

JASON AND THE DETECTIVES

The Case of the Missing Jewelry

By Karl Milde

Chapter 1: The Move

“But I’ll miss all my friends!” Jason had protested vehemently when his mom and dad told him the family would be moving away. “Can’t we stay here? Please!” Even as tears welled up in his eyes, he could tell his pleading would be useless. He’d soon be leaving his home in Fairview, and that was that. Where was this place called Somers, anyway?

All he knew was that he, his younger sister Amy, and his two parents were moving to a new home in a community called “Heritage Hills.” Matt’s and Luke’s families had already moved there because, according to them, the taxes were lower and there were many more things to do than in Fairview. There were swimming pools, tennis and bocci courts, billiard and ping-pong tables, a community garden, an eighteen-hole golf course, and even a private park with playing fields. Just a few months ago, Jason’s parents had told Jason and Amy they’d decided to move there too.

What Jason’s dad liked most about the move, in addition to the lower taxes, was that all the outside work was taken care of. He no longer had to mow the lawn or shovel snow.

But Jason struggled to feel this same excitement. He had attended school in Fairview since kindergarten and was now finishing sixth grade. Not even a year ago, he and his friends had become quite noted for uncovering a gambling ring involving one of the school administrators. But some time thereafter, both Matt and Luke had moved to Heritage Hills. Their moves were quite unexpected, and Jason had felt bereft at their leaving. It had been nearly a

month now since he'd last heard from them, so he wasn't sure if they even liked it there. They must have been too busy to contact him, he told himself, so he held off sending a text.

Now, on the last half-day of the school year in mid-June, Jason bid a sad farewell to his remaining classmates and rode the school bus home with a heavy heart. A large moving van was parked at the curb in front of the two-story colonial house that had been his home for as long as he could remember. As he approached, he saw two movers shove the last few cardboard boxes into the back of the truck and pull down the sliding rear door.

"That's finally it," said one of the men to the other. "These people sure have a lot of stuff."

Jason's parents and his sister, Amy, stood on the sidewalk surrounded by many of their neighbors as he walked up. His mother hugged him warmly and suggested he go inside and take one last look around before they left. "Just check to make sure we've got everything, and say goodbye to your room." She looked up wistfully at the windows in front of the building and added, "Once we leave, you won't be able to see inside this house again. It won't be ours anymore."

Jason walked up the path to the front door and entered their family home one last time. All the rooms had been emptied, and his footsteps on the hardwood floors echoed off the bare walls. He peeked into his old bedroom, but without furniture, it looked very different than before. It was no longer his room, so there was nothing to say goodbye to. He rejoined his family outside as they were exchanging goodbye hugs with many of their neighbors. Even friendly old "Uncle Ted," as everyone called him, who owned the "go-to" jewelry store in town, was there to wish them well and "*bon voyage*."

Although Jason had seen photos of their new home in Somers, he was certain about one thing: it could never be as nice as their place in Fairview. According to the real estate listing, their condominium unit was located in Heritage Hills on the “West Hill.” Did that mean there was an “East Hill” too? If so, which hill was nicer? The pictures of Heritage Hills left a lot to be desired.

As far as he was concerned, the only bright spot about moving was that they were going to live in the same suburban development where Matt and Luke had moved last year.

Chapter 2: A New Home

Jason sat glumly in the back seat of the family car as they led the moving van north to Somers. His mother had made a box lunch for everyone to eat on the way. Jason ignored the family banter as he munched quietly on his PB&J sandwich, alone with his thoughts. Would he like his new home? Would Matt and Luke, still be his friends and join him in solving crimes?

The cardboard box at his side felt like a small comfort. Something familiar. He opened the flap to peek inside. The toy car he'd been modifying for weeks sat there, its wires and gears and custom electronics on full display. A few more tweaks, and it would be ready to go.

Over the course of the hour-long drive, the landscape gradually changed from the familiar to the unfamiliar. Eventually, Jason's dad turned into the entrance of Heritage Hills, followed by the truck with their two movers. Jason paid close attention as they drove through what looked like a park, with lakes, trees and acres of lawn interspersed with buildings designed and painted to blend into the landscape. Jason saw only the occasional person, which was quite a change from what he was used to. The streets in the town of Fairview were always busy with people bustling about.

This place was so strangely quiet and serene that Jason felt he was moving to a different planet. The only thing keeping Jason calm was the thought of seeing Matt and Luke soon. As they passed by home after home, each with a one- or two-car garage, he hoped to spy one of their family cars, but none were visible.

They wended their way through the spiderweb of roads and finally turned into the entrance of a cluster of five homes. After pulling into an empty parking space, Jason's dad quickly jumped out of the car and directed the movers to back up the truck to one of the units.

Jason climbed out with the rest of his family and stood for a moment, staring at the surrounding buildings. Every unit in his cluster was painted the same light gray with white trim.

His dad pressed some buttons on a keypad near the garage door, and it slowly rose, revealing an empty space. “Finally, a garage,” he remarked, smiling. “Big enough for two cars and then some.” He walked around to the side of the garage and approached the front door. After unlocking it, he stepped inside and held the door open as the family entered.

Jason followed his mother and sister toward the front door of their new home. Naturally curious, he wondered what he would see once inside. Following the short entrance hall, he came to a grand main room. A fireplace commanded the area to the right, which he knew would be their living room, and a dining area occupied the space to the left. Without furniture, the room was just an empty space, but Jason knew his mom would decorate and make the place a home. He felt his spirits rise with the excitement that comes with change.

Jason joined Amy in following their mom into the kitchen. He gazed around, admiring the cherry-wood cabinets and the gleaming new appliances.

“Wow!” Amy exclaimed. “The kitchen’s really neat!”

“Go choose your bedrooms,” Mom said. “If you can’t decide between you, come back and we can discuss it.”

Jason and Amy made a beeline for the bedroom wing. At the end of a short hallway, they found a spacious master bedroom with an enormous adjacent bathroom. Two smaller, equal-size bedrooms were on opposite sides of the hall with a shared bathroom in an alcove between them. Amy preferred the bedroom closest to the bathroom, which was fine with Jason. He chose the bedroom across the hall with a large sliding-glass door out to the deck. This room was slightly smaller than his old bedroom in Fairview, but the glass door facing the deck as well as the large

window to one side gave the room an open look and feel. Jason smiled inwardly. This room would do just fine, he thought. Now, what he needed was a place in the garage he could call his own. A place where he could work on his inventions.

Chapter 3: Old Friends

By seven o'clock that evening, the movers finally finished their work and left. Most of the family's things were still in boxes, but all the furniture was in place, including their beds. Jason sat with Amy and his parents at the kitchen table, enjoying a hastily made dinner of scrambled eggs, sausages and buttered toast.

"Well, here we are," said Mom, smiling at Jason and Amy. "What do you think?"

"I love it!" Amy replied enthusiastically. "I can't wait to have my friends over to see my new room."

Jason was not as ecstatic. He asked to be excused to look around outside while there was still daylight. Being mid-June, darkness was not expected until eight-thirty or nine.

"That's fine," Mom said. "But stay close to home," she cautioned, "and whatever you do, don't go out on the main road."

Jason stepped outside and glanced around again at the other four homes in their cluster. One of the far units had a big window facing his and a large garage door matching theirs. As he stood there, he saw Matt come out the front door of that unit.

"Oh, my God. Jason!" screamed Matt as he ran over. "I thought it might be you. I knew you were going to move to Heritage Hills, but I didn't know when or what unit you would be moving to. There's not a lot of us kids around here, so I was hoping you'd come soon."

Jason and Matt exchanged a big hug. "Today was my last day in sixth grade," Jason said. "I'm free for the summer!" Jason grinned. "How about you?"

"Same as you. Luke's here too, you know. We've been taking the school bus together," Matt said.

Jason scanned the rows of distant homes, wondering which one was Luke's. African American and quite wealthy, Luke's family had been the first to make the move to Heritage Hills. So much time had passed since then.

"He lives close by," Matt said, "so he and I get together almost every weekend."

Jason couldn't believe his luck. He hadn't even unpacked yet and had already discovered his old friends lived nearby. "What's there to do around here?" he asked.

"There's lots to do. They don't have a baseball diamond, a soccer field, or anything like that, but there's this place nobody knows about where Luke and I go. It's like our hideout."

"Hideout?"

"Yeah. It's where we hang out."

"What do you do there?"

"We just...you know, chill. We play games and stuff."

"Sounds cool," Jason said, realizing the pun on "chill" only after he'd said it. He added, "Reminds me of our place in Fairview where we'd play that game 'Whodunnit.' One of us would think of a crime, and the other two would ask questions, like a police interrogation, and have to figure it out in twenty questions or less."

"Yeah, I remember. We were just kids. But wouldn't it be better if we could solve real crimes again?" Matt asked.

"Well, sure, but you can't just walk up to a cop and ask, 'You got any crimes for us to solve today?'"

"But maybe we can," Matt said. "My dad works out of a local police station now. He was promoted to captain in the NYPD just before we moved here and then applied to join the New York State Police."

Chapter 4: The Thefts at Heritage Hills

The next day was a Saturday, the official beginning of summer. Jason walked over to Matt's unit and pressed the doorbell.

A few seconds later, Matt appeared at the door. "Hi, Jason," he said. "Wait just a second. I'll tell my parents I'm going out."

He and Matt had already agreed to meet that morning and ride their bikes to visit Luke. As they rode, Matt told Jason that Luke's parents allowed him to do almost anything he wanted. Luke had become a bit of a brat, Matt said, adding that now and again he had to let Luke know he was out of line. "I'm just saying, Jason. You can form your own opinion, but you'll see what I mean."

Luke's home turned out to be a detached, stand-alone unit, one of the largest in Heritage Hills. Behind it was one of the fairways for the eighteen-hole golf course. His place was one of the most expensive condo units, and from the sound of it, Luke's attitude now seemed to reflect his father's wealth. Although tall for his age, Luke was skinny as a proverbial rail. *One good punch would knock him over if he pissed off the wrong person*, Jason thought. Having experienced the schoolyards in Fairview with its diverse mix of children from both rich and poor families, Jason had no sympathy for any "rich kid" behavior from Luke.

Luke stepped out of his house and shoved his hands in his pockets. "You brought Jason?" he asked Matt, seemingly annoyed. Luke didn't bother to turn or speak to Jason.

"Yup. He moved into my cluster."

Luke eyed Jason. "When did you get here?"

"Yesterday."

“I hope you don’t think you’ll be such a big shot at school like in Fairview,” Luke said.

Jason bristled, not expecting the jab.

Apparently used to throwing his weight around and getting the most respect from his peers, Luke shot Jason a look of disdain. “The public schools in Fairview were pathetic.”

Jason stared at Luke so fiercely that Luke averted his eyes. Jason knew he had to establish himself if he was going to get along with Luke, so he countered with, “You and Matt attend the public schools here in Somers, right?”

“Yes, but...” After a moment’s pause for reflection, Luke reversed himself. “I’m sorry, Jason. Forget what I said. But still, Somers schools are the best.”

Matt quickly spoke up in an undisguised attempt to change the subject. “Jason reminded me about the game we used to play in Fairview. Remember ‘Whodunnit’? I thought we could try it here. We might even get to be real detectives and solve some real crimes.”

“Really?” Luke looked at Jason with what appeared to be newfound interest.

“Yeah. You remember, right?” Jason said. “For each game, one of us, like Matt here, would make up a crime. Then you and I would interrogate him, like detectives, and try to figure out who did it and why.”

“I told my dad about our game,” Matt said, “and asked him if there were any actual crimes we could work on. He didn’t like the idea at all, but he let something slip: He told me there’s been a series of jewelry thefts around here. About one a month for the past six months.”

Jason brightened. “That’s terrific,” he exclaimed, and then caught himself and became suddenly serious. “No, I don’t mean the jewelry thefts. That’s awful. But this could be our first real case. We can work together to catch the thief.”

Luke looked at Matt, then at Jason. “That’s a great idea,” he said, smiling for the first time since Jason arrived.

Chapter 5: A Plan of Action

Off in the distance, Jason noticed a group of golfers walking the far edge of the course. The sun is beginning to beat down on them and, at Luke's suggestion, they stepped over toward the course and stood under a shade tree.

"As the first step," Jason said, "I think we need to get a map of Heritage Hills and mark all the places where the jewelry was stolen. That way we can go to each place and look for clues. The map might also show some kind of pattern."

"Good thinking." Luke turned to Matt. "If you showed the map to your dad, do you think he could point out the units where the jewelry was stolen?"

"I don't think so," Matt replied. "In the first place, he's against the idea of us playing detective. And I'm not sure he even knows where the thefts were. He did say the police were looking for just one guy. Whoever did it, they pulled off all the thefts in pretty much the same way."

"Then there must be another way to find the places," Jason said. "But we need to get our hands on a map."

"How about asking a real estate agent for a map?" Luke suggested.

"Google Maps," Matt said. "We bring Heritage Hills up on the screen and print it out."

"Let's try Luke's idea first," Jason said. "The maps you print from Google Maps are too small and may not be as detailed as we need."

"I'll get my mom to drive me into Somers," Luke said. "If one of the real estate agencies has a map, we'll get it."

Jason suddenly remembered what his mother had told him. “This afternoon, I’m going with my family to check in at the security office. We need to register our cars and get our photo IDs. While we’re there, I’ll ask them about the thefts. Maybe they’ll even have videos showing the cars coming and going in different parts of Heritage.”

“Those security officers are not going to give you anything,” Matt explained. “They won’t give out important information to anyone except the police.”

“How can we investigate a crime if we don’t even know where it happened?” Luke asked, clearly discouraged.

“Information about the thefts is going to be hard for us to get,” Matt said. “I’ll work on my dad, but I can’t promise anything. Maybe I can get into his computer when he’s not looking at emails.”

“If the police are looking for a serial thief, there ought to be something about it in the news reports,” Jason commented. “Maybe online, you think? I’ll do some research.”

“We all have something we can do,” Luke said. “It looks like we have a plan.”

“I just want to say one thing,” Jason added. “We shouldn’t tell anybody what we’re doing. We need to work in secret to collect the information.”

All three agreed. Having officially started their first detective case in Heritage Hills, they headed up the hill toward the hideout Matt had told Jason about.

Chapter 6: The Hideout

After walking uphill for nearly ten minutes without anyone saying much, Jason asked, “How much further is this place?”

“We’re at least halfway,” Luke replied.

“Really? Where the heck is this hideout?” Jason asked. “No wonder nobody knows about it.”

“Which hill do you think is higher here in Heritage?” Matt asked him. “The East Hill or West Hill?”

“I won’t even guess,” Jason replied.

“The West Hill is much higher, and our hideout is at the very top,” Matt said proudly.

“It’s at that restaurant...what’s it called? The Grill or something?”

“No, that’s not at the very top.”

“Then where are we going?”

“It’s up the hill from Recreation Area 3. Not many people know about it. I think we’re the only ones who go there now. We’ve never seen anyone else.”

“What’s up there?”

“You’ll see.”

Jason, Matt and Luke continued trudging up West Hill Drive without a further word. They finally reached and turned right onto a cross street. A short distance later, they arrived at a parking area and climbed some steep steps marked by a sign for “Tennis Court 5.” At the top of the steps, they walked past the tennis court on their right and two huge water tanks on their left, then continued up the hill, following a dirt road barely wide enough for a car.

When they neared the top, Jason saw an open shelter—a pergola—with four posts supporting a roof. Within it stood a rustic picnic table with benches on each side. Outside the shelter, to one side, was a rusty outdoor grill built on a stone base. On the other side was a similar stone base that, without a grill, resembled a lectern. Although these various structures were evidently built for Heritage Hills residents to use for outdoor events, they appeared unused and abandoned. Having been long forgotten by the residents, this place was a perfect spot for a hideout.

“This is amazing!” Jason exclaimed after giving the area a once-over. Behind the shelter, on a ledge outcropping, he discovered an embedded survey marker at the highest point of the hill. The inscription read: “For information or to report damage, write to The Director, National Geodetic Survey, Washington, DC.” The marker was also stamped “Reference Mark, Round Top, No. 4,” along with the years 1935 and 1982. All of this added to the aura, confirming to Jason that his friends had found a very special spot for a hideout.

“We picked this place so no one can see us,” Matt said. “It’s been abandoned for years. The only people who come up this far are men who maintain those tanks for the water system.” Matt pointed back in the direction they had just come.

The two large water tanks Jason had spotted on the way up were higher than the tennis court but way below the crest of the hill. “What do you do up here?” he asked.

“We just hang,” Luke replied. “Sometimes we’ll invite a friend, but this is our special place. No one else knows about it.”

“Ever have a party up here? With food and stuff?”

“No, we don’t want any grown-ups. Once they find out about this place, it won’t be ours anymore.”

Chapter 7: Where and When?

That afternoon, Jason's dad drove their family to the Heritage Hills security office at the Activities Center, which was at the center of the development. Jason stepped out of the car into the bright sunlight and stretched. The main door of the fitness center was propped open, and he immediately took in the smells of citrusy disinfectant mingled with chlorine, probably drifting over from the nearby swimming pool. Jason's dad led them to the security office window, where he explained to the female officer at the front desk that they had moved to Heritage Hills just the day before and wanted to apply for ID badges. Jason had learned from his dad that such badges were needed to access the fitness center, the swimming pools and other Heritage Hills facilities.

"Okay. We can do that," the security officer said. "Just fill out this form. I'll need the names of everyone in your family." She handed Jason's dad a clipboard with a two-page form and a ballpoint pen. "After that, you can all come into the office here and have your pictures taken."

Jason's dad passed the clipboard and pen to Jason's mom. "Can you fill this out, dear? Your handwriting is much better than mine."

Jason stood near the window and scanned what he could of the office. Only the back of the security officer's computer screen was visible. He wondered if it displayed live footage from video cameras throughout Heritage Hills. Trying to keep his tone nonchalant, he asked, "You watching the videocams?"

"Yes. We have a few," the officer said.

"Really? Do you have them at all the entrances?" Jason hoped his questions seemed innocent enough to hide his true intent.

“No. But our activity buildings have cameras inside, pretty much everywhere.”

“How long do you keep the videos?”

“Maybe a week. As long as we need to. If there’s a problem at any time or we see something relevant on a video, we archive it.”

“A problem? Like when the jewelry was stolen?” Jason asked casually.

The officer shot Jason a strange look. “Jewelry? You know about that?”

“Doesn’t everyone know?” Jason remarked offhandedly.

“Not really. No. That’s still under investigation.” She asked pointedly, “How did you find out?”

“I don’t know,” Jason said. “The news, I guess. Is it supposed to be secret?”

“We don’t want to frighten the residents at Heritage. The less they know about the crimes we have here, the better.”

Their conversation was interrupted by Jason’s mother, who had just finished filling out the form. “Here,” she said, returning the clipboard to the officer. “It’s all done.”

The officer scanned the form for completeness, then pointed to the security office door. “Can you all please come in?” she said, smiling.

Jason’s family filed into the small office space and stood at attention while the officer prepared to take a headshot of Jason’s dad first. While standing there, Jason could see the officer’s computer screen displaying a *Hollywood Squares* layout of videocam images from various sites at Heritage Hills. Jason assumed that images from additional videocams could be accessed with the click of a mouse.

What Jason really wanted but didn't know how to get were the addresses of the homes where the jewelry was stolen. He looked around quickly, seeing nothing helpful until his eyes fell upon a file labeled "Confidential—Missing Jewelry."

Chapter 8: Email to Jason

If only I could look at that file, Jason thought, quickly tearing his eyes away from the folder. He couldn't risk appearing too interested in its contents. The file lay on a small desk in the back of the security office.

The security officer took a headshot photo of Jason's mother next, then Amy. As soon as Jason's photo was taken, he stepped aside, pulled out his cell phone, and dialed Matt. With his hand cupped around his mouth, he whispered, "Matt. I want you to call the security office *right now*. Please hurry." He then terminated the call.

A moment later, the office phone on the front desk rang. The security officer excused herself and walked over to take the call. As soon as she did, Jason stepped over to the back desk and quickly opened the file folder. Seeing several names and addresses on the first page, he quietly snapped a photo with his cell phone. He closed the cover and returned to his place next to his parents, trembling slightly from the rush of adrenaline.

"You can't do that," his father scolded in a hushed voice. "Let me see your phone."

Jason looked up at his dad and shook his head. "Shhh. Not right now, Dad," he whispered. "I'll show you the picture when we leave."

As he said this, the security officer ended the call and turned around. She looked first at Jason and then at Jason's parents, clearly noticing that something out of the ordinary had just occurred. "Is everything okay?" she asked.

Jason gripped his phone even tighter and held his breath.

"Yeah," Jason's father said. "The kids are just getting antsy."

Pleasantly surprised by his dad's cover-up, Jason stood there in silence as the officer uploaded the photos for the ID badges.

"Give me a minute to prepare your badges," the officer said. "Perhaps you'd like to walk over to the Activities Center and speak with Andrew about what we have here. He'll take your names and addresses and explain how to log into the Society website."

Jason was first out the door. A feeling of relief descended as soon as he stepped outside. He hoped against hope that he had all the names and addresses he needed. Pulling his phone from his pocket, he pressed the camera icon and brought up the last photo taken. "Yes!" he said to himself. Seven names and addresses were listed at the top of the page, including the dates when the jewelry was stolen.

His father came out of the office behind him. "Let me see that," he barked. "The cover of that file was clearly marked '*Confidential*.' Let me see your cell phone."

Jason hesitated. "Let me explain, Dad... This is not what it seems. I needed..." As he spoke, he quickly tapped the photo on the screen, typed something, then pressed the screen a few more times.

"I don't want to hear any argument from you. You took a photo of a confidential file. You have to delete it."

"Here." Jason handed his dad the phone. "Do it yourself. It's just a bunch of names and addresses."

Jason's dad glanced briefly at the screen and, without saying another word, pressed two buttons to delete the image.

But Jason knew that, at that very moment, a blank email with a photo attachment was landing in his inbox.

Chapter 9: The Clue

After visiting Andrew to have their names and email addresses added to the Activities Center's mailing list and then returning to and obtaining their badges from the security office, Jason's family felt their move to Heritage Hills was complete. As soon as they returned home, Jason went straight to his room and closed the door. He sent his photo to Matt and Luke.

Matt picked up Jason's call on the first ring. "I was just about to call you," he said. "My dad won't tell me anything about the jewelry thefts. I also tried Googling and got nothing. There seems to be a blackout on this thing, and I can't figure out why."

"Look at your email," Jason said. "I just forwarded a list to you and Luke. *I got the addresses.*"

"What? You got..."

"Yeah. The security office had them, and I...um...snapped a photo of the list when no one was looking."

"Just a minute..."

Jason waited while Matt checked his email.

"That's *awesome*. Good going, Jason. Now, if Luke is able to get that map of Heritage, we're golden."

Jason heard a tone and looked at his phone screen. "Gotta go, Matt. Luke is calling. I'll find out if he has the map. Bye."

Jason ended Matt's call and took Luke's. "Hey, I sent you an email with a list of names and addresses. I found out where the jewelry was stolen. Did you get a map?"

“Yeah, I did. They didn’t want to give it to a kid like me, so I got my mom to ask for it. You said you know who got robbed?”

“I do. Let’s meet at the hideout in an hour. I’ll bring a copy of the list; you bring the map.”

“Matt too, right?”

“I’ll call him right now. We’re good to go. Let’s catch this guy.”

Jason printed out three copies of the list and called Matt. The two met outside, then rode their bikes to Luke’s home. Luke was waiting outside when they arrived, map in hand. He spread the map on the lawn under a tree, and the three boys kneeled around it. They carefully examined it, looking for the unit numbers, and found the location of each home on Jason’s list. Luke circled each one in pencil.

When they were done, they stood up and looked at the map. The circled homes were all on the West Hill. Other than that similarity, however, the seven locations seemed randomly scattered. Jason noticed something unusual about them, but he couldn’t quite put his finger on it. He let the thought percolate as they discussed what to do next. At some point, they needed to talk to the people whose jewelry was stolen, but they felt they weren’t ready for that yet. Why would those people agree to talk to three young boys? They had no good reason to ask them questions about the heists.

“What if I go to my dad with this,” Matt said, holding up his copy of the list of homes, “and bluff that I know way more than I do? He might start talking, maybe even tell me what the police know about the thefts.”

They fist-bumped, confirming the plan. They then said goodbye to each other and agreed to meet at the hideout the very next day to prepare a plan of action.

After supper that evening, while Jason was in his room he suddenly realized what had previously eluded him about the locations of the thefts. All the heists were in the super-pricey stand-alone condo units, not unlike the one Luke lived in. Maybe, just maybe, the thief could be enticed to strike again—this time at Luke’s home.

Chapter 10: Jason's Spy Car

The next day was Sunday. Having agreed to meet Matt and Luke at their hideout—at the top of the highest hill in Somers—Jason couldn't wait to tell them what he'd figured out. But truth be told, he also wanted to show them his latest invention: a remote-controlled model car they could use for spying.

He saw Matt and Luke waiting for him when he walked up the hill, carrying a brown cardboard box with his new toy car. As he walked past the tennis court and the two large water tanks, he saw his friends running down the hill toward him, their eyes fixed on his brown box.

They offered to help.

"I'm good," Jason said, nearly out of breath. "I've lugged this thing up this far. I'll set it on the picnic table. Always finish what you start, as my dad always says."

Jason stepped up to the table and plopped the box down with a *thunk*. As he sat down on the bench in front of the box, he heard birds chirping overhead and looked up. The trees were tall, reaching toward the blue sky beyond. Unseen birds skittered in the branches. He returned his attention to his two friends.

"What is it?" Matt said, staring down at the box.

"Yeah. What's in the box?" Luke demanded.

"It's a little car that does stuff." Jason reached over to open the box. His friends crowded close and peered inside as he lifted the car out and placed it gingerly on the ground. To him, it was a beauty, but he wanted his friends' confirmation.

"It's really ugly," Matt commented.

"Yeah, ugly is right!" Luke agreed.

So much for their approval. They were tough to please, Jason knew from experience.

The expensive toy car Jason's parents had purchased for him had no outer shell—no covering of any sort—so its “innards” were clearly visible, but that was the beauty of it in Jason's mind. One could see how it worked.

The car lacked any arms or tools to grab or lift objects, but Jason had made up for this by adding electronics. He'd installed a small burner phone to transmit and receive data from cell towers or via Wi-Fi when it was available. He'd also added a Bluetooth receiver/amplifier and a small loudspeaker to create a mini public address system on the car.

In fact, the car was a toy “monster truck” with oversized wheels that could handle even the roughest terrain. Jason used the wireless controller that came with the car to move it forward and backward and to steer the front wheels. He had practiced driving the car around his bedroom until he felt he was proficient enough to take it outside.

“Let's see it run,” Luke said, sounding doubtful. Jason noticed him looking the car over with his critical eye for engineering. He was Jason's trusted truth-teller: his *El Exigente* who noticed whenever something wasn't good enough.

Matt seemed hesitant to say anything at first. “Does it do anything special?” he asked finally after Jason looked at him inquiringly.

“I suppose it depends on what you mean by ‘special’,” Jason replied. He reached down and pressed the “on” switch at the back of the car. Two headlight LEDs lit up and the car came alive, waiting for a command. Jason started putting the car through its paces using the controller. He turned the car around and drove it out toward the trees that bordered the picnic area. The car looped around just short of the woods, then stopped. Its headlights seemed to be looking back at the boys, almost as if it were alive.

“That’s very cool,” Matt admitted.

“See those two headlights on the car? They’re like a flashlight at night. I can turn them on and off with the controller.” Jason demonstrated by pressing a button.

“Neat!” Matt and Luke exclaimed together.

“And here’s another thing: I also installed an infrared LED and an infrared video camera. The car can take videos at night without anyone knowing it.”

Matt and Luke looked at each other. “Not too shabby,” Luke admitted.

“And there’s more,” Jason said. “I can make the car speak.”

“What do you mean?” Matt looked at him. Although Matt knew about Jason’s other inventions—like his air-powered bicycle and the video cameras on his model plane—he still seemed wowed by the features of this new car.

“Hello, everybody! How’m ah doin’?” The words boomed out of a loudspeaker, sounding as if the car were actually speaking to them.

Jason’s two friends stood there with their mouths open.

“It’s a supercar!” Luke exclaimed. “Can I try it?”

“Sure.” Jason handed him his cell phone.

Luke took the phone and thought for a minute. Eventually, in a deep, booming voice, he commanded, “Supercar, come here.”

The car just stood there.

“That’s a great idea,” Jason exclaimed, “calling the car like that, but we’re not that advanced. Not yet anyway.” The car did seem alive though, he thought. He figured if the car could “see” who called it to come—that meant having line of sight—it could follow. Or if one’s GPS location could be transmitted, it could track the caller without actually “seeing” them.

Hmm...It's complicated. I'd have to think that one through.

"By the way," Jason said, "the camera transmits live to an app on my phone. The livestream video is also saved on a flash drive."

"Is the camera motion-sensitive?" Luke asked.

"No, not yet anyway. If I want to go back and see stuff, I have to watch the whole video from the flash drive."

"Let's take the car to the tennis court," Matt interrupted. "It's flat down there, and we can race it around."

"Okay." Jason grabbed the car's controller. "I'll let you guys drive. It's really fun. I'll drive the car down there and you can try it out."

Jason followed his two friends down the hill with the car following at his heels. When he reached the tennis court, he gave a short demo on the use of the controller. Matt went first, then Luke, using the controller to drive the car around. After their practice runs, the three boys took turns and were soon speeding the car around the court like race drivers. All three were engrossed, watching the car slip quickly and precisely through its paces, when Jason's phone rang. He looked down at the screen. It was his mom.

Chapter 11: A Neighborly Visit

Jason let the call go to voicemail. But it rang again, and he quickly picked up. He had worked out a phone protocol with his parents: If he wasn't busy, he promised to pick up a call from them. If he was busy, though, he was permitted to ignore the call and let it go to voicemail. If Mom or Dad had something important or urgent to tell him, they merely had to call a second time, and he'd pick up immediately.

"Hi, Mom. What's up?"

"Our neighbor just called me. He'd like to speak with you."

"Really? What about?"

"He didn't say, but he told me he'd like to discuss some detective work. He'd read about you and your friends in the newspapers. When you solved those crimes back in Fairview? The missing trophies; the fire in the school building..."

"Did he mention a jewelry theft?"

"No. What jewelry theft?"

"Oh, just something we're working on. Forget I said that."

"Heavens, let's hope there aren't any crimes like that around here."

"When does the guy want to meet?" Jason asked, changing the subject.

"Right away. He said it was urgent."

"Can I bring Matt and Luke?"

"I don't know. He asked for you."

"I'll bring them along. Amy can join us too, if she's there. They can help me think of questions to ask."

“Amy’s here. When can you and your friends come?”

“We’ll leave now. We’ll be there in less than twenty minutes.”

“Okay. See you soon then. Bye.”

Jason clicked off and pocketed his cell phone. Luke was busy driving the model car with Matt watching. “We have to leave!” he shouted to them. “We may have a *new case*.”

His friends came over and Jason told them what he’d just learned. They were all excited by the prospect of another case to work on. Jason quickly ran back up the hill and grabbed his cardboard box while they waited. The boys then carefully packed the car and the controller in the box, and Luke carried it down the hill to their waiting bicycles. Jason strapped the precious cargo over his rear wheel, and the three of them rode their bikes the quarter mile or so to Jason’s unit. The neighbor who wanted to meet Jason was waiting for them when they arrived.

“Come on in,” Jason’s mom said, holding the door open. “I gave the man a cup of coffee. He’s waiting in the dining room.”

The “dining room” was really a part of the big open space that included both the living and dining areas. When Jason entered with his two friends, he saw the man sitting at the dining table. He was talking with Amy, holding her spellbound, it seemed. The man rose from his chair when he saw the three boys.

“Hello,” he said, smiling. “I’m your next-door neighbor. My name’s Phillips. Oscar Phillips.”

Jason, Matt, and Luke took turns saying “hello” and shaking the man’s hand. “Very nice to meet you, Mr. Phillips,” Jason said politely.

“It’s Doctor Phillips, actually. I’m an O. B. G. Y. N.” He pronounced each letter. “Stands for obstetrician-gynecologist. You don’t have to pronounce that. Just say ‘OB-GYN.’”

Jason and his two friends joined Amy at the table, and Dr. Phillips continued. “I came here because I suspect something. I can’t prove anything, but there’s definitely something fishy going on.”

Chapter 12: A New Case

Dr. Phillips spent the next fifteen minutes explaining. “I deliver babies,” he began. “In the last year, I must have delivered five hundred babies. Maybe more. People are so happy when this blessed event occurs. Their family celebrates. They gather around the mother and father. We can fit only four or five people in the hospital room, you understand, so some have to take turns visiting and admiring the baby. To most people, the baby’s a miracle, and they show it. It’s joyous. They bring flowers. They bring balloons. They laugh. They talk together. It’s just incredible sometimes. And I see it all. I’m a part of it and I’m caught up in the feeling of renewal. The regeneration of life. The *joie de vivre*. Birth after birth. It never fails, until this one time. The woman’s husband was there. But no one else.”

Dr. Phillips took a moment to compose himself. He took a sip of coffee and continued. “This one couple was different,” he said. “First of all, they came to me out of the blue. The wife would not tell me if she’d seen a medical professional during her pregnancy and could not, or would not, provide any medical records. When she came in, far along in labor, she refused an anesthetic, even an epidural which doesn’t knock you out. She was severe. And so strong. She endured giving birth, which they say is one of the most painful experiences a person can endure. Out of a scale of ten, giving birth is a twelve. Maybe higher. But she did it. Without screaming. Without even a complaint. And when it was over, she held the baby like any other mother would, but there was something different in her expression. I don’t know and can’t explain it. It was as if she were hiding something. Keeping a secret from the staff. The nurses. Even the nurse who mopped the sweat from her brow during the long hours she worked to push the baby out. She didn’t say anything to anyone, except maybe her husband when they were alone.”

The doctor took another sip of coffee. “No one came to visit her. Not one relative or friend. There was no joy at the event. Her husband, who had stood by her side during the birth, whispered softly to her during her ordeal to show support, but otherwise said nothing. They must have talked together when the door was closed, but they said nothing when anyone else was present. I know, because I was surprised and I asked around. The staff had thought it was peculiar too. They had heard nothing. Their birth was... um, different.

“And now, two months later, I expected them to bring the baby in for a check-up and for his immunizations, but no. My nurse made inquiries. They never responded to her or asked for an appointment. I’m worried about the baby, of course, but that’s not all. I’ve become suspicious.

“Because of this, I began to wonder where these two people came from. Where did they live? I checked their address and was completely taken aback. They lived right here in Heritage Hills.”

Dr. Phillips looked around the table. Jason’s mom was sitting there with her mouth open. Jason felt momentarily out of his depth. He hoped someone else could think of something to say.

It was Amy who spoke first. “What’s their address?” she asked.

“I have their unit number in my computer. One hundred something. I remember thinking it must be on the East Hill.

“I’ve heard about the crimes you solved back in Fairview,” Dr. Phillips continued. “I used to live nearby in White Plains, and it was in the local papers. I can’t be directly involved myself, you understand, but I’d like you to make some discreet inquiries for me. Who are these people? Where did they come from? Why are they so reclusive? How do they earn a living? My guess is they’re up to no good and, if so, it would benefit us all if you could find that out. I’m willing to pay you for your services, of course.”

By this time, Jason's mind had kicked into high gear. He glanced at his mom to make sure she wasn't clearly against such an investigation, which meant spying on residents of their own community. A brief look at his two friends, Matt and Luke, confirmed that they were very keen about what Dr. Phillips was saying. The prospect of getting paid would possibly bring their detective work to a whole new professional level.

The more Dr. Phillips spoke, the more excited Jason became about the prospect of his smart team of detectives taking this on. Should he ask for a retainer? What kind of deal would it be? How would he even know if his team could produce results? These thoughts instantly dissolved with a "poof" when his younger sister stepped in.

"We'd like that," Amy said matter-of-factly.

"If you think this couple might be dangerous in any way, you must back off and stop immediately. Don't let yourself get involved," Dr. Phillips said finally after explaining a few more details and asking for questions. Neither Jason nor anyone else could think of any.

"I've come to you, rather than a professional detective," he added, "because I want to keep this inquiry low-key. Besides, it's sometimes easier for young people than for grown-ups to sniff out information. Nobody suspects you, and you can be just as good or better than adults at doing the sniffing."

As before, everyone at the table sat there, somewhat stunned by what they had heard. Everyone except Amy. She gave Jason a knowing look. "Well...?"

"Well, what?" Jason looked at her.

"Say something. Is this a job for the detective agency, or what?" Amy had started calling their group the "agency" rather than "Jason and the Detectives." Fed up with Jason getting all the

attention, she had voiced her protest in a recent outburst, saying, *“It’s Jason this, Jason that. Enough with Jason already!”*

Jason turned to Matt and Luke. “What do you say?”

“Let’s do it, of course,” Matt exclaimed.

“No, that’s not it. The other...” Jason nodded in Amy’s direction.

“Oh, that,” Matt replied. “We may not need them. She and Karen will just be in the way.”

“Yeah,” Luke agreed. “We can do it ourselves. We don’t want any girls.”

“*Mom!*” shouted Amy, clearly trying to hold back tears.

Mrs. Brooks reached across the table and placed her hand on Amy’s, her gaze holding firm. “Amy,” she said soothingly, “Matt and Luke didn’t mean anything by that. Luke doesn’t have a sister, so he doesn’t appreciate what we girls can do. Matt,” she addressed him directly, “you should be ashamed of yourself. Karen can assist if she wants to.”

Jason felt sympathy for his younger sister, but he didn’t want to cross the clear preference of his team. To diffuse the situation he said, “Let’s first find the jewel thief. We can take this case up later.”

Mrs. Brooks winked at Amy. “Girl power, remember?”

Chapter 13: Amy and Karen Want In

As soon as Dr. Phillips left, Amy went to her room, closed the door, and called her BFF, Matt's sister Karen. Karen picked up on the first ring.

"Do I have a surprise for *you*," Amy said.

"I love surprises," Karen replied. "What's up?"

"We have a *new case*."

"Yikes!" Karen practically shouted into the telephone. "Really? Tell me all about it."

Amy spent the next few minutes detailing Dr. Phillips's suspicions about a shady couple in Heritage Hills and how he wanted Jason and his "detective agency" to investigate.

"I'm in," Karen said. "What do the boys think?"

"Those lumps don't think at all," Amy said. "I say we take the lead on this."

"Agreed. But how do we investigate this time? What the heck should we do?"

"I'll speak to Dr. Phillips and get the couple's names and unit number. We'll be one step ahead of the boys already."

"Good," Karen said. "We'll show those guys what we can do. Are we part of the group or not?"

"Well, I think so. I'm still not sure."

"How come you were there and I wasn't?"

"Neither of us was invited. I just happened to be there when the man showed up."

"I don't know," Karen said. "That doesn't sound good. Like the boys don't really want us to help them."

"I'm sure they don't. But we're here, and they have to deal with us. Too bad for them."

“They’ll learn. We’ve shown them up before,” Karen noted, referring to the case of the burning schoolhouse. “We can do it again.”

“That’s the spirit, Karen. Maybe we should take the lead,” Amy said excitedly. “Those dumb boys should be helping us, not the other way around.”

“Yeah, right on. And we have at least one good thing going for us,” Karen said. “No one will suspect a couple of girls sniffing around. We can pretty much do whatever we need to do to find out what those people are up to.”

“We’ll show those guys what we can do. Okay then, let’s talk again tomorrow.”

Amy hung up and went to Jason’s room to have an initial talk. She knocked on his door but got no answer. She and Karen should have been working hand in hand with the boys as a team, she thought, to solve the new case Dr. Phillips had placed in their laps. Amy was becoming perplexed that Jason was missing and thought the boys might be cutting them out. She immediately called Karen back.

“He’s gone,” she said. “I’m worried they’ll work on the case without us.”

“The heck! Damn those guys. I’m sure they are.”

“This could be for the best, Karen. We don’t really need them at all. Let’s find out who this couple is and where they live. Then we go and talk with them.”

“How do we do that?”

“Let’s think this through...”

“I have an idea,” Karen said suddenly. “Remember that fire back at Fairview Middle School? We posed as writers for the elementary school newspaper and talked to the principal. We could do the same thing and interview these people.”

“But that won’t work this time. There’s no big news, like the fire, and they’d wonder

what we wanted to talk with them about...Oh, but wait a minute...Suppose we pose as Girl Scouts again, like we did with Mr. Gottlieb, and tell them we're selling Girl Scout cookies. That way they invite us in and we can get them talking. We're, like, making a social call or something."

Karen giggled into the phone. "I like that," she said. "I like that a *lot*. Let's do it."

"Okay. I'll follow up with Dr. Phillips and ask him for their name and address. I can also find out if Jason has beat us to it."

"That's a plan," Karen said. "We're on the case!"

That evening, Amy walked over to Dr. Phillips' unit and knocked on the door. He answered promptly, and she learned he'd been waiting for Jason to come over. He handed her a slip of paper, on which he'd written the name of the couple and their address. As she walked back home, she looked at the note. From the doctor's handwriting, she deciphered:

Marianne and André Millhouse
230A Heritage Hills, Somers, NY 10589

Telephone 555-1234

Chapter 14: The Girls Go It Alone

Amy knew a friend who knew a friend who was a Girl Scout. She got the cell phone number and called the girl out of the blue. The Scout picked up on the first ring.

“Hi. You don’t know me, but my name’s Amy. Amy Brooks. I got your number from Betsy Westerlund. I need to speak to a real Girl Scout, and she gave me your name and number.”

“Well, that’s me. I’m a Junior Girl Scout. How can I help you?”

“Junior Girl Scout? Whatever. You sell cookies, right?”

“Among other things, yes. We Girl Scouts work together to help the community.”

“Uh, yeah. I’ve heard that. But selling cookies is what you’re famous for.”

“I guess.”

“I know some people who want to buy some.”

“Are you kidding?” The girl’s voice brightened. “Really? Selling the cookies is like pulling teeth sometimes. We usually stand all day with a table outside a supermarket. Or worse yet, we go around a neighborhood with our parents, knocking on doors.”

“What happens when you knock? People open the door for Girl Scouts, right?”

“Yeah, they do when we tell them we’re Girl Scouts. If we’re not in uniform, we show them the official form to fill out. It lists all the cookies we have.”

“What if you don’t have the form? Can’t you just write down the cookies the people want?” Amy asked, thinking maybe she didn’t need a form to pretend she was selling Girl Scout cookies.

“No way. People have to pay in advance, remember. If you’re not a Girl Scout, you could be a scammer.”

“I need a form then. Could you send me one?”

“Not hardly. We’ve been told: Never give the form to anyone who’s not a Girl Scout. Once that form gets out, it’ll be copied. Can you imagine? There are scammers everywhere, and they’ll glom onto that form. They’ll use it to fake the sale of our cookies and collect the money.”

Amy was caught off guard by the obstacle. She felt she was at a standstill and didn’t know what to do next. After a pause, she said, “You live in Somers, right?”

“No, I’m in Yorktown. Where are you?”

“We live in Heritage Hills. It’s mostly a retirement community, so I’ll bet there are lots of people here who’ll buy Girl Scout cookies if I asked them. How about joining me in knocking on doors?”

“I wish I could, but that’s not my area. I can’t be canvassing there.”

Amy felt stymied again.

She was about to hang up when the girl continued, “I do know someone over there, but she’s a complete B—, if you know what I mean. She thinks she’s better than everyone else. And everyone hates her.”

“Could you give me her name?”

“I don’t want to do her any favors. Tell you what, though. I’ll send you the form if you promise not to copy it. You can use it only once. Just *once*. Go get that order and send the form back to me with a check made out to ‘Girl Scout Junior Troop 29.’ Can you do that?”

Yes! Amy felt her heart leap. “Sure can,” she said. “I promise.”

Amy dictated her name and address, making sure that her new telephone friend spelled it correctly. After saying her goodbyes, she disconnected and called Karen right away to tell her the good news.

Their ruse was on, she told her. They could knock on the door of their suspect couple, and unless the people were completely unsociable and lacked any community spirit, they'd have to let them in. Now all they had to do was wait for the form.

Chapter 15: The Detectives Get Started

The day after their meeting with Dr. Phillips, Jason and his friends decided it would be best to shift their focus fully to the jewelry thefts, at least for now. As mysterious as the doctor's request was—and as tempting as the offer of pay sounded—they knew the serial thief had to be stopped. It was only a matter of time before he struck again.

They sat around the picnic table at their hilltop hideout, eating popcorn and drinking soda while they brainstormed how they'd go about catching the thief in the act. It was going to be a difficult project, Jason thought, but he was anxious to try out his new gadget: the spy car.

Jason told Matt and Luke about his plan: They should entice the thief to strike again—this time at Luke's home.

Luke nearly spit out his drink. “You want to *what*?”

“Hear me out.” Jason scanned the edge of the hill and confirmed they were still alone. “What if we make your house look like the next easy hit? If the thief thinks there's something worth taking, he might strike again.”

Matt's eyes remained wide. “You're talking about baiting a serial criminal. That's much too *risky*.”

“Yeah,” Luke added. “And how would we even pull that off?”

“That's what we need to brainstorm,” Jason said. “Figure out ways to make your house look like an attractive target to the thief. If there's a time during the week when your parents are both gone, even better.”

Luke leaned away from the table and let out a whistle. “My parents would kill me if I agreed to this. Correction: Kill *us*.”

Matt exchanged a look with Luke, and asked Jason the next obvious question. “But what do we do then?”

Jason shrugged and stared at the map. “We watch and take photos quietly with our phones—or, better yet, using the spy car. We can place it inside your unit and control it remotely from outside. It’d use infrared and shoot a video. We’d catch the thief in the act and he’d never even know it.”

There was silence for a long moment. Luke sighed. “That’s totally crazy. You understand that, right?”

“I think it might work,” Matt said. “But if this goes sideways...”

Luke let out another long sigh. “Okay,” he said. “I’m in.”

Luke said he wasn’t sure he could convince his parents to leave home, even for a brief weekend stay. At any rate, none of the boys could think of a way to let the thief know they were away. Luke could stay over at Matt’s home, as he often did anyway, so Luke’s home would be empty. That would make it an easy mark for the burglar.

“It’s not vacation time yet,” Jason noted, “so most people are still here at home. Your place would be one of the few large units at Heritage Hills that’s dark all night.”

“A lot of people leave their lights on all night when they’re away,” Matt said. “Or they use a timer.”

“My parents don’t,” Luke noted. “Whenever we’re away, our place is like a tomb.”

“That’s perfect. The burglar, whoever it is, would prefer a unit that’s dark all night,” Jason said. “And a unit that’s big like yours.”

Chapter 16: A Plan is Hatched

The boys decided to give it a go. From Jason's list, they noticed the burglar had stolen jewelry about once a month for seven months. The last theft had happened nearly a month ago. If the burglar were on some kind of schedule, Jason reasoned, he (or she) would be due to return fairly soon. "What are you going to say to your parents?" Jason asked Luke. "No way could I get my parents to leave home. They're practically chained to our place."

"I'm not sure, but there must be a way," Luke replied. "My dad has been talking about all the time off that he's earned. He told me just recently: If he doesn't use it, he'll lose it."

"Where's his favorite place to go on a long weekend?"

"Vermont, definitely. Most of his friends go to Cape Cod or the Hamptons, but it gets really crowded out there on weekends. Dad and my mom want peace and quiet, so they bought a renovated cabin in the Green Mountains last year. They like going there for a weekend, but there's not a whole lot to do except eat at country restaurants and shop at the Vermont Country Store. Whenever they'll let me, I like to stay with Matt when they take off for a weekend."

"You can stay with me any time," Matt said. "This weekend, the next, or whenever."

They had a plan of action and would take the next step just as soon as Luke's parents took a weekend off. With all solemnity, they put their right hands together in a triple handshake and shouted, "*Jason and the Detectives!*" before leaving the hideout.

Luke texted Jason and Matt later that day. His parents were more than willing to take a brief trip to Vermont this weekend. Luke had told his parents he'd been invited to stay with Matt, and that was incentive enough for them to start making plans to leave on Friday.

The boys agreed to take turns standing watch to see if the burglar tried to break in. Jason volunteered to take the first watch, from eight in the evening until three in the morning.

“If the burglar hasn’t shown his face by that time, he’s probably not coming,” Jason said. “No sense staying later than that. I’ll just go home then and get some sleep.”

“Aren’t your parents going to wonder where you are?” Matt asked.

“Especially when you come crawling in at three in the morning,” Luke added, looking dubiously at Jason.

“Uhh, yeah. I guess you’re right. My parents are used to me working late in my workshop, but the workshop is in our attached garage. All they have to do now is shout. If I’m not there, they’ll know it.”

“Why don’t you stay at my home too, with Luke? When you’re done watching Luke’s place, you can come on over. I’ll set my alarm at three and let you in.”

“Thanks. I guess that would be alright. The next night, Saturday, you guys can stay at my place.”

“That’s good,” Luke said. “Settled. Now, how do we let the thief know my parents will be away?”

“I can’t think there’s any way we can,” Matt said. “He’ll just have to find out by cruising around and looking for homes with the lights out.”

“You know, every home here has a lamp outside on the garage that goes on automatically when it gets dark,” Luke said. “We’re not talking about that one, I assume. Just the lights inside. I’ll make sure all the inside lights are turned off.”

“Then I guess we’re ready,” Jason said, looking at his partners in crime-solving.

“Ready as we’ll ever be,” agreed Matt. Luke nodded.

Chapter 17: The Girls Get Inside

Amy went to the mailbox the next evening before supper. She brought in the day's mail, placed it on the kitchen counter, and searched through it. She didn't really expect to see an envelope addressed to her containing the Girl Scout form, and sure enough, it wasn't there.

The next day, she did the same and was again disappointed. There was no mail for her. She called Karen to tell her the form hadn't come.

"Let's just wait one more day. If you don't get the form, you should call that girl again," Karen told her.

Amy agreed. It would be best to carry out their plan on the coming Saturday, so they had some time, but Amy was getting anxious. Like her brother Jason, she liked to tick off items on her to-do list.

On the third day, Amy's mom had already retrieved the mail by the time Amy got home. An envelope addressed to her was waiting on the kitchen counter. Her heart leaped when she saw it. She immediately called Karen. "It came!" she said excitedly. "I got the form."

"Good work, Amy," Karen replied. "Let's meet Saturday morning and plan our strategy. We'll be way ahead on this case before the boys even know what's going on."

At exactly ten in the morning on Saturday, Amy answered the door when Karen knocked. "This is going to be fun," she said, her eyes bright with anticipation. "I've got the form right here. It's our ticket to get in the door and look around."

"I think one of us should stay in the kitchen or wherever and act like a Girl Scout. Show Mrs. Millhouse the form and work with her on filling it out. And collect the money. Take time.

Meanwhile, the other should say they need to use the bathroom. Pretend to get lost along the way and look in the bedrooms. I'll bet they're using one of them as an office."

Amy approved the plan and showed Karen the form, thinking Karen would be the one to fill it out with Mrs. Millhouse while Amy took a fast pass throughout the unit. Their strategy in place, Amy asked her mother to drive them.

The trip to Unit 230A on the East Hill took fifteen minutes. It should have taken less, but Mrs. Brooks got lost in the maze of roads in the development. Twice she had to double back and look for the unit number signs on the side of the road. Amy asked her mother to park down the street, away from their target, so her car wasn't visible.

Amy and Karen got out and walked, as if they were going from unit to unit to sell cookies. Looking up as they approached Unit 230A, Amy noticed two surveillance cameras, high above both the garage and the front door. She stared up at the one over the door while Karen rang the bell. Amy couldn't help sensing that someone was staring back at her.

The door opened a crack and a voice said, "Yes?"

Amy held up the official cookie form. The Girl Scout logo appeared prominently in green at the top of the sheet. "We're from the local Girl Scout troop," she said. "We're selling Girl Scout cookies. Everyone loves them. Especially the Thin Mints."

"No, thank you," came the voice through the crack.

Amy tried to look through the crack, but it was dark and the door quickly closed. She looked over at Karen, squinching her mouth as if to ask, *what do we do now?*

Karen nodded up toward the camera and put one finger to her lips. She then walked away, and Amy followed. When they got to the road, far enough to be out of earshot, Karen said, "We

should have left a card or something with our name and address. She might want to get in touch with us if she changes her mind.”

“I don’t think that’ll happen. We’ll just have to think of another way to spy on her.”

“How? I can’t think of any. Can you?”

“I know Jason’s been working on this toy spy car. It’s pretty neat. He installed a video camera and—”

“*Hello!*” someone shouted.

The two girls looked back and saw a woman running toward them from where they had just left. She was dressed in gym clothes—gray sweatpants and a matching sweatshirt—and what seemed like brand-new white sneakers. Amy couldn’t tell whether the outfit was meant for exercise or just something comfortable she wore at home.

“Please wait,” the woman said breathlessly as she approached them. “I’m so sorry about the way I reacted at the door. I should have invited you in. If it’s cookies you’re selling, I’d like to have some.”

To Amy, it seemed like the woman was almost pleading with them to come back to her home.

Amy and Karen exchanged looks, their eyebrows raised. “Okay, sure,” Karen said without a pause. “We have the order form with us. We’d be glad to take your order.”

“Thank you, girls. I’d like that. Come with me.” The woman turned on her heels and led them back to her unit. “Let’s go in the kitchen,” she said as the girls followed her inside in single file, Karen right behind Amy.

It was a beautiful, modern kitchen, Amy thought as she pulled the Girl Scout form from her pocket and laid it flat on the counter. It looked a bit sterile, however. All gleaming white, like

a hospital, without a pot or pan out of place. It was as if the home were up for sale. It had no nick-nacks, or other evidence that a family actually lived there.

“My name is Marianne Millhouse,” the woman said, pronouncing her first name in two separate parts—*Mary Anna*. “What’s yours?”

“I’m Amy. This is Karen,” Amy replied, adding, “We’re close friends.”

“Can I use the bathroom a minute?” Karen asked, rocking from side to side as if she really needed to go.

“Of course,” Marianne said. “It’s just around the corner.” She motioned to another door off the kitchen. “Come right back when you’re done. I want you to meet my husband, André, and our brand-new baby.” Marianne smiled as she said the word “baby.”

Karen scurried off to take care of her fake business, while Amy stayed in the kitchen, showing Marianne the form. “Most people like the Thin Mints,” she said. “Would you like to try a box?”

“Sure, but let me see what else there is.” Marianne stared down at the form. “You know,” she began, “now that we have a new baby girl, maybe I should start getting involved with the Girl Scouts and with other groups in the community. How old do the girls have to be to enter Girl Scouts?”

Amy, who’d never wanted to be a Girl Scout and didn’t know much about them, thought for a moment, then quickly grabbed her phone from her pocket. “Let me look it up...”

She found the answer on the Girl Scouts’ website. “Here it is.” She handed the phone to Mrs. Millhouse. On the screen were the different Girl Scout levels:

Daisies (Kindergarten - 1st grade)
Brownies (2nd - 3rd grade)
Juniors (4th - 5th grade)
Cadettes (6th - 8th grade)

Seniors (9th - 10th grade)
Ambassadors (11th - 12th grade)

“Who would have known? Which one are you?” Marianne asked, giving Amy her phone back.

Amy quickly looked at the screen. It took her a moment to figure out she’d be a Cadette. She’d be entering sixth grade in the fall.

“You’re not really a Girl Scout, are you?” Marianne looked sternly at her.

Amy felt her face turning red with embarrassment and covered it with her hands.

Before she could answer, Marianne continued. “Your friend Karen isn’t either, is she?”

“Uh, no. We’re not,” Amy replied dully. She’d been caught in a lie, and her heart was racing.

“And she doesn’t really have to go to the bathroom, right?”

“No, she doesn’t.”

“Just so you know, there’s nothing for you girls to see here,” Marianne said. “Except our new baby. Would you like to see her? She’s sleeping now, but you can take a peek if you’d like.”

“Uh...yes, ma’am. I’d love to.” Amy didn’t know what else to say.

Karen entered the kitchen again and looked at Amy. “What...?”

“Mrs. Millhouse invited us to see the baby,” Amy said, smiling weakly. “I told her we’d love to.” Amy received a questioning stare from her friend and shot back a stare as if to say, “Cool it. We’re good.”

The two girls followed Marianne into a darkened bedroom. In the corner was a gray crib, about waist height, with a slumbering baby inside. The baby girl lay on her back with her eyes closed. She was dressed head to toe in a plain pink onesie. Oddly, Amy thought, the pajama had no pattern or other decoration. Amy had seen baby clothes before and they’d all had images of

dollies, teddy bears, airplanes, hot air balloons, or some cute design that would catch your eye and make you smile. She also noticed something else: The walls of the baby's room were bare, as if the unit was for sale and Millhouses were about to move away. Amy and Karen peered over the edge of the crib. "She's *so cute*," they cooed together.

Amy then turned and looked up at Marianne. "Thank you for showing us. You must be very proud of her."

"Yes, we are. She's very much a miracle. We're still getting used to having her as a member our family. My husband, André, and I have been married a long time and we were pretty set in our ways until she came along. Having a baby was quite a change for us."

"Well, I think we need go now," Karen said, turning to leave the room. "We've taken too much of your time."

"I hope you can stay a moment longer. I know André would love to meet you both before you go. He's working doing some computer thing right now, but he'll be with us in a moment. I'm an art dealer, so I can work at my own pace, although I do have to travel a lot."

"What's her name?" Karen asked, nodding to the baby.

"Nice of you to ask. It's Marjolaine, the French word for marjoram. The Dutch call it *marjolein*, a fragrant herb in the mint family. Marjoram has been used for cooking, and also in traditional medicine, for centuries."

"Oh." Amy nodded, thinking it was too much information to remember.

Marianne stepped aside, allowing the girls to leave the room, then quietly closed the door behind them. "We have a baby monitor, so I can tell when Marjolaine awakens. Let's step back into the kitchen for a moment. I'd like to ask you something."

"Sure," Amy said, wondering what she had in mind.

When they returned to the kitchen, Marianne bent her knees slightly to get down to their level, softened her eyes—which until now had been hard as glass—and said to the girls, “As you can see, Marjolaine is just a wee one. Only a few months old. But when the time comes, maybe one or two years from now, would you like to babysit for us?”

“We’d love to!” both girls said together.

While speaking with Mrs. Millhouse, Amy felt the presence of someone behind her. She turned and saw a man, standing in the kitchen doorway through which they had just entered, filling the space with his hands on both sides of the doorframe. His dress was casual and yet different from what Amy was used to. It was as if he had just stepped off a plane from some foreign country. Amy didn’t know enough about foreign dress codes to guess the country, but the man was definitely not wearing the customary jeans and a T-shirt of an American.

“Hello,” he said, frowning. Amy felt a shudder run through her. She expected him to say more, but he just stood there, without expression on his face, and kept silent. Without moving he eyed his wife. Turning back, Amy could see she received his warning message. She bent down to again and addressed the girls. She said, “I think you should go now.”

Chapter 18: The Boys Lay in Wait

The Friday after their strategy meeting at the hideout, Jason asked his parents for permission to stay overnight with Matt on Saturday and Sunday. He didn't say why, thinking his parents might not like him staying up until three in the morning to stake out a burglar—one who might notice he was being watched and not take kindly to having his picture taken. Jason was concerned about that himself, of course, but he'd be extra careful not to be seen. If the burglar did discover his presence, despite his efforts to conceal himself, he'd quickly grab his bike and pedal away as fast as he could.

The very next evening, when daylight was beginning to wane, Jason found a place behind nearby shrubbery that gave him a view of the road and both the front of Luke's home and the patio out back. He'd brought his spy car with him and was prepared to use it to take closer pictures of the burglar if and when he showed up.

Lying in wait with his spy car at his side, Jason saw several vehicles drive by, but none stopped or even slowed. One was a white workman's van, the driver apparently on his way home after a long day building or repairing something at Heritage Hills. There was no name on the door or the side panel. Jason also noticed a dark-colored SUV, which slowed down but then sped up and passed on by. From where he lay, he could not read the license plate number but was able to see the car's grille in the faint light and recognized it as a BMW.

Jason watched the passing cars, one by one, until late in the evening. He looked at his wristwatch again and again, hoping the time would slip by, but the watch seemed to slow the time to a crawl. Cars came by less and less frequently until, when his watch showed it was past midnight, they stopped coming altogether. This made the time pass even slower.

Jason recalled seeing a television show in which Detective Harry Bosch did a stakeout at a suspect's home. Harry drove by and, seeing the suspect's car in the driveway, turned around and parked up the street, where he could quietly keep watch on the house through his windshield. Sitting patiently, he ate a ham sandwich and took a sip of black coffee. In the very next scene, Harry glanced at his car's clock and saw it was two in the morning. Looking up, he spotted the suspect leave his house, get into his car, and drive away. After eight hours of waiting, shown as less than a minute in the TV episode, Harry put down his coffee cup and followed.

I wish, thought Jason as he watched and waited, changing positions again and again to keep awake. The seconds, minutes and hours ticked away ever so slowly until his watch hands finally told him it was three in the morning. He had seen no burglar, and it was time to text Matt that he was done watching and would head to his home.

When Jason arrived, Matt was at the door to let him in. Matt looked at him inquiringly.

"Nothing," said Jason morosely, handing his spy car to Matt. "Not one darn car went by after midnight."

Matt showed him where he could lie down. Exhausted, Jason quickly fell asleep.

Matt stood watch the second night, while both Jason and Luke slept in Matt's room with the alarm set for 3:00 AM. Jason showed Matt how to take a video with the spy car in case of a break-in. But as had happened the previous night, only a few cars drove past Luke's home. Matt failed to notice any dark SUV, much less a BMW SUV, as Jason had reported seeing previously. Through it all, Matt's parents never knew Matt was gone, although it would have been awkward if Matt had seen the burglar and alerted the police.

* * *

On the third night, it was Luke's turn to keep watch at his home. He opted to stay inside his unit, ready to take clandestine photos with Jason's car should a burglar break a window and enter. To avoid detection, Luke stayed in his room but left the door open to hear any sounds of forced entry.

As Jason and Matt had both told him, time seemed to pass slower and slower as the night wore on. Luke spent the early hours watching television, and when he grew bored with that, he read one of his favorite adventure books, losing himself in the story for nearly an hour. At around ten, he began to feel sleepy. At first, he didn't know what to do to stay awake. He wanted desperately to remain vigilant so as not to disappoint his fellow detectives, although he knew they wouldn't find out if he fell asleep. They wouldn't know he had slept unless someone broke in that night and stole his mother's jewelry. He'd never forgive himself if that happened.

To keep himself awake, he decided to play with the "Supercar," as he called it. Jason had told him he'd charged the car's batteries but cautioned that it would run only about thirty minutes before stopping. Fully aware of this limitation, Luke told himself he needed to practice operating the remote control, as well as the special camera app. There were so many features he couldn't remember them all.

Luke turned on the switch at the back of the car and started driving. He drove the car through his bedroom door and down the hallway to the large main living area. This was fun, he thought. More fun than he'd imagined, in fact, so he kept driving. He ran the car around the living room furniture and back down the hallway into his parents' bedroom.

Although the car responded to the remote control, it seemed to have a mind of its own and raced ahead. When Luke caught up and came into the bedroom, the car had disappeared. He

thought it must have gone under the bed, but for some reason it was no longer responsive. Luke could neither see nor hear the car, wherever it was.

He decided to look at the camera footage. He pulled out his cell phone and tapped the app to see the live image. It was dark, almost black, and also fuzzy, so it was no help at all. Out of the blue, he remembered the car had a PA system. He examined the app and found the button to press. Holding it down, he spoke in a whisper, “Where are you?”

From the clothes closet, he heard his own voice—“Where are you?”—in muffled tones. Looking up, he saw the closet door had been left ajar, and the car’s twin headlights peeked forlornly from behind the crack. Luke felt a sudden relief. Jason had done it again, he thought to himself.

Realizing the car could be extremely helpful in the event of a burglary, he picked it up, brought it back to his bedroom. There, in the comfort and seclusion of his room, he began to explore the various features Jason had added to the vehicle. He became so engrossed that the hours whisked by without so much as a glance at his watch.

It was nearly two in the morning when he heard a sound at the back door. He looked out the dining room window but saw nothing. He went into the kitchen to look out the front window and could vaguely make out the image of a dark SUV. As he re-entered his bedroom, he heard a noise outside his window. Looking in that direction, he saw, outlined in the window, the silhouette of a man trying to open it.

Luke crouched down to avoid being seen and grabbed his phone. He quickly dialed Heritage Hills Security. “Someone is breaking into our home,” he whispered with his hand cupped to the phone.

The female officer asked for his name and unit number, and Luke quietly provided the information. While he was still on the phone, the sounds at the window suddenly ceased. Luke waited, and a minute or two later, he heard the SUV outside start its engine and drive away.

The police arrived too late to see anything. Somewhat embarrassed that he had no evidence of any wrongdoing, he told the two officers at the door that he had come home from his friend's house briefly to get some things and had heard noises. He was overly worried about burglars, he said, and had called Security. The officers took a quick look around, both inside and out, and were apparently satisfied that all was in order. Luke was glad when they finally left.

"We'll file a report," he heard one of the officers say as they walked away.

Chapter 19: The FBI Takes Over

Amy and Karen quickly paid a visit to Dr. Phillips and gave him a full report of their visit with Mr. and Mrs. Millhouse. They told him what they had seen in their unit – which oddly was nothing that you’d normally find in a home – and about their encounter with Marianne. Although cordial enough, she seemed to change from stand-offish to friendly at the flip of a switch. Her request that they babysit little Marjolaine, some years in the future, seemed strange since one would think they should already know someone – a friend or relative, or maybe even a neighbor on the East Hill – who could fill this role. What was most unusual, they told him, were their feelings about Mr. Millhouse. His very presence had made them feel creepy. In their opinion as young detectives, there was something definitely and decidedly off with this family.

Dr. Phillips listened, without speaking, to all that they had to say. When they were finished, he thanked them and asked that they not do anything further. They had confirmed his suspicions about the couple, he said, and he now had enough information to go to the authorities. He asked the girls to tell Jason and his friends to stop investigating too, because he was now concerned about their safety. The Millhouses might be dangerous, he said. With hindsight, he should never have asked them to pursue this matter, but what they found out was invaluable, and just might be key to unravelling this mystery.

Amy looked at Karen, and she nodded. “Will you pay us now?” Amy asked, looking Dr. Phillips straight in the eye. “Our work is done now.”

Dr. Phillips seemed initially taken aback by this request, but he managed a smile and quickly resumed his normal dignified demeanor. “You’ve done well, young ladies,” he said. “What you’ve accomplished is more than I ever expected. You’ve have obtained more useful

information than Jason and his two friends could have done, I'm sure. Yes, I recall saying I'd pay Jason, and I will pay you, I promise. It's that I just don't know..."

Amy and Karen looked at each other and both winked. "Oh, that's all right," Karen said. "You don't owe us anything. We just wanted to do the right thing. And, at the same time, show those boys up with some girl power." With that, the two girls politely thanked Dr. Phillips for his valuable time, and left.

* * * *

That evening, Amy intended to open the dinner-table discussion by telling her family about her day's escapade, but her father trumped the plan with a news bomb.

"Listen up, everyone. Remember you telling me that our neighbor, Dr. Phillips, came over a few days ago to say he was suspicious of some people here at Heritage Hills?"

This abrupt announcement, uncharacteristic of Mr. Brooks, caught the family up short. They all turned to listen to what he had to say. The room was so quiet, Amy could've heard a pin drop. "It's all over the news," he said, his hands up in an "I'm only the messenger" posture. "We can watch it at six thirty, just a few minutes from now."

"What? Dad, what happened?" Jason asked.

"Yeah, what?" Amy pressed him.

Mrs. Brooks remained quiet, waiting for her husband to explain.

"The FBI paid a visit to Heritage Hills today and arrested a couple on the East Hill. I think they may be the same people Dr. Phillips told us about. I heard they recently had a baby."

The table erupted in rapid-fire talk. Amy's mind spun, wondering if Marianne and her husband had been the ones handcuffed or if the people arrested were not the same couple. If they were, what would happen to the baby?

“Hold on,” Mr. Brooks said, holding his hands up again, this time to stop the talking.
“Let’s just go to the TV and watch the news.”

Jason jumped up from the table and rushed to the TV in the living room with Amy in tow. He grabbed the remote and turned the TV set on. A commercial was running, but the six-thirty news was next.

At precisely half past six, the commercial break ended and the evening news began its weekday report with shots of a condominium unit at Heritage Hills. Police cars were everywhere. A video showed two agents with the white letters “FBI” emblazoned on their black vests, accompanied by several uniformed New York State police, walking purposefully into the same unit that Amy and Karen had visited just a short time ago. The video cut to a short time later when the FBI emerged with Marianne and André Millhouse, their wrists in handcuffs.

“We were just there!” Amy shouted excitedly over the news anchor’s report.

“Really?” Jason stared at her, evidently startled. “You were *there*?”

“*Breaking news*,” a gravelly voice said. “*The FBI descended on Heritage Hills in in the Town of Somers, New York, just hours ago. They arrested a couple they alleged were Russian spies. The FBI stated they had been tracking their actions for weeks. They made the arrest today because certain unspecified events took place at their residence enabled them to move in immediately.*

“The FBI had been monitoring the family with a video camera strategically mounted in in a hidden location. This camera had come close to identifying them as Russian agents, but additional evidence was needed to make an arrest, according to one source. Information received by an unidentified neighbor in the community confirmed suspicions that the husband and wife

team were secret agents living in plain sight. According to the source, the police action was accelerated in the interests of safety to the community.

“Those arrested, André Millhouse and Marianne Millhouse, were alleged to be ‘sleeper spies’: people living and working in the community as common citizens. These spies receive orders to obtain information from Americans who have no idea of their true identity. Their loyalty lies with their mother country, and they secretly pass this information to their handlers.

“When making the arrests, the FBI as well as the New York State Police considered them armed and dangerous.”

Mr. Brooks quietly turned off the television set, and silence reigned in the room. Family members looked at each other for a moment and came together for a family group hug.

Chapter 20: The Burglar's Way In

The only information the boys now had about the burglaries was that the thief drove a dark SUV, possibly a BMW. This wasn't much, but it was enough for Jason to persuade his mom to drive him back to the Heritage Hills security office, this time with Matt and Luke. Jason's dad had wanted to take them, but he had to leave on a business trip early that morning.

As they walked up to the window, Jason saw that the same officer who had prepared their badges two Saturdays ago was on duty. "Hi, remember me?" He offered a friendly smile. "I came here with my family the Saturday before last to get our badges."

"Yes, of course. How can we help you?"

Jason launched into an explanation of how he and his two friends, Matt and Luke, had identified what they thought was the jewelry thief's car. As he did so, the officer quickly entered Luke's name and pulled up the officer's report of the break-in in Luke's home. "Yes, we know about the car that your friend thought he saw."

Jason asked the officer if they could watch the video streams of the many entrances at Heritage Hills to look for dark BMW SUV's, and perhaps get its license plate number.

"We should look first to see if the car belongs to someone here at Heritage, don't you think?" the officer suggested. "We keep a running list of the makes, models and plate numbers of all the residents' cars." As she spoke, she typed a few keys on her computer keyboard. "I see a number of dark BMW SUVs," she said. "Two of them are black and one is dark blue. There are a number of other SUVs that are also a dark color, though. Especially gray."

"Can you tell us who the BMWs belong to?"

“I’m afraid not. That’s confidential, but I can assure you that neither of the black ones could have been involved in any thefts. Their owners are longtime residents and...um...quite senior in age.”

“What about the dark blue one?”

“Let me see...” The officer typed something into her computer. “Nope. That person moved away six months ago. But they might be coming back to steal jewelry.”

“How about the cam images then? Can we look at them?” Jason asked. “The burglar may have come from outside of Heritage Hills.”

“We don’t have videocams at the entrances,” the officer said. “We could have, but a long time ago the managing board nixed the idea because it was too expensive. The cost has come down a lot since then, but no one has introduced the idea again.”

Jason and his friends stood dumbfounded, disappointed, and discouraged by the result. They were almost certain that a dark SUV was a key to exposing the burglar. Jason felt stumped, with no idea how to proceed.

Everyone remained silent as Jason’s mom drove them home. They dropped off Luke, who simply said “goodbye” with a sad face, and continued to their own cluster of homes. When they arrived, Matt also said goodbye and thanked Jason’s mom for the ride. Jason, who had been lost in thought the whole time, hurried inside to his room and closed the door. He remembered seeing something on the map of Heritage Hills that he wanted to check.

He unfolded the map he’d received from Luke and spread it out on his bed. He looked at the lower left corner of the map, where he’d previously seen something odd that he now focused on closely. It was a connection between the development and an external roadway, called “David Road,” that bore the legend:

BREAK AWAY

FIRE GATE

Five minutes later, Jason was out the door, furiously riding his bike toward this spot to investigate.

When he reached the end of the road in the southwest corner of Heritage Hills, he found a wide opening in a stone wall that bordered the property. The opening had a chain across it, fastened at one end with a padlock. The chain was rusty and appeared old, but the lock was new. Someone had apparently removed the old lock, perhaps with a bolt cutter, and replaced it with the new one. Jason knew this would enable the person to remove the chain, drive through the opening, and later lock the new padlock upon leaving, at a time when no one would notice.

Jason checked the ground in the opening and saw tire tracks. The lawn between the end of the road in Heritage Hills and David Road was matted, indicating that a vehicle had recently passed through, but it was impossible to make out the tire tread. Jason immediately reached for his cell phone and called home.

“Mom, I need to go back to the security office *right now*.”

“Whatever for?” his mother asked.

“I’ll explain on the way. We’ll pick up Matt and Luke. I’m coming back on my bike. Be there in ten minutes. We need to hurry.”

Jason pocketed the phone and rode his bike back home as fast as he could. Fifteen minutes later, he, Matt and Luke were in the car with Jason’s mom, heading for the security office.

The female security officer who had assisted them earlier, and who had spoken to Luke in the middle of the night, was no longer available. Jason asked the officer at the desk if there was a videocam on West Hill Drive anywhere near the southwest corner.

“No, there’s not. There were a number of accidents near there a few years back, so they put up a stop sign. But we don’t have many videocams in Heritage Hills.”

“Would it be alright to have a videocam at our unit?” Jason asked. “Like at the front door?”

“No one’s objected to anyone doing that, as far as I know.”

“How about on the street, next to our unit?”

“I don’t think so. That would be like having a videocam on the street. I’ll have to check, but I would say that’s a ‘no-no.’”

“Okay. Thanks.” Jason turned to Matt and Luke. His mom stood by with a warm, understanding expression, but the faces of Jason’s friends clearly showed disappointment. “Let’s go back to the car,” he said. “I have an idea.”

Once they were alone in the car, with Jason’s mom now included in the boys’ confidential circle, Jason explained what he had found in the southwest corner of their development: a secret entrance to Heritage Hills from David Road. His idea was to place his spy car in a hedge just outside of Heritage Hills, adjacent to the stone wall, aimed toward the open entranceway. If the car is not driven, its battery could last the entire night, and because of its infrared camera, it could practically “see in the dark.” If anyone were to drive up, take down the chain, and pass through the gap in the stone wall at night, they would be seen without realizing their movements were captured on video.

“What about those privacy problems the security officer was talking about?” Matt noticed the disapproval on his friends’ faces and held up his hands, quickly adding, “Not for me. I could care less. But residents are going to complain if they find out.”

“Here’s the thing,” Jason replied, with a wink. “The spy car won’t be in Heritage Hills. It will be hidