which he placed his smartphone and laptop computer. Next, he placed his toolbox and fueling kit on the ground next to his model plane.

By the time he had gassed up his plane and attached the wing with rubber bands, Luke arrived, followed shortly by Matt.

"Turn on the laptop. We'll test the cameras, and then, if everything works, we'll start the engine," Jason explained.

After the computer booted up, Jason flipped a switch on the side of the airplane to turn on the battery power to the cameras and image transmitter. Using the mouse pad on the computer, Jason clicked on the camera icon, and sure enough, two video images appeared, one above the other, on the computer screen. Jason picked up the airplane and pointed it straight at Luke. An image of Luke's face appeared at the top half of the screen. Then Jason held the plane up so that the bottom face of the fuselage was directed toward Matt. Matt's face appeared on the bottom half of the screen.

“We’re ready!” Jason said excitedly. He set the plane down and flipped some switches on the side, first to turn off the cameras and then to turn on the radio control. Jason tested the RC, making sure all the control surfaces moved in synchrony with the movements of the joysticks on the control box.

Jason attached a glow plug battery to the terminal on top of the engine and retrieved an electric starter from his tool kit.

“Straddle the fuselage with your two feet in front of the elevator,” he directed to no one in particular.

Luke complied. “Like this?”

“Yes. That’s good. Matt, you hold the control box.”

Matt picked up the controller from the ground next to Jason.

Jason grabbed a cylindrical electric starter and pressed a cone at the end of the shaft against the propeller hub. He squeezed a switch on the side of the device with his fingers, and the starter whirled. In about a second, the engine began to pop, then ran continuously with a loud noise. Jason removed the glow plug battery and stood up.

Matt handed him the control box, and Jason moved the joysticks once again to make sure they were working. He accelerated the engine to full throttle and held it there for a second. The plane strained to move forward, pulled by the spinning propeller, but it was prevented from doing so by the elevator pressed against the back of Luke’s ankles.

Jason brought the engine down to an idle and asked Luke to step away. When he did so, the plane remained stationary. Jason reached down and flipped the switch on the fuselage to turn on the cameras. He then slowly increased the throttle, and the plane began to move, slowly at first and then faster. As it taxied, he steered it toward the middle

of the playing field and aimed it toward the far end. Jason finally gave the engine full throttle, and the plane surged forward, quickly lifting itself off the ground, and was airborne. He grinned from ear to ear.

Jason brought the aircraft up to a safe altitude, banking it to the left in a wide circle, and sat down on the chair in front of the card table. As the plane moved through the air, the video images on the computer screen moved in sync, showing the scene in front of the craft on the top display and the scene immediately below the craft at the bottom.

Matt and Luke watched in wonder, glancing with Jason at the two display screens.

“To the right! To the right! You’re flying too close to the school,” yelled Matt.

Jason looked up again and banked the plane to the right, away from the school. When he had the plane under control again and in a good groove—a simple oval course above the playing field—he allowed himself to look back at the computer display and fly the plane from the video.

It took some time getting used to—flying the plane without looking at it in the sky. But after a couple of scary episodes, Jason felt more and more comfortable, pretending that he was a tiny pilot sitting in the cockpit of the model plane looking out the cockpit windshield and manipulating the joystick controls. It was exhilarating!

“Can you store a picture?” Matt asked his friend. He and Luke seemed almost as excited as Jason about the flight.

“Yes,” Jason replied without taking his eyes off the screen. “Place the cursor on the picture you want and do a right-click.”

Matt knelt on the ground next to Jason and worked the computer mouse while Jason continued to fly the plane. Matt practiced clicking pictures of various objects as they came into view.

“Keep away from the school!” yelled Luke. “Steer to the right again!”

“Okay! But the plane is under control. It feels really good right now.” Jason turned to the right and again headed out, away from the school. When the plane was at a safe distance from the school, Jason wiggled the joystick and did a zigzag in the air. Matt continued to take pictures of the ground.

“You’d better come in soon. You’re going to run out of gas,” Luke warned again.

“My God, you’re right! I almost forgot!” Jason shouted. He looked back at the sky and adjusted his focus on the distant aircraft. He did a U-turn and brought the plane back while dropping its altitude and lining it up with an imaginary runway on the field.

Jason throttled back, allowing the plane to slow down and lose its lift. He kept the plane’s nose pointed forward, careful not to stall but not allowing the craft to pick up speed by heading “downhill” toward the ground. He finally cut the engine as the plane passed directly in front of him and watched the tiny model settle lower and lower and eventually touch down in a perfect landing.

Luke and Matt ran out to retrieve the plane as it quickly slowed to a stop on the grass.

As Jason, Matt and Luke disassembled the aircraft and packed the equipment for transport back to Jason’s home, students began to arrive for the Saturday sports: lacrosse, soccer and football. Mr. Brooks arrived with the family minivan to collect them, and within a few minutes, there was no trace they had been there at all.

Chapter 7: More Trouble at School

After unloading and bringing all the equipment into his garage workshop, Jason set the laptop computer on his workbench and turned it on. He first looked at the rows of thumbnail photos he had taken that morning on the computer display, then downloaded them all to a new folder, which he labeled “Flight1.” Some of the pictures seemed blurry, but that was to be expected. The little plane’s engine had vibrated furiously during its flight, especially when he gave it full throttle to gain altitude, so he felt lucky that any of the pictures had turned out well.

Jason was just closing his laptop when Amy came rushing into the workshop.

“Jason!” she screamed. “The school’s on fire!”

“What?”

“Yeah. It’s on the radio!”

“We just came from there. We didn’t see any fire.”

“It started in the principal’s office. Someone noticed the smoke and called the fire department.”

Jason’s thoughts scrambled. “It must be still going on. Let’s ask Dad to bring us back!”

“Good idea. It’s a job for the detectives. I told you some new case would come along.”

“Oh, oh. I have a feeling this is going to cost me ten bucks.”

“You betcha. I see dollars in my future. *Dad!*” Amy called out as loud as she could.

“I could have done that! I meant you should go find him.”

Their father quickly appeared. “What’s the matter?”

“The middle school’s on fire! We’ve gotta go there, *now*!” Amy appeared so excited she was about to burst.

“That’s ridiculous. Your brother and I were just there. We didn’t see any fire.”

“I know, Dad. The alarm must have gone off after we left. It’s on the radio now.”

Jason explained.

“You didn’t start it did you?” Jason joked.

“Dad!” shouted Amy, incensed at his insinuation.

“Just kidding, Amy.”

“You shouldn’t joke about such a thing. This is serious stuff. Somebody there might get hurt.”

“I know. I know. I’m sorry.”

“Jason and I are calling the detectives,” Amy continued. “We’re taking the case.”

“What case? Jason?” Jason’s dad rolled his eyes. “What’s Amy talking about?”

“We’re thinking someone may have started the fire, and...”

“Yeah, while Jason is sitting on his behind.”

“You want to...investigate?” Jason’s dad asked him. “That’s the job of the Fire Department.”

“It’ll cost me ten bucks, but yeah. There are things we can find out that maybe the Fire Department can’t.”

“You won’t have schoolwork if your school burns down,” Amy joked.

“You’ve got a point there,” their dad noted.

“And whoever started it might strike again. We’ve got to stop him...or her,” Amy urged.

“How do you know it was arson? The fire could have started by accident.”

“I’m with Amy on that one,” Mr. Brooks replied. “The school was built just ten years ago. With all the fire codes, the chance of an electrical fire or something like that is almost zero.”

“I guess we’ll have to find out, won’t we?” Jason winked at Amy.

“Let’s call all the detectives right away. I’ll call Karen, and she’ll tell Matt. You call Luke. When they come over, we’ll decide what to do.” Amy reached for the phone.

“I have a better idea,” their dad interrupted. “You have to check out the scene of the crime as soon as you can while it is still fresh. I’ll drive you back to the school right now.”

“You’re right, Dad. Amy and I can scope things out. We’ll tell the rest of the guys when we get back.”

“I stand corrected. Let’s go!” Amy was up and out the door with Jason, and their father was right behind.

Chapter 8: The Raging Fire

When Jason's dad pulled into the school parking lot with Jason and Amy, the place was alive with activity. Fire equipment was everywhere, and firefighters were pulling hoses off their vehicles, connecting one end to a hydrant and drawing the other end into the school building. The police had arrived too and were busy directing traffic and cordoning off the entire area. Gray smoke billowed through broken windows of the front office, which Jason knew was the principal's office. Behind the smoke, inside the building, were flickering orange flames.

"Oh my God!" exclaimed Amy. "Why would anyone do this?"

"It looks bad all right," Mr. Brooks retorted, almost to himself. "What a change from when we were here a half hour ago."

Jason moved forward immediately through the crowd toward the front door of the school.

"Hey! You can't go in there," shouted a policeman who was in the process of bringing a police barricade into position. "Out of the way. Let the firemen through."

Jason stopped and just stared. The fire was gaining strength by the second as if it were feeding on something. The policeman came over to him, angry now.

"What did I just say? Get out of the way! Now!"

"All right. I'm sorry. I'm just... surprised. I was here a half hour ago and I didn't see any fire."

"What? You were here when the fire started?"

"Yes. I was here with some friends."

“What were you doing here?” the policeman asked suspiciously.

“We were flying a model airplane.”

Jason noticed his dad and Amy walking over. He nodded to them and turned back to the policeman. “Sir, this is my dad and my sister.”

“Were you here too?” asked the officer.

“He means were you here with me a half hour ago when we were flying the airplane,” Jason filled in.

“He was. I wasn’t,” Amy offered.

“I came to pick the boys up,” explained Mr. Brooks.

“What boys?”

“My friends Matt and Luke, and me,” replied Jason, becoming a bit exasperated by the policeman’s questions.

“Don’t go away. I’m going to make a call.” The police officer pulled a communicator from his belt and pressed a button. Turning away and lowering his voice, he said, “Detective, I’m out in front of the building with a couple of people who say they were here when the fire started. I suggest you come over here right away. I’m going to hold them for questioning until you come.”

A moment later, the officer turned back to the group. “Wait here just a minute. Someone’s coming over to talk to you.”

“Who is that, may I ask?” queried Mr. Brooks.

“Detective Howell.”

Recognition swept over Jason. Detective Howell had helped him solve the earlier *missing trophies case* – his very first case – nearly a year ago now. Because of this, Jason felt the greatest respect for Detective Howell.

“He’s head of our crime investigating unit. As a matter of fact, here he comes now.” The policeman pointed toward a man in a trench coat, pressing his way toward them through the crowd of firemen and security officers.

Detective Howell both looked and acted like an English detective out of central casting. His small but powerful frame was enveloped in the Burberry trench coat, which was about two sizes too large. His electric blue eyes, framed by crow’s feet wrinkles, appeared embedded in his leathery complexion. As he walked toward the officer and his charges, he immediately recognized Jason and held out his hand in greeting.

“Well, hello!” Detective Howell’s usual frowning face broke into a friendly smile.

“Do you know these people?” the policeman asked as Detective Howell shook hands all around.

“I sure do. This young man, Jason, and his sister, Amy, here solved the school trophy crime last year. I never met you, Mr. Brooks, but you should be one proud father.”

“Yes, Detective, I certainly am. Glad to meet you finally, to thank you personally for saving my son’s life. We had quite a scare when we learned how close he came to losing that final bicycle race.”

“I’m just glad I was in the right place at the right time.”

“It’s kind of dangerous, this detective business.”

“It goes with the territory,” Detective Howell admitted. Then, looking over at the raging fire, he added, “We have another big problem on our hands here, I see.”

“Do you think someone started the fire?” Amy chimed in.

“We’re quite sure of it. Blazes like this don’t start by themselves.”

“It started and spread awfully quickly,” Jason noted. “When we left here a half hour ago, there was no sign of a fire.”

“That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you, Detective,” the police officer blurted. “You should take these people in for questioning.”

“That’s fine, Officer,” the detective acknowledged. “You can go about your business now. I’ll take care of this.”

“Yes, sir.” The policeman gave Jason and Amy a sharp look and then slowly turned away as if to say, *Don’t say I didn’t warn you. Watch out for these people.*

“Don’t mind him. It’s his job to be suspicious.”

“No problem,” replied Mr. Brooks. “It’s just lucky you were here or we’d be down at headquarters by now.”

Detective Howell suddenly turned serious. “You interested in taking on another case?” He addressed this question to Jason and Amy.

“If you think we can help,” Jason replied. Amy just stood there and grinned.

“There is going to be an awful lot of pressure on me to solve this crime. I’ll need all the help I can get.”

“What can we do?” asked Jason.

“Well, for starters, I need someone inside the middle school. Someone to hear what is going on at the student level and to pass along any leads.”

“What can Karen and I do? We’re still in elementary school,” Amy chimed in.

“I’m sure you’ll think of something. You young ladies are so resourceful.”

“We’ll give you all the support we can,” volunteered Mr. Brooks. “Now, I’m sure you’re busy. We’ll be on our way.” Mr. Brooks held out his hand, and the deal to assist Detective Howell was sealed with a handshake.

“Don’t be shy about calling if you have any information at all,” the detective said as he walked away into the crowd of firemen and policemen.

“Hurray!” shouted Amy. “We’re on the case. And you, big brother, owe me ten bucks!”

Chapter 9: The Detectives Get Down to Work

The young detectives met at Jason and Amy's house to plot their strategy. However, within minutes of Matt, Luke, and Karen arriving, the discussion had turned into an argument.

"You guys won't let us do anything!" Amy protested.

"Yeah," Karen agreed. "Don't you think it would be smarter if we divided the work? You do some stuff and we do other stuff?"

"It's not that we don't trust you," Matt responded. "This is just...well, just...guy's kind of work."

"There, you admit it!" Amy screamed. "You're a sexist pig!"

"We are not! It's just that there's nothing for you to do right now." Luke tried to reason with the girls, but they saw right through him.

"Nothing to do? Nothing to do? We'll see about that. We'll do everything you do, only better."

"Now wait just a minute," Jason broke in. "You mean, after we interview somebody who might have information, you're going to interview him again?"

"That's right. We'll pose as reporters from the elementary school newspaper. We'll pretend we're doing a story on the fire."

"As a matter of fact, that's brilliant!" noted Luke. "We should do that too."

"But none of us is on the paper," Jason objected.

"Who cares? By the time anyone finds out, we'll have gotten all the info we need."

“I’m not so sure,” Jason countered. “We might have to interview people several times. If they find out we lied to get the first interview, we won’t have a second chance.”

“Okay,” Luke said, “let’s do it this way. We let the girls have the first shot at anyone who might know something about the fire. Then, based on the information they collect, we conduct a second interview of those who might have more to say. Especially those we think are lying.”

“We can live with that,” Amy admitted.

“That’s a good plan. A one-two punch,” said Matt.

“Sort of good cop/bad cop. It ought to work,” Jason agreed.

Once their responsibilities were sorted out, the band of detectives got down to work deciding who would be interviewed and in what order. They decided to start at the top with the principal of the middle school and then work down through the ranks of assistant principals, guidance counselors, teachers, and eventually the students themselves.

“I guess we’re as ready as we’ll ever be,” Amy said finally.

Jason told the detectives, “Let’s meet back here tomorrow at noon. After church. You can tell us what you found out.”

“You got it! Karen, where’s your bike?” asked Amy.

“Back at the house.”

“Take mine,” offered Jason. “It’s faster.”

“Sure! She gets the air-powered bike! I have my old ordinary bike,” Amy complained.

“We’ll trade off,” Karen offered.

“Hey, I’m just joking. You keep it, but you must be special. Jason never lets me ride it.”

The two girls hurried out to start their work on the new case.

Chapter 10: The Principal Spills the Beans

That afternoon, Amy and Karen rode to the middle school with notebooks and pens tucked in a bag, strapped on the back of Jason's bicycle. As they had learned from their preliminary investigation, the principal of the middle school, Salvatore Mondeo, was there, standing outside the building talking with his assistant principals, David Gottlieb and Maria Shaefer, as well as the school guidance counselor, Elizabeth Flaherty. Various teachers who had learned about the fire surrounded the principal and his cadre, much like members of a football team in a huddle.

"Just the people we want to see!" Amy looked over at Karen as they rode side by side.

Karen stopped pedaling and let the bike cruise. "Yeah, but it's going to be hard to separate them. We need to interview each one alone."

"You're right. Maybe we had better hold off until one of them walks away. Then we'll go after that person and get a statement."

"Good idea. In the meantime, we should hide so they don't ask us any questions we don't want to answer, like what are we doing here."

"Let's park behind that tree."

The girls turned off the access road and hopped off their bicycles, ducking behind a large evergreen tree with branches extending to the ground. They peeked out from behind this natural cover, watching the assembled group of grownups intently. Finally, the little huddle parted, and Principal Mondeo walked toward the parking lot.

"I think he's going for his car. We had better get him, now," Amy said urgently.

“Let’s go!”

The girls grabbed their bikes and quickly rode to intercept Mr. Mondeo.

“Hello!” Karen shouted as they approached him. “Mr. Mondeo!”

Mr. Mondeo turned to see the two girls riding toward him. He stopped short and waited for them. “Yes?”

“We’re on the school newspaper at Fairview Elementary. We want to do a story about the fire here,” Karen said breathlessly.

“That’s very enterprising! Sure. What do you want to know?”

Amy and Karen stopped their bikes and let them drop. Karen quickly retrieved a notebook and pen from the back of Jason’s bike and began taking notes as Amy talked.

“First of all, was anyone hurt?”

“No, thank goodness. As far as I know, no one was in the building when the fire started.”

“How did it start?”

“I don’t know. I’m letting the firemen figure that out.”

“Do you think the fire was started by someone?”

“Oh, goodness no! What gave you that idea?”

“Just asking. We’re reporters, you know.”

“Yes, well, I hope you don’t print that the fire was suspicious. I’m sure there is a logical explanation for how it started.”

“How will we find out? For our newspaper, I mean...”

“You will probably find out by reading the *Fairview News*. It comes out every week, on Wednesday, I believe.”

“We can’t wait that long. We have to turn in our story on Monday.”

“Sorry. I can’t help you. You might try contacting the fire department.”

“That’s a good idea. Next question: Is the fire completely over now?” When the wind blew in her direction, Amy thought she smelled a whiff of charred wood.

“Oh, yes. As you can see, the firemen are picking up their hoses. They’ll be leaving soon.”

Amy looked over toward the school, noting the activity and nodded, while Karen wrote furiously to keep up with the questions and answers.

“Was there much damage?”

“Yes, quite a lot, I found out. The central computer system is damaged, and we may have lost all the computer files. Also, a lot of paper. My office is a disaster, to tell you the truth.”

Amy and Karen exchanged a look. “How about the classrooms?”

“Not a single one. The firemen got here just in time to stop the fire from spreading.”

“Will school open on schedule next Monday?”

“Oh, yes. There may still be the smell of smoke in the hallways, but other than that, I see no reason to close the school.”

“Who discovered the fire?”

“One of the students here. I think it was Jamal Al-Kazim. Odd name. That’s why I remember it.”

“Oh?” Amy had heard of Jamal from Jason. “What did he do?”

“He did just the right thing. He ran to a house close by and had the people there call the fire department. I guess he didn’t have a cell phone with him.”

“He ought to get a medal or something.”

“You know, you’re right! Now that you mention it, we’ll have to think of something appropriate.”

“If it wasn’t for him, the whole school might have gone up in flames.”

“Precisely. Now, if you don’t mind, I’m afraid I must go. I hope you have enough to write that story.”

“I think we do. Oh, just one more question, please?”

“All right. What is it?”

“Where were you when the fire started?”

“I was out shopping. I didn’t learn about the fire until I got home and found the message on my answering machine.”

“Out shopping? Where?”

“Grocery shopping. Why?”

“What store?”

“Stop & Shop, as a matter of fact.”

“Did anyone see you there?”

“Now, young ladies, that’s enough, don’t you think? Why don’t we stop right there.”

“It’s for the newspaper. Oh, well. It’s not that important.”

“Goodbye, Mr. Mondeo, and thank you for your time,” Karen said after letting Amy conduct the entire interview.

“Goodbye, girls,” Mr. Mondeo said and walked off briskly toward his car.

Chapter 11: What's in Those Pictures?

After his detective friends had left, Jason went back to the computer in his workshop to examine the flight photos more closely. Now that he knew a fire had broken out at school, Jason hoped against hope that the photos would provide at least a clue about what increasingly looked like a case of arson.

Jason looked at each picture one by one in the order that his video camera had taken them. With over two hundred photos to go through, the viewing took some time, but since most of them showed only grass and trees, he was able to eliminate them quickly. The pictures were taken in succession each time the model airplane looped back and forth over the field, so they were quite repetitious. It wasn't until the eleventh loop that Jason noticed something out of the ordinary.

Jason stared at the photo on the computer screen in front of him. A person had appeared in the field of view, apparently heading toward the school building.

Jason zoomed in to look at the image more closely. He could only see the top of the person's head, not his face, so he moved on to the next photo. When this picture was taken, the person had moved a few steps closer to the school building. Jason viewed the next few photos in rapid succession, watching as the person walked toward a side entrance of the school building, glanced back to see if anyone was looking, and then opened the door. The very next photo showed no one at all, so Jason assumed the person had entered the building. But a few photos later, one, two and then three new persons entered the field of view.

There was something familiar about these guys, Jason thought, but he could only see them from above—the vantage point of the aircraft. As he looked at the pictures in turn, he saw that they too walked toward the side entrance of the school and then went in. Unlike the first person, however, they appeared to be in a hurry.

Shortly after this moment, the model airplane had come in for a landing and the sequence of photos came to an end. The very last photo was blurry green, an out-of-focus close-up of the grass of the playing field.

Jason clicked back to the photos of the three last persons and zoomed in. He could see what they were wearing: one with a baseball cap and a plaid shirt, while the others wore T-shirts and jeans. *Funny I didn't notice these guys*, Jason thought. *I guess I was too involved in flying the plane. I wonder if Matt or Luke saw them?*

“Well, that’s it for clues,” Jason muttered as he switched off the computer. “Nothing to write home about.” Jason turned to leave the workshop when a thought struck him. *What about the video camera in front? Did those photos get stored?*

Jason quickly turned on the computer again and waited for it to boot up. When the menu screen appeared, he clicked on the Photo-Lab icon and looked in the storage buffer. Sure enough, another series of photos was ready to be downloaded into a photo file.

Jason called this new file “Flight2” and downloaded the photos. The thumbnail photos soon appeared in rows on the screen.

As Jason expected, nearly all the photos showed the distant horizon: the mostly straight line between the tops of the green trees and the blue sky above. But toward the end of the series of photos, when the airplane was coming in for a landing, the photos showed the side of the school and the door where the four people had entered.

On the very last photo, Jason noticed that the door to the school was ajar and someone was coming out. The person was not very clear because he or she was still in the shade of the doorway instead of the full sunlight outside. Jason zoomed in, and as he did so, the face became larger and larger until it was recognizable.

“Oh my God. It’s Jamal!” Jason gasped.

Chapter 12: What About Jamal?

Just then, Amy and Karen burst into Jason's workshop.

"Jason!" shouted Amy. "We just interviewed the principal, and you'll never guess what he said!"

"Okay, so I won't even try. What?"

"He said Jamal called in the alarm on the fire. And that saved the building from burning down! He's a hero!"

"Jamal called the fire department?" *Wait just a minute.* Jason tried to reconcile this new information with what he'd just discovered. He waved the two girls over. "Come here. Let me show you something." He pointed to the computer screen. "There."

The girls looked at the zoomed-in picture of Jamal's face.

"Who's that?" Amy and Karen said in unison and looked at Jason inquiringly.

"That's Jamal leaving the school building at 8:30 this morning. Just about the time the fire started."

"You mean..."

"I don't know... Firebugs often like to wait around, or come back to watch the fire, like they're proud of it or something. Maybe to kickstart things they'd call the fire department and then watch all the activity."

"You think that Jamal..."

"I can't imagine that Jamal would do such a thing. But..."

"Why don't we talk to him!" Karen urged.

"Yeah. I agree. Before we call him, though, what else did the principal say?"

“Nothing much. He said he was at Stop & Shop when the fire started. He only found out about the fire because someone left a message on his answering machine.”

“Who left the message?”

“Huh, we don’t know. We didn’t ask that question,” Amy admitted.

“I’ll ask Jamal if he called. Okay, here goes.” Jason looked up Al-Kazim’s family in the telephone book and dialed their landline number on his cell phone. He pressed a button to place the phone to “speaker” mode. The sound of the phone ringing filled the workshop.

“Hello?” came a female voice.

“Is Jamal there? This is Jason Brooks calling.”

“Just a minute please...”

Jason, Amy and Karen heard talking in the background; then the same voice came on the phone again and said, “Jamal isn’t here.”

“Oh. Could you tell him to return my call, please?”

“When he comes in, I’ll tell him.”

“Thanks.” Jason gave her his number and touched the “hang up” button. He turned to Amy and Karen and said, “I’m almost positive he was there. He just didn’t want to speak to me for some reason.”

“Very suspicious, wouldn’t you say?” Karen noted.

“Yeah, I’ll have to say,” Jason agreed.

Just then, his cell phone rang. Jason pressed the answer and “speaker” buttons and said, “Hello.”

“Jason,” came a whisper. “It’s me. Jamal.”

“Jamal! Where are you?”

“I’m at home on my cell phone. I know you called, but I couldn’t talk. My family would hear me.”

“I just wanted to ask you about the fire at school.”

“Yeah, I know. I think I’m in trouble.”

“I hear you turned in the alarm.”

“I was there. I saw the fire.”

“I have pictures of you going in and coming out of the building.”

“What!”

“Pictures. I was there too. Flying my model airplane.”

“Oh, God. Does anyone know?”

“The only ones I told were my sister and her friend Karen. They’re here with me now.”

“Please don’t tell anyone else. Especially Detective Howell.”

“Why? Did he talk to you?”

“Yeah, he just left. He thinks I started the fire. He asked me a lot of questions.”

“Why were you at school?”

“I got a call from somebody. He said to meet him there.”

“Who?”

“I can’t tell you. If I said anything, he’d kill me.”

“I know who it is. I have pictures of him too.”

“You do?”

Jason suddenly realized the identities of the three people in his photos. “Yeah. John Abrams, right? And Bryan and Ivan.”

“Thank God! I may need those photos.”

“They’re not that clear. But it shows those three guys followed you to school.”

“I’m scared, Jason.”

“What really happened?”

“I can’t talk now. My parents are coming.”

“You should tell them all about it. They’ll help you.”

“I’m not so sure.”

Abruptly, the phone went dead. Jason pressed the hang-up button. The girls stared at him in disbelief. “I know Jamal,” Jason said. “I can’t believe he did it.”

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Chapter 13: The Detectives Devise a Plan

Matt and Luke came over to the Brookses' house as quickly as they could after receiving Jason's call. They stood with their mouths open as Jason, Amy, and Karen brought them up to date.

"My God, poor Jamal," Luke said.

Matt nodded in agreement that Jamal could not have started the fire. "What do we do now?" he asked.

"Yeah, how can we help Jamal?" asked Luke.

"First, we have to talk to him and find out what he was doing at school," Amy said. "Then we have to find out who really started the fire and find proof that he did it."

"Or she," Karen added. "It could have been a girl who started it."

"I'll bet that John and those guys lured Jamal to the school and then started the fire to get him in trouble," offered Matt.

"It sure looks that way," Luke agreed.

"But how do we prove it?" Amy wondered aloud. "No one is going to admit to anything."

Jason, who had been quiet for a time, suddenly spoke up. "First, we have to find out who was in the building when the fire started. That will give us a list of suspects, right?"

"How do we do that?" Amy queried.

"I'll get to that in a minute. But think: Once we get a list of suspects, we'll be able to solve the crime."

“What? Are you kidding?” Luke asked incredulously.

“Not at all,” said Jason. “It’s quite simple, really.”

“We don’t get it,” Matt said, speaking up for everyone in the room. “What the heck do you mean?”

“Listen. We were there in the morning taking pictures. We don’t have to show anyone the pictures we have. But once we know who was in or near the building, we let everyone think we have a picture which proves who started the fire.”

“So? I still don’t get it...” Karen, the youngest, was not hesitant to ask for an explanation.

“If you were in the building and didn’t start the fire, you would be glad we had a picture that proved you didn’t do it. Right? But if you did start the fire... think about it. You would have to steal the picture and destroy it,” Jason said firmly.

“So, whoever comes after us and tries to steal the picture...” Karen’s eyes lit up as she finally understood the plan.

“That’s brilliant!” offered Matt. “That should work!”

Luke snatched a baseball off the table, tossed it in the air, and caught it with ease.

“There’s just one problem.”

“What’s that?” Matt asked.

“It’s dangerous!” Luke tossed the baseball at Jason, as if testing his focus.

“You’re a sitting duck, Jason.”

Jason turned the ball in his hand, studying the worn cowhide, the row of stitches.

“I know,” he agreed. “I’ll have assistance, though. We’ll explain everything to Detective

Howell before we proceed with the plan. He'll be on the lookout for the guy and grab him when he tries to get the picture."

"Or girl," Karen corrected.

"Let's hope he's on time," Amy said with a shudder.

"Yeah. We can only hope he gets the guy before the guy gets you," seconded Matt.

"I'll have the advantage, though," Jason offered brightly. "You'll be here to help me out."

"He can't kill us all, right?" Luke smiled at the thought.

"Is everyone willing to take the risk?" Jason asked finally. He looked around, and everyone nodded in agreement.

"Then I think we're ready to call Detective Howell."

Chapter 14: Detective Howell

Detective Howell drove over to the Ice Cream Shoppe soon after he received the call from Jason. He had a hunch from the start that the band of young detectives would be involved in his investigation. He was now extremely curious to learn what they had in mind and what they had learned so far.

Detective Howell knew each of the detectives from their investigation of the trophy theft nearly a year ago, and they had earned his respect, if not his annoyance. Now, more than ever, he needed whatever information they had gathered from “inside” the school. He had interviewed a dozen witnesses, including Jamal Al-Kazim, and as far as anyone knew, he was no closer to solving the crime than when he started. That suited his plans to a T.

Jamal had been evasive, and although he suspected that Jamal knew more than he was willing to tell him, he had no proof that Jamal perpetrated the crime of arson. And proof is what he was looking for. Fires were like that. Whatever proof there might have been usually went up in flames. So be it.

“Hi, Detective.” Jason greeted him when he arrived. “Come on in.” The entire band of young detectives was there, seated around a white table in a shop with white walls covered with decorative color drawings of ice cream cones. Jason led him over to the table, where his friends had made themselves comfortable and were sipping ice cream sodas through thick straws.

“Hello, everybody: Jason, Matt, Luke, Amy, Karen. The whole gang is here, I see.” Detective Howell grabbed an empty chair from a nearby table. The others made

room and he took a seat. Looking around at all the young faces, he said, “Where do we begin?”

“Let me start!” Karen spoke up. “Amy and I conducted our first interview. With Mr. Mondeo, the middle school principal.”

“Oh?”

“Yes, and we learned that Jamal—that’s a boy in Jason’s class—discovered the fire.”

“Yes, I’m aware of that.”

“Okay, and we also learned that Mr. Mondeo was out grocery shopping at Stop & Shop when the fire started,” Karen said proudly.

“I know that too. I spoke with him at length.”

“Oh.” Karen’s enthusiasm deflated as she realized that her information was old news to Detective Howell.

“Did you find out anything else?”

“Uh, no. Not really.”

“Did you find out who was in the building this morning?”

“No.”

“Did you ask who was authorized to be in the building?”

“Uh, no.”

“Did you ask who had keys to the building?”

Karen looked at Amy, their faces a slight shade of red with embarrassment.

“No, we didn’t,” Amy admitted.

“Don’t worry. It’s my job to find out things like that. Had you asked, Mr. Mondeo would probably have thought you were presumptuous and wouldn’t have answered you anyway.”

Amy and Karen looked a bit relieved.

“It just goes to show how we should be working together,” Howell went on.

“There are things I can do that you can’t. And there are things you can do that I can’t do.”

“Like what?” Karen asked.

“Like finding out what Jamal really knows. Jason, do you know this Jamal very well?”

“Well, I know him well enough to believe he didn’t start the fire.”

“Don’t be too sure.”

“We think we can prove it.”

“What?” Detective Howell, surprised by the news, stared at Jason, his eyes bearing down. “What do you mean?”

Jason punched a few keys on his laptop computer, which he’d brought with him, and the pictures of Jamal and three other boys appeared on the screen. Detective Howell scrutinized them intensely, nodding his head side to side, until Jason came to the final photo, which showed Jamal leaving the school building. Jason zoomed in on his face.

“Where did you get these?”

“We were flying my model airplane this morning, just before the fire started.”

“My goodness. Let me see those photos again,” Howell said, holding in his excitement.

Jason began to sequence through the pictures a second time.

“Wait a minute,” Howell interrupted. “Go back to the previous picture.”

Jason pressed the “back” key on the computer, and a picture appeared showing Jamal entering the school.

“That’s Jamal,” said Matt.

“Yes I know, but...um, I assume you saw that.” Detective Howell pointed to the dark region within the open doorway. Although you could barely see it, a faint, ghostly image of a person’s face appeared in the shadows.

“Wow, you’re right!” Jason exclaimed. “I guess I missed that.”

“Any idea who that might be?” Detective Howell asked, looking carefully at the screen and then at the boys. “It’s very hard to see.”

“Just a minute...” Jason held down the control key on the computer and zoomed in on the person’s face. The image was still unrecognizable. Working the keyboard, Jason enhanced the picture step by step, causing the face to slowly emerge like an apparition from the dark background.

“It’s...it’s Mr. Gottlieb!” Luke was incredulous.

“Who’s that?” Howell asked, his voice becoming instantly serious.

“The assistant principal. He’s a real bumner,” Matt replied.

“Yeah. My class schedule was all screwed up and he refused to help me,” Luke said with disgust.

“Apparently we have another suspect,” Detective Howell noted calmly and a bit coolly. “We need to sort them out somehow.”

“We have a plan,” Jason began. The other detectives nodded and waited for Jason to continue.

“You do?” Once more, Detective Howell stared at Jason intently.

“It’s kind of dangerous, but…”

“Then I probably won’t allow it. But go on.” Detective Howell was intrigued in spite of his usual calm demeanor.

“We let it be known I have a photo that shows who did it. Then we wait to see if anyone tries to steal my computer.”

“Stop right there. I won’t allow it.”

“Why?”

“We may be dealing with a bad person here, whoever he is. One who has no respect for the safety of others or the law. You can’t tell what he would do.”

“But you’ll protect me, won’t you? Or your policemen will.”

“Never happen. We couldn’t possibly get to you fast enough. No. We won’t take that chance.”

“Okay,” Jason agreed, his face showing his disappointment.

“We’ll have to find another way.”

“What other way is there?”

“First, let me complete my investigation. I’ll talk to everyone, including the principal again and assistant principal, and find out who could have been in the school building this morning.”

“That includes John and his two goons, Bryan and Ivan?” Amy didn’t want him to forget those three.

“Yes, and any other grownup or student who might have been there,” Detective Howell assured her.

“What then?” Luke wanted to know.

“Then, once we have a list of suspects, we’ll look for a motive. In the meantime, Jason, let me have your computer. I’ll keep it safe.”

“But I need it, Detective Howell. I use it for everything, including flying my airplane.”

“I could just confiscate it, you know. But I’ll tell you what: If you send me the photos you showed me, I’ll let you keep the computer. After sending, I want you to delete them and forget about him. I don’t want you telling anyone and putting your life in danger.”

“Deal.” Jason closed his laptop and stood up. “I’ll take care of this just as soon as I get home.”

Chapter 15: A Talk with Jamal

As soon as he arrived on Monday, Jason went to his homeroom in the hope of talking to Jamal before the school bell rang. He was not disappointed. When he entered the room, he found Jamal sitting silently and alone in his assigned seat. He brightened as Jason approached.

“Hi, Jamal.”

“Jason, I’m so glad you’re here. Can we talk?”

“Sure. But let’s go out in the hall so no one will hear.”

Jamal got up from his seat and followed Jason. It was still early, and the hall was nearly devoid of student activity.

“Boy, am I glad I have someone to talk to,” Jamal began hurriedly, almost in a whisper. “I know who started the fire.”

“You do? Who?”

“It’s not who you think it is. It’s not John or those dumb friends of his, Bryan and Ivan.”

“Then who?”

“I saw him do it.”

Jason felt his pulse quicken. “*Who?*”

“I don’t want anyone else to know. Swear you won’t tell?”

“Why? What are you afraid of?”

“If he doesn’t admit it and finds out I accused him of starting the fire, it’ll be his word against mine.”

“So?”

“No one will believe me.”

“You’re just telling what you saw. What can happen?”

“The guy is powerful. He’ll get me, for sure.”

“Okay, I swear. Now, tell me.”

“Mr. Gottlieb.”

“What about him?” Jason stared at Jamal.

“He did it.”

Jason stood there in silence for a moment. “Mr. Gottlieb?” He asked incredulously.

“Yeah. It was him. I saw it.”

Jason was stunned, and puzzled. “Why would he do such a thing?”

“I don’t know. It doesn’t make sense. But he did.”

“Okay. But why? That’s what we have to find out then.”

“Why? What do we care?”

“Once we have a motive, everyone will believe you.”

“What do you mean ‘everyone’? No one is going to know. You’re sworn to secrecy, remember?”

“You don’t want anyone to know? Besides me?”

“I told you. This is a secret. It stops with you.”

“But you’re going to let him go free? He committed a crime.”

“Exactly. You finally got it.”

“Look. If we can prove Mr. Gottlieb did it without your eyewitness account, would you agree to tell?”

“If you could prove that he did it, why would I have to say anything?”

“And if we can’t prove it, he goes free? And that’s okay?” Jason wondered if Jamal’s unwillingness to go forward might be because Gottlieb threatened or even blackmailed him in some way. Gottlieb was the assistant principal after all.

“I’m afraid so. I know it’s wrong, but...”

“But what?”

“I had my ass kicked just once too often. I’m not going to go there. And that’s final.”

Chapter 16: Suspicion Is Cast

During the week, Jason, Matt, Luke, Amy, and Karen did their best to concentrate on their schoolwork, which wasn't easy because the students at the middle school and even some at Fairview Elementary were abuzz with talk about the fire. Everyone had a theory about how the fire started and why it spread so quickly.

For his part, Jason noticed Detective Howell was continually at the school, seemingly working tirelessly to solve the crime. Knowing the truth left him feeling especially tense and unsettled, since he was unable to tell even his fellow detectives.

Principal Mondeo moved his office to an empty classroom while the fire department and the police combed through the burned-out area for clues. Detective Howell appeared everywhere, making suggestions and checking every possible lead, while also speaking to all the people who might know something about the fire. Every time Jason passed Detective Howell in the hall, he seemed hurried and frustrated. By the end of the week, the frown on his face had solidified into something more permanent, making Jason assume he had not even come close to solving the crime.

As they had arranged in advance, all the detectives appeared at Detective Howell's office bright and early on Saturday morning. When they entered, Howell was puffing furiously on his pipe and pacing the room.

"Hello, everyone. Please come in."

There were not enough seats in the tiny office, so they all stood around his desk. Detective Howell closed the door behind them, then went to the desk and sat down, appearing exhausted, and looked up at the crowd of young faces.

“I’ve gotten exactly nowhere,” he confessed. “I’m stumped. No closer to solving this crime than I was last week. I’ve spoken to every conceivable witness at least twice, and I’ve learned nothing. I do think I know who was in the building at the time, but everyone had a reason for being there. Even your friend Jamal.”

“What did he say?” Jason wanted to know.

“He told me he got a call from a friend in one of his classes, John Abrams, who said he’d forgotten to write down his homework assignment. He asked Jamal if he had it, and Jamal went to school to get it out of his locker.”

Knowing what he did about Jamal’s fear of John and his two bullies, Jason felt there must be more to the story than a call from a “friend” about homework. He was certain that Jamal had been lured to the school, but why? Jamal had sworn him to secrecy, however, so he said simply, “That checks out with the pictures we got of Jamal, John and John’s two friends.” Jason felt a pang of guilt at this moment, knowing that by pretending he didn’t know any more he was covering up the truth. But he would stand by the promise he made, even though what Jamal told him would go a long way to help Howell put the pieces together.

“I know.”

“What about Mr. Gottlieb?” Jason asked him.

“He was in school to do some class scheduling that he couldn’t get done during the week. He didn’t see anything suspicious before he left.”

“Were there any others in the building?”

“Just the janitor. He opened the side door when he went there first thing in the morning and forgot to lock it. That’s how Jamal, as well as John and his friends, got in.”

“Maybe the janitor did it,” Amy suggested, trying to draw suspicion away from Jamal.

“Not much chance of that. The janitor’s been working for the school for thirty-five years and he’s looking forward to retirement.”

“What about Bryan and Ivan?” Luke asked, trying to be helpful. They seemed to be the only ones left.

“They just went along with their friend John, who got his homework assignment from Jamal. Then they all left.”

“Did they tell you about the fight in the schoolyard?” Matt ignored Jason’s gaze to keep quiet and listen.

“No, what fight?”

“It was nothing.” Jason tried to avoid getting into the subject. “It’s not helpful anyway.”

“I’d like to know about it,” Howell pressed.

“Jason stopped John from beating Jamal up. John’s nothing but a big bully,” Amy said proudly. She had heard about the fight at the family dinner table.

“Is that true, Jason?”

Jason felt Detective Howell’s gaze. “Well, yes, but...”

“Why didn’t you tell me that before? That explains *a lot*.”

“I didn’t think it was important.”

“Not important? That gives John a motive. He could have called Jamal to lure him to the school and then started a fire in hopes that Jamal would be injured or at least be blamed for the fire.”

“But you don’t suspect Jamal?”

“Heck, no. Especially since Jamal turned around and reported the fire to the authorities.”

“But you said John and his friends didn’t do it.”

“I didn’t really think so. Not even Jamal tried to blame them. Their stories were all consistent.”

“So, we’re back where you started.” Jason didn’t want anyone to get in trouble for something he didn’t do. Not even John.

“No, not exactly. This fight throws a new light on this thing.”

“Oh?” Jason didn’t actually agree with Detective Howell. “What do we do now?”

“I’ll bring John and his friends in here this morning and talk to them again. I might use a little bluff.”

“What bluff?”

“I’ll tell them that someone saw them start the fire. I won’t say who.”

Oh, God! Jason thought. I’d better warn Jamal.

Chapter 17: The Model Flies Again

That afternoon, Jason and Amy's father drove Jason, Amy and their friends to the field behind the middle school to fly the airplane again. Before taking his gear to the field, Jason strapped an additional gas tank to the fuselage below each wing, and connected all the tanks to the engine through a fuel valve, operable by remote control.

"We can't let the engine run out of gas before I switch tanks. Once it stops in the air, it won't start again. So, Amy and Karen, you keep track of the time. We'll fly fifteen minutes on each tank."

"Aye, aye, Captain." Karen gave a mock salute.

"Matt, you operate the laptop and keep those pictures coming. I set it up so that the forward view in the airplane is on the top part of the screen and the view of the ground is on the bottom."

"What can I do?" asked Luke, appearing disappointed that he wasn't chosen to run the computer.

"You have the most important job of all. You watch the ground and tell me what you see."

"Okay."

Jason's dad watched in fascination as Jason filled the three gas tanks, the main one and the two side tanks; tested the remote control and the video cameras; and then hooked the battery to the engine glow plug. Luke stood with his feet on either side of the fuselage in front of the tail to hold the airplane from lurching forward as Jason pressed the electric starter against the propeller hub and squeezed the switch.

The engine rotated a few turns and came alive, popping and sputtering before it smoothed out. Jason advanced the throttle on the remote-controlled unit and the engine sped up with a whine. He brought the engine back to an idle and disconnected the battery. Standing up, he waved his hand, signaling Luke to release the plane.

Luke carefully stepped aside.

“Ready, girls? Check the time.”

“Time check!” reported Amy.

“Ready, Matt? Check the video.”

“Video check. Pictures are coming in!”

“Okay, here we go...”

Jason moved the throttle lever forward slightly, and the plane taxied out on the grass, away from the group. Pressing the lever gently forward, he brought the engine to its maximum power. The plane literally jumped into the air and was on its way.

“Here we go!” Jason said excitedly. “I’ll circle around a couple of times to gain altitude.”

“The pictures are great!” Matt shouted after the airplane climbed over the trees at the edge of the field.

“Yeah,” seconded Luke, who carefully watched the bottom screen. “I can see the leaves on the trees.”

“I’m ready to head out. Can you see anything, Matt?”

“I see the church steeple.” Matt pointed to an image on the top half of the screen.

Jason shifted his attention from the model in the sky to the computer screen.

Playing with the joystick, he banked the aircraft, first right and then left. In response, the

horizon in the video image rolled to the left and then to the right. Next, Jason moved the joystick forward and back and watched the horizon move upward and then downward on the screen.

“I’ve got to get used to flying this way. This is harder than it looks!”

“Take it easy! If you go into a spin, you’ll get confused,” warned Jason’s dad, who had been silently watching up to this point.

They all watched the screen as Jason struggled to keep the little plane in the air. The horizon went up as the airplane nosedived and then went down as the nose of the plane turned upward. Suddenly the screen was all blue sky, and Jason had no idea whether the plane was rolling to the right or left.

“Yeeow!” Jason pressed the joystick forward and the horizon came up fast from the bottom of the screen. The horizon was now angled from lower left to upper right. Jason tried to correct this and pressed the joystick to the right. The horizon rolled further until the blue sky was at the bottom of the screen. The plane was upside down!

Jason watched and held his breath as the horizon rolled all the way over and then steadied at the center of the screen.

Relief swept through him. “I think I’ve got it now.” Jason played with the joystick, and the horizon rocked briefly from right to left, then up and down.

“Whew! That was a close one,” Jason’s dad said with relief. “You had us going there for a moment.”

“Now where am I headed?” asked Jason.

“You just passed over Highway 1,” replied Luke, watching the image on the bottom of the screen. “Turn left now and you’ll see the highway on the top screen.”

Jason did so, and the strip of highway came into view, snaking up through the green woods until it met and disappeared on the horizon.

“Now follow that road,” shouted Matt.

“Okay. Just let me know when to turn off,” Jason replied without taking his eyes off the screen.

Jason flew the plane uneventfully for a few minutes, following the ribbon of road beneath the airplane, until Karen looked at Amy and they both yelled, “Time!”

“Okay, time to switch tanks. Let’s hope this works.” Jason flipped a switch on his transmitter. “Start timing the next fifteen minutes.”

“Yessir, Captain.” Karen saluted again.

“Right there!” Matt shouted excitedly, pointing to the screen. “That’s the turnoff! Turn right and follow that road.”

“Roger,” Jason acknowledged, slipping into a military mindset. He dipped the nose of the plane down so he could see the turnoff more clearly.

“Luke, tell me when the plane is right over the intersection.”

Luke waited a few seconds, then said, “*Now*. Turn *now*.”

Jason banked the aircraft to the right. The horizon rotated to the left briefly until the new road came into view, aligned in the middle of the top screen.

“You’re right on track,” confirmed Luke, concentrating on the lower screen.

“Follow this road for about a mile and you should see his house,” Matt said confidently.

They all watched the screens intently as the woods passed by slowly beneath the horizon. In the distance, the woods thinned out and gave way first to one house, then another, and eventually a small farm with a house, a barn, and several outbuildings.

“That’s the *house*,” Matt urged. “Right there.” He pointed to the farmhouse.

Jason pressed the stick forward to bleed off altitude until the plane was close to the trees and skimmed along just above the highest branches. The trees fell away, and the first house loomed ahead in a clearing. Jason briefly glanced at the lower screen as the little craft passed over the first house and continued toward the second. As the airplane cleared the second house, the farm appeared on the top screen directly ahead.

“There’s Jamal’s place!” Jason screamed with delight. “Oh, oh, what’s that?”

Everyone saw it at once. As the farm loomed larger and larger on the top screen, they could just make out a small group of boys in a field directly behind the main barn. Three of them were holding on to a fourth and pulling him away from the barn toward the woods.

“That’s them!” Matt shouted. “That’s John and his goons. They’ve got Jamal!”

“Make sure we’re storing these pictures. I’m going to fly right over.” Jason turned the aircraft to aim in the direction of the four boys.

Luke watched the bottom screen intently until the boys came into view. “There they are!”

At first, the boys didn’t appear to notice the plane, but as it passed overhead, they looked up.

“Okay. We’ve got the pictures. Now, let’s save Jamal!” Jason said, his jaw firmly set.

“Go for it!” Amy and Karen shouted together.

After passing over the boys, Jason banked the airplane first to the left and then made a complete circle to the right until the boys came into view again. Then, pressing the joystick forward, he brought the craft down as far as he dared and headed straight for John.

The detectives watched the screen as John stared at the oncoming craft and suddenly realized it was heading right for him. Fear gripped his face as he let go of Jamal and tried to flee, then stumbled and fell backward to the ground. His loss of balance caused Bryan and Ivan also to trip and fall.

Now free of their clutches, Jamal seized the opportunity to run—and run he did. He fairly flew over the field in the direction of the barn. Before John and his two friends could take up the chase, Jamal had reached his house and was safely inside.

“Oh my God, it’s time!” said Karen, looking at her watch. “It’s eighteen minutes already!”

Jason quickly threw the switch to allow the fuel to flow to the engine from the third and final tank. “Thanks, Karen, you’re just in time. We still have power,” he said. “At least we now know that there are at least eight minutes of fuel in each tank. We may need it to get home.”

Chapter 18: Running on Fumes

Jason looked at the top screen again and saw the road into town. “Thank God, we’re headed in the right direction. I’ll just follow the road.”

“I’ll tell you when I see the school,” Matt said, looking closely at the ever-changing video image.

“I’ll watch the bottom screen for any problems,” added Luke.

“We’ll watch the clock,” said Amy. “We’re three minutes out already.”

Jason throttled back to cruising speed to save precious fuel and flew the plane for a while in silence. The flight crew was also too tense to speak.

“Ten minutes!” came the ominous time check from Amy and Karen.

“I see the school!” Matt shouted excitedly. He pointed to a small rooftop within a clearing, far in the distance, on the screen.

“I don’t know if we can make it,” Jason said, worried now. “That’s pretty *far*.”

“Is there any place else you can land?” asked Jason’s dad, breaking his silence.

“Can’t land on a road,” warned Luke, watching the lower screen intently. “A car would run over it before we were able to get there and pick it up.”

Jason pulled the throttle back a bit more to further conserve fuel while maintaining altitude. “Girls, let me know exactly when eighteen minutes are up. I’ll switch back to the first tank. We might still have some fuel in that one.”

“We’re up to sixteen and a half minutes.” The girls kept looking at their watches. “Now it’s seventeen. Fifty-nine seconds to go. Fifty-eight...fifty-seven...”

The whole crew counted down the seconds for Jason when the girls reached thirty. As they reached 10, their voices got louder.

“Nine...eight...seven...six...five...four...three...two...one...Switch!”

Jason threw the switch, and fuel began to flow from the main tank for a second time.

“We have maybe a minute of fuel,” Jason said hopefully. “After that, I don’t know. We’ll just have to switch from tank to tank to sip fuel evenly.”

“Why can’t we draw from all the tanks at once?” Amy asked.

“I didn’t set it up that way because if one tank were to empty first, then air would get into the fuel line and the engine would quit.”

“Oh.”

Jason wasn’t quite sure Amy understood, but at least he had explained the reason for their predicament.

“Only one minute to go,” Karen noted as she watched the two screens. “But our plane sure isn’t going anywhere very fast.”

The view of the ground on the bottom screen seemed to have become a still photograph. The ground had slowed to a stop.

“There must be a headwind up there!” Jason said, his worry growing. “Dammit! It’s not windy at all down here.”

“Drop down lower,” suggested Luke. “Maybe you can get out of the wind.”

“If I drop down, we won’t be able to see the plane until it’s practically overhead. Besides, I hate to waste the altitude. We might need it.”

“I think I see the problem,” Mr. Brooks spoke up again. “It’s that hill over there between us and the airplane. It’s a barrier to the air on our side, so the wind speeds up as it goes over the top.”

“That means if we go even higher, there should be less wind,” Jason said. “I sure hope this works!” Jason pressed the throttle lever slowly forward to add power. They all watched the two screens, and sure enough, the ground beneath the plane began to move again.

“Time is up. Eighteen minutes on the first tank,” said Karen.

“The plane’s still far out. Any thoughts?”

“Yeah, I have one,” said Luke. “We’re just coming up even with the top of that hill. We should be getting an updraft.”

“You’re right! Look at that!” The view of the school on the top screen took on a greater perspective, whereas the distance from the ground on the top screen seemed to recede.

“Fly along the ridge of the hill,” Matt suggested.

“Good idea,” Jason agreed. “I’ll gain as much altitude as I can.”

“Nineteen minutes!” yelled Karen.

“Yikes! I’ll switch back to tank two for a minute.” Jason made the switch.

“You’re really up high! Maybe you’d better head for the school again now.”

“Okay. Let me know when tank two has gone nineteen minutes.” Jason turned the craft, and the school appeared on the screen again.

Luke looked up from the screen and gazed at the sky toward the hill. “Hey, guys. I think I can see it!” he shouted, pointing.

Everyone except Jason turned to look.

“Where? Oh, there it is!” Karen said excitedly. “It’s on its way.”

A cheer went up from the group.

Jason’s eyes finally darted to the sky and located a little black spot in the distance.

His plane was coming home!

“Nineteen!” Amy shouted. “Tank two has gone nineteen.”

“I’ll try tank three again,” Jason said. He made the switch.

“It’s about five minutes out.” Jason’s dad tried to be realistic without stifling the enthusiasm.

“Let me know when the plane is close enough to see the wings,” Jason said.

“In just a minute,” Luke said hopefully.

“Time again! Nineteen minutes are up,” Karen warned.

“I’ll let it run just thirty seconds more, then switch tanks again,” Jason said.

“Thirty seconds!” The warning came fast.

“Tank two,” Jason called out as he switched. “Give me another thirty-second warning.”

“Thirty seconds!”

“Tank one.” Jason switched tanks again. “We can’t let the engine die and we don’t know how much fuel is left.”

“I think you can see the wings now,” Matt said.

Jason looked up and saw the little craft heading his way. He changed the heading slightly to approach one end of the field.

“Thirty seconds!”

Jason switched over to tank number three. “We must be running on fumes by now.”

“I’ve been watching the airplane,” said Jason’s dad. “We still have about two minutes to go.”

“I really don’t think we have that much fuel.” Jason was not very hopeful. Once the engine ran out of gas, the plane would lose altitude and eventually crash in the woods.

“Keep switching tanks.”

“Every ten seconds now. Just let me know.”

“Time!” Amy and Karen called out together.

Jason made the switch. In the distance, he could see the craft getting larger; for the first time in nearly an hour, he faintly heard the high whine of its tiny motor.

“It’s still running!” Matt said encouragingly.

“Time!” came the call again, and Jason switched tanks once again.

“Time!”

“Switching,” Jason answered.

The whine of the engine could be heard distinctly now. Looking up from the screen, Jason could now see the object in the sky heading toward them. It grew bigger as he carefully guided it toward the landing field. Then, suddenly, the sound of the engine stopped.

“Oh my God!” screamed Amy and Karen together.

“Dead stick!” shouted Jason’s dad.

Jason didn’t respond. He focused on the little craft and worked the controls to bring it home.

Everyone watched the sky as the airplane floated downward and turned left to line up with the playing field. Framing the far sides of field were woods of tall trees. It soon became clear that the airplane was dropping too fast and would not clear the trees. Just before the airplane dropped out of sight below the trees, Jason returned his gaze to the computer and flew the plane as he had before, from the top half of the screen. What Jason saw, at first, was an impenetrable barrier of trees in front of the open field. Then, below the branches of the trees and between the tree trunks, he saw an open gap, revealing the green grass of the field beyond. Jason quickly pressed the joystick forward to drop even lower and aimed directly toward the narrow space. The aircraft gained speed as it lost altitude and slipped smoothly between two tree trunks.

The craft materialized from the trees and then appeared to float for a moment at level height above the grass before its final descent. Just before it touched down, Jason pulled back on the stick to flare the craft and bleed off its excess speed. The airplane landed gently and came to a quick stop at the far end of the field.

“Hurray!” The entire flight crew clapped with joy and took turns hugging Jason.

Chapter 19: Jamal Talks

When Jason walked into his homeroom on Monday morning, John, Bryan and Ivan were standing in the back of the room, talking secretively. Almost everyone else in the class had arrived, including Jamal, who sat at his desk and pretended to be absorbed in his schoolbook. Mr. McLaren was at the front of the room, waiting for the bell to ring.

John saw Jason immediately and glowered at him.

Jason walked over to him and greeted him pleasantly. “Hi, John. Hi, Bryan and Ivan. How was your weekend?” he smiled.

“You...you son of a—”

Jason’s jaw tensed, but he regulated his breathing to stay calm.

“I know who was flying that plane!” John continued. “I’m going to get you—you just wait!”

“Jamal,” Jason called out without taking his eyes off John. “I guess these guys still don’t get it. They think they can do whatever they want to whomever they want.”

Jamal, who had been watching Jason’s actions from the moment he arrived, rose from his seat and headed toward the back of the room to join his friend.

“You’ll get yours, you punk kid!” John’s anger was reaching the boiling point.

“Well,” Jason continued, his voice still pleasant, “maybe now’s the time to try.” He grinned again at his adversaries. By now all heads in the room had turned. “You seem to have an audience.”

Just as Jamal approached, John lunged at Jason in a football-style tackle.

Receiving the impact in his chest, Jason fell backward under the force of the larger boy's body weight, and the two went sprawling on the floor. Gasps erupted around them, but Jason barely registered the sound. His mind zeroed in on John's movements, the shock of pain in his chest, and the unrelenting force keeping him pinned to the floor.

Through the chaos, he caught a glimpse of Jamal standing three feet away, frozen. For a split second, Jason wondered if his friend would move, if he would do anything, but then something shifted in Jamal's expression. A flicker of realization, like a couple of live electrodes touching.

Jamal reached down, grabbed John by the collar, and literally lifted him to his feet by the scruff of the neck. "Get off of him, you bully!"

John turned in disbelief just in time to see Jamal pull back his fist and deliver a tremendous punch to the jaw. The punch landed with a resounding *crunch* as John's jaw buckled under the force of the blow. This time it was John's turn to fall backward, sending desks and chairs flying as he fell against them and crashed noisily to the floor.

"*Stop that!*" came the command from the front of the classroom, but the fight was over. Jamal turned away from John and bent down to help Jason to his feet. Jason grabbed Jamal's hand and stood up just as Mr. McLaren reached the scene of devastation.

"Oww! My jaw is broken!" groaned John, writhing in pain on the floor. Bryan and Ivan leaned over to console him, but he ignored their attempts to assist him. "I need to see the school nurse," he cried, grabbing onto a desk and pulling himself up.

"All right, go!" shouted Mr. McLaren. "You two..." he said, nodding to Bryan and Ivan. "You go with him but come back just as soon as you take him there."

Mr. McLaren turned and glared at Jamal and Jason. “And you! You’re not fit to stay in this classroom. I am taking you both to the principal’s office.”

Jason looked at Jamal and smiled. “Thank you,” he said. “You did good.”

Mr. McLaren glowered at Jason to show his displeasure and then announced to the class, “I’ll be gone for five minutes. I don’t want anyone to leave their seats!” Then he herded Jason and Jamal out the door to meet the principal.

They proceeded down the corridor in silence, Jason and Jamal in front and Mr. McLaren right behind them. When they arrived at the administrative office, Mr. McLaren opened the door and held it as the two boys entered the reception area. A sole secretary sat behind a makeshift desk in the middle of an otherwise empty room.

This was the first time Jason had seen the principal’s offices since the fire had decimated them. The windows and walls were badly scorched, and a faint smell of smoke lingered. The floor had been cleaned, but there were traces of ash and dust in the corners.

The secretary looked up to see who was being hauled before the principal this time. She shot Jason and Jamal a smile and rolled her eyes knowingly.

“These boys are here to see Mr. Mondeo,” said Mr. McLaren.

The secretary reached for the telephone receiver and pressed the intercom button. She announced the visit, then turned to the boys. “Please go right in,” she said. “He’ll see you right away.”

Mr. McLaren knocked briefly on the principal’s office door, then opened it and walked in. Jason and Jamal remained outside in the reception area as Mr. McLaren conferred out of earshot with Mr. Mondeo.

Jason leaned over and whispered to Jamal, “Now’s your chance to tell the principal who started the fire.”

Jamal looked at him in surprise. “I can’t do that.”

“Oh, yes you can. John’s afraid of you now. You’re invincible.”

Jamal bit his tongue. This was a new and different day.

Mr. McLaren came out of the office and waved the two boys in. After the two entered, he quietly closed the door behind them, leaving them to face the music alone.

Jason and Jamal stood in front of Mr. Mondeo’s desk and awaited their fate.

“Sorry for the mess, boys,” he said. “I understand we had an...uh...incident at your house, Jamal, over the weekend.”

Chapter 20: Jamal Saves the Day

“Jason,” Mr. Mondeo began. “I’m surprised at you. You really asked for it by teasing those big bullies. And, Jamal, I’m surprised at you too. Not for what you did to John. I’m surprised you didn’t do it a whole lot sooner. He’s been the leader of those troublemakers since the start of the year.”

Jason spoke up. “Mr. Mondeo, I did it on purpose...”

“You what?”

“I started the fight so Jamal and I could speak to you in private.”

“Speak to me? About what?”

“About the school fire, sir.”

“If you had something to say, why didn’t you just make an appointment to see me? My door is always open.”

“It’s not that simple.”

“I’m afraid I don’t understand.”

“Jamal, why don’t you explain?” Jason looked at Jamal expectantly.

Jamal widened his eyes at Jason. Then, as if resigning himself to his fate, he exhaled and wiped his palms against his jeans. “Okay. Mr. Mondeo, sir...I know who started the fire.”

“You what?”

“I was there when the fire started and saw what happened.”

“I remember you were the one who called in the alarm, but...”

“I know, I know. I should have explained everything then, but I was afraid. Afraid no one would believe me.”

“Why not?”

“Well, it has to do with John and his two friends Brian and Ivan.”

The principal leaned back in his chair, a mixture of shock and recognition on his face. “I knew it! I knew they were involved, those three. They are the biggest troublemakers in—”

“It wasn’t them.”

“What?”

“They didn’t do it.”

“They...But you just said...”

“They are the main reason I couldn’t tell. If I told anyone—anyone at all—they said they would blame me for the fire.”

“This is quite confusing. Why would they blame you?”

“I don’t know. They just hate me for some reason.”

“Then...” The principal shook his head and appeared to try to gather his thoughts.

“Who are they protecting?”

Jason watched Jamal’s leg bounce feverishly as he squirmed in his seat.

“The person,” Jamal said, “the one who did it, will just lie and say I did it.”

“You’re probably right. That person would try to cast blame elsewhere. But don’t you think we would see through the lie?”

“It would be that person’s word against mine.”

“Trust me, Jamal. I would believe you over almost any other student in this school.”

“Suppose...suppose that person is an adult?”

“An adult?”

“Yes, an adult.”

“An adult started the fire?”

“Yes.”

“Well, in God’s name, who?”

“Mr. Gottlieb.”

Mr. Mondeo’s jaw dropped open. “Mr. Gottlieb?”

“Yes,” Jamal said simply.

Jason, who had been quietly listening, finally spoke up. “Mr. Mondeo,” he began. “It just occurred to me...Maybe John and his friends were working together with Mr. Gottlieb. That would explain why Jamal was here at school in the first place. It was a Saturday, remember?”

“I’m afraid I don’t...”

“Jamal was being set up to take the fall if they got caught.” Jason said.

“Set up?”

“Yes. Don’t you see?” Jason said excitedly. “Knowing that Mr. Gottlieb started the fire doesn’t mean we can prove it. We’ll have to set a trap for him or we’ll never see justice done.”

“Set a trap?”

“Sure. Since he doesn’t know that we know, he’ll never suspect we’re up to something.”

“I’m beginning to think we should call Detective Howell, and right away.”

“That may be a good idea,” said Jason.

Mr. Mondeo lifted the receiver on his desk and placed the call. He spoke for just a minute and then announced, “Detective Howell is on his way.”

Chapter 21: A Plan Is Hatched

Jason and Jamal returned to their homeroom class just in time to move along to their first period class. Mr. Mondeo had promised to call them in just as soon as Detective Howell arrived. After a half hour went by without a call, Jamal became visibly nervous and turned to Jason for support.

“If he doesn’t call, that means Detective Howell doesn’t believe my story,” Jamal lamented as they rushed to their next class. “I should never have told anyone.”

“Don’t think that way, Jamal. You did the right thing. I know it.”

“I could go to jail! Everyone will say I did it, and I can’t prove otherwise.”

“Maybe we should come up with a plan ourselves.”

“Jeez. Jason, could we? I mean, I don’t know what to do now. I’m scared!”

“Maybe we should speak to Detective Howell privately.”

“That’s not going to help. All he cares about is putting someone away as quickly and easily as possible. I’m a sitting duck!”

Jason stopped walking and pulled Jamal to the side, away from the main flow of students. “Okay. Let’s think. What happened exactly when Mr. Gottlieb started the fire?”

“He got a whole lot of paper and piled it up on the floor in front of the school computer. Then he took a match and—”

“In front of the computer?”

“Yeah, you know. In the administration office. Where a computer is kept.”

“Was the computer ruined?”

"I'm sure it was. If the fire didn't do it in, I'll bet the water did. When the firemen arrived."

"Mission accomplished."

"Yeah, all the school records."

"There ought to be a backup of the school records. No, it must be something else."

"Like what?"

"I don't know. Something that isn't usually kept in a backup file."

"It must have been something you can't easily delete or Mr. Gottlieb would have done that."

"And something stored in the computer without anyone knowing it."

"Is there such a thing?"

"I wonder... What would Mr. Gottlieb use the computer for?"

"I don't know. Word processing, spreadsheet, searching the Internet. That sort of thing."

"The Internet. I'll bet that's it!"

"What do you mean?"

"I'll bet there were cookies in the school computer. Cookies he didn't want anyone to see."

"What are 'cookies'?"

"Little identifiers showing where you have been on the Internet."

"You mean, you can tell what websites you visited?"

“You bet. If you know how, you can find out a lot about where a computer has poked its nose.”

“You mean, like at an X-rated site?”

“Or whatever.”

The hallway had mostly cleared out. They couldn’t afford to stall any longer.

“So, what do we do?”

Jason grabbed Jamal’s arm and tugged him forward, quickening their pace as they raced down the hall. “We go directly to Detective Howell. To heck with Mr. Mondeo.”

“I’m scared of him too. Suppose he doesn’t believe me?”

“Don’t worry. He will have no choice but to believe you. I have a plan.”

“Plan? What plan?”

“We are going to make it known that you made a printout of the cookies before the fire started.”

Both boys passed through the door their first class of the morning and sank into their seats, just as the English teacher was calling the class to order.

Chapter 22: Detective Howell Takes Charge

“Well, hello, boys and girls! It’s nice to see you again.” Detective Howell welcomed the visiting contingent to his office with a handshake all around. In addition to Jason and Jamal, Matt, Luke, Amy and Karen had arrived for the private talk. It was late in the day, after school hours, on Tuesday.

“What can I do for you? I feel honored to receive such a large delegation.” Detective Howell returned to the seat of power and settled into his chair as the others stood around his desk.

“You have it backward, Detective,” Jason said. “It is what we can do for you that brings us all here. We would like to help you catch the person who started the fire in our school.”

“I understand that you saw the whole thing. Is that true...er...Jamal?”

“Yes, it is,” Jamal replied politely.

“Mr. Mondeo informed me you believe it was Mr. Gottlieb.”

“Yes, sir.”

“You know, I have interviewed Mr. Gottlieb at length, and this charge sounds quite preposterous to me.”

“I saw what I saw, sir.”

“Do you have anything against Mr. Gottlieb?”

“No, sir, I don’t.”

“If anyone has something against Mr. Gottlieb, that would be me,” Luke said.

“My whole school schedule was screwed up and he refused to do anything about it. All I heard was that the school computer was down.”

“I wouldn’t be casting any aspersions on Mr. Gottlieb if I were you. It will just get you into trouble.”

“Why do you say that?” Jason asked.

“Mr. Gottlieb is a very respected member of our community. But I can tell you, he also doesn’t take kindly to students who malign him. If you cross him, he’ll strike back—hard. I know. He did it to me one time.”

“But Jamal saw him start the fire!” Jason insisted.

“I sincerely doubt it. Why would he do such a thing?”

“We don’t know, but we intend to find out.”

“I’m warning you. Don’t go there. You’ll find yourself in deep trouble. With me as well as with him.”

“Oh, brother,” Jamal groaned. “I knew I never should have said anything.”

“No one has to know,” Jason replied. “No one’s going to know what we know. That Mr. Gottlieb was involved,”

“I don’t follow you, Jason.” Detective Howell drumming his fingers on the desk.

“Just what do you have in mind?”

Jason hesitated. “I just mean that we’ll keep our mouths shut about Mr. Gottlieb from now on.”

“You and your detectives have been very helpful to me in the past, but this time I am asking you—no, telling you—to mind your own business. Do you understand me?”

“Yes, sir. We understand very well,” Jason replied.

“We do?” Luke seemed unsure.

“Yes, we do.” Jason looked at Luke.

An awkward silence followed until Detective Howell filled the void by saying,
“All right, then. Be on your way, everyone. And study hard at school.”

Detective Howell thanked everyone for coming and shook hands again all around. After they left, he closed his office door and went back to his desk. He dialed a number on his phone, then waited a few seconds, drumming his fingers again, until he heard a familiar “hello” in the receiver.

“George, I just finished talking to those kid detectives. I called them off the case.”

Chapter 23: Jason's Plan

Jason and his fellow detectives agreed to meet after school on Friday at Jason's house and discuss what to do next. Meanwhile, Jason made an appointment to see Principal Mondeo at his office.

Jason walked in the open door to the outer office to the principal's suite and was immediately ushered in. Principal Mondeo stood up from behind his desk and smiled warmly. "Have a seat," he said. "Make yourself comfortable. We have a lot to talk about."

During the next half hour, Jason gave Mr. Mondeo an earful. He explained what he thought had happened on that fateful Saturday morning when the fire started and had quickly consumed the computer in the principal's office. Jason felt a deep sadness at having to accuse anyone, but crimes were committed and those responsible needed to be held accountable. As Jason spoke, Mr. Mondeo nodded his head in approval. He contributed a few facts that Jason was unaware of, but in the main, Jason and his detective friends had identified who started the fire in the school building and, with Mr. Mondeo's contributions, had provided plausible reasons why they had done so. Mr. Mondeo again stood up at the conclusion of the meeting and came forward to shake Jason's hand.

"Go get 'em," was all that Mr. Mondeo said.

"Thank you, Sir," Jason replied, and left for home.

* * * *

When Friday finally came, Jason was ready to present his plan.

“Listen, you guys,” Jason began, addressing the group. “I would like to invite Jamal to work with us on this case. Does anyone have a problem with that?”

Everyone nodded in agreement, and Jason continued. “Jamal knows most about what happened, and I have a plan that won’t work without him. Here’s my idea...”

Jason proceeded to describe his strategy, which they agreed to carry out the very next day.

Later, after everyone left the meeting, Jason called Jamal to explain the plan. As expected, Jamal jumped at the chance to join the team, wanting desperately to clear his name. After the call, Jason went to his workshop in the garage and spent almost an hour preparing the equipment they would need. Finally, Jason retired to his bedroom and crawled into bed. After staring at the ceiling for what felt like forever, he fell into a deep but troubled sleep.

Bright and early Saturday morning, the detectives met again at Jason’s house, this time joined by Jamal, the newest member of their group. Jason and Amy’s dad drove them all in his minivan, with Jason’s model airplane, his aircraft toolbox, and the assembled equipment, to the middle school playground. When they arrived, Matt and Luke fueled the airplane and prepared it for startup, while Jason attached wireless microphones to Amy and Jamal. When he finished, he turned on a loudspeaker he had placed on one side of the laptop computer and asked Jamal to “speak normally” to test the system.

“Testing, testing, one, two, three, four,” said Jamal, his voice blasting from the speaker so loudly that Jason almost jumped.

“It works!” Jason said, elated at his own handiwork. He turned on a second loudspeaker on the other side of the computer and asked Amy to test her wireless microphone. It worked as well.

Finally, Jason turned his attention to the model plane. He prepped and started the engine and taxied the aircraft onto the field.

“Is everyone ready?” Jason shouted. “Everyone knows what to do?”

Everyone nodded. Jason pressed the throttle lever forward all the way. The model airplane engine spooled up quickly with a siren-like whine. The little craft darted forward, then took off smoothly and headed upward into the clear blue sky.

Amy, Karen and Jamal followed Mr. Brooks back to the minivan, and they all climbed in. The van then backed out of its parking place and drove away, leaving Jason, Matt and Luke at command central.

Chapter 24: The Model Airplane Saves the Day

Jason, Matt and Luke watched the computer monitor as the images on the upper and lower screens continuously changed. A ribbon of road moved down from the top to the bottom of the lower screen, while the roof of the Brooks' minivan, progressing along the road, remained almost stationary at the center. Eventually Matt pointed to the tiny image on the upper screen of a colonial frame house surrounded by a fenced-in yard.

"There it is!"

Jason banked the little aircraft to the left shortly before it reached the house and began a slow right turn to start a circling pattern in the sky.

"I'll throttle back as much as I can. We don't want to alert Mr. Gottlieb with the noise," he reminded Matt and Luke.

Every few seconds, Jason banked the plane to aim the lower camera at the house, allowing him and his fellow detectives to see what was going on.

As they watched the screens, they saw the van drive up to the house and deposit Amy, Karen and Jamal. Jamal immediately walked around to the back of the house while Amy and Karen approached the front door and rang the bell. After a pause, Jason, Matt and Luke heard Amy's familiar voice over the loudspeaker.

"Hello, Mr. Gottlieb. My name is Amy, and this is my friend Karen. Girl Scouts in Troop 29 here in Fairview. It's that time of year again! We're selling Girl Scout cookies."

"I don't think so, girls. I don't need any."

"Just a minute, Mr. Gottlieb. We just want you to taste these wonderful cookies."

“Sorry. Now, if you’ll excuse me...”

“If you taste these cookies, Mr. Gottlieb, you’ll buy some. You won’t be able to resist!”

“I said no. I really don’t like cookies all that much.”

“Karen, we’ll just have to put Mr. Gottlieb’s name down in our Girl Scout publication.”

“Yes, indeed. His name will go right at the top of the list.”

“What? My name.... Hey, just wait a minute! What list?”

“Oh, it’s a list of deadbeats. People who wouldn’t buy...won’t support the community.”

“Well, okay. Come on in. Let’s see what you have.”

“You’ll have to come out and taste these cookies. We are under strict instructions not to go into anyone’s home. You understand, I am sure.”

Jason watched Mr. Gottlieb step outside and take a cookie from Karen.

“Mmm. This cookie’s not bad. Okay, I’ll buy some.”

“Not so fast, Mr. Gottlieb. You have to try these also. See if you like them better.”

“No. I’ll get these.”

“Try them! Or we’ll put you on the list.”

As Amy and Karen kept Mr. Gottlieb occupied, Jason, Matt and Luke watched Jamal slip into his house through the back door. Jason switched on the separate loudspeaker to hear Jamal’s voice.

“I’m in the door now,” came the voice in a hushed tone. “I’ll look around for his computer. Oh, there it is!” There was a pause. Jason and the detectives held their breath.

“It has a spreadsheet on the screen,” Jamal continued. “I take a quick photo with my phone...”

“Hey, what’s that?” Someone else’s voice could be heard in the background.

“Well, I’ll be damned. If it isn’t that pipsqueak, Jamal!”

Jason, Matt and Luke froze at the sound of John’s voice heard over the loudspeaker. Jason hadn’t expected John to be there, but his relationship with Mr. Gottlieb became suddenly clear to him.

“Bingo!” he shouted to his two friends. “We have him dead to rights!”

“Let’s get him!” and “Grab the S-O-B,” came two other voices, unmistakably those of Bryan and Ivan.

Jason, Matt and Luke stared at the screen in horror as they saw Jamal run out the back door and head around to the front of the house. Jamal looked up and waved wildly at the airplane, which was circling lazily over the yard. Jason pressed both levers on his control box all the way forward and to the left, throwing the airplane into a tight left turn with down elevator to set up a full-speed dive aimed straight for the back door of the house.

Just as the aircraft was gaining speed, engine screaming, John and his two bullies ran out of the house. Hearing the noise, they looked up and saw the airplane heading straight toward them. Their faces, appearing on the upper screen of Jason’s computer display, turned white as they recognized the airplane. Jason’s lips cracked a faint smile as he watched the three boys scramble back to the safety of the house. Jason yanked the elevator lever back just in time to pull out of the dive, and the little airborne missile cleared the rooftop.

When Jason got a visual of Mr. Gottlieb again, he saw him standing aghast as Jamal ran toward him.

“What’s the matter, Jamal?” Amy shouted.

“It’s John and those goons!” Jamal shouted back as he ran toward Mr. Gottlieb. “Mr. Gottlieb has been in cahoots with them all along!”

“Is that true?” Amy asked sternly, turning on Mr. Gottlieb. Meanwhile, Jason saw his dad jump out of the van and run over to Amy and Karen to guard them in case there was trouble.

Mr. Gottlieb sprang forward to attack Jamal. The two girls instantly followed him and grabbed at his clothing. With Jamal in front of him, the girls behind, and Amy’s dad running toward them to assist, Gottlieb flailed his arms in an attempt to land a blow.

Seeing the action from above on the screen, Jason again set his aircraft into a dive, this time aimed straight for Mr. Gottlieb.

Jamal, Amy and Karen knew what was coming and quickly dropped back, pushing Mr. Brooks away from the target. The aircraft sped forward, gaining speed as Mr. Gottlieb looked up in terror. The last thing Jason saw was Mr. Gottlieb’s distorted face on the upper screen of his laptop computer before both screens went blank.

Chapter 25: “It Was Detective Howell’s Idea”

Mr. Mondeo sat in the Brookses’ living room, surrounded by Jason, Jason’s parents, Amy, Karen, Matt, Luke and Jamal.

“I feel like a complete idiot,” Mr. Mondeo began. “We found that Mr. Gottlieb was operating a gambling business right under our noses. He took bets on the school team’s sports. It was all inside his home computer. He even the school’s computer. That’s why he started the fire.”

“We know the school’s computer was damaged by the fire. Was the memory gone?” Jason asked.

“Yes. The fire did its job, unfortunately. It destroyed the memory so we couldn’t recover any evidence. We were hearing rumors of Gottlieb’s gambling, so we hired a computer expert to come in and investigate, but Gottlieb started the fire before he had a chance to check it out.”

“But why wouldn’t anyone believe me when I said I saw Mr. Gottlieb start the fire?” Jamal wanted to know.

“Frankly, we didn’t know who to believe at first,” Mr. Mondeo admitted.

“Detective Howell said one thing and you said another.”

“That’s why the investigation seemed to go nowhere,” Matt noted.

“Detective Howell was in on the gambling ring too,” Jason explained. “It took me awhile, but I finally figured that out. I thought it best not to confront him, though. It could have been dangerous for us.”

Mr. Mondeo continued, “Yes, it would have. In fact, as I told you in private, it was Detective Howell’s idea to start the fire in the first place. When Mr. Gottlieb learned we had hired a computer expert, he was beside himself. He couldn’t even do his job at school for a while.”

“Plus, he spent so much time using the computer for his gambling operation, he couldn’t even work out class schedules—meaning mine,” Luke added.

“You weren’t the only one who complained about their schedules. But the complaints came to Mr. Gottlieb and never reached my desk. I’m awfully sorry about that.”

“Lucky I was there and saw Mr. Gottlieb start the fire, or we would have never solved the crime,” said Jamal.

“Well, that was a tactical error on their part. Bringing you into the school was a part of Detective Howell’s plan too. He wanted someone to blame, to take the heat off Mr. Gottlieb if we figured out what was going on. Knowing from experience that something might go wrong, he needed a backup plan. So, he got John, Bryan and Ivan to bring you into the school and place you there when the fire started.”

“I didn’t fully understand why they asked Jamal to go in there. John and his friends were there too,” Jason said. “They could have served the same purpose.”

“Joun didn’t want to take the fall. Those boys were also in on the gambling business from the start. They are known troublemakers, those three, and Mr. Gottlieb had no difficulty recruiting them. They were his eyes and ears on what went on behind the scenes at the school team sports.”

“Okay, but Jamal,” Jason turned to address his friend. “Why did you let them talk you into coming to school on a Saturday?”

“I admit it was dumb, but I wanted to be a part of their group. I thought they were the coolest guys in the class, and I would do anything to suck up to them. What a loser I was! I could kick myself. I couldn’t be more ashamed,” Jamal admitted.

“If it weren’t for you, we would have never caught the gang,” Mr. Mondeo reminded him. “Thanks to you, we now have the evidence. That photo you took of Gottlieb’s home computer was the clincher. His spreadsheet showed everything we need to convict him.”

“You can think of yourself as one of us detectives,” Jason said with a smile. Looking again at Mr. Mondeo, he became suddenly serious and asked, “But what about Detective Howell? What’s going to happen to him?”

“I must you, police internal affairs are all over his case. He’ll have some major explaining to do and I doubt he’ll remain at his post in the Fairview police force.”

Jason nodded. Detective Howell had earned his respect during the time they worked together to unravel the theft of trophies at the elementary school. As a result, he’d missed some clues that should have been red flags about his behavior. When the truth of Detective Howell’s involvement finally became clear, he had no other choice but to inform Mr. Mondeo.

“The middle school is truly indebted to all of you,” Mr. Mondeo said, looking around at everyone. “On Monday, we will hold a school assembly and explain this entire episode to the students and faculty. If you don’t mind, we’d like to award a Certificate of Merit to each of you in front of the whole student body.”

“Gee, I don’t know. I’m so shy...” Jamal pretended to hide his face in his hands.

“You can take one for the team,” Jason told him. “You were a hero already just for punching John.”

“I guess I can manage...”

“Can we come too? We’re only in elementary school,” Amy chimed in.

“Not only do we want you there at the middle school, but after our assembly, we are all going over to your school to do it all again in front of your classmates.”

“I’d like that,” Karen agreed, winking. “Amy and I don’t get much respect around there.”

THE END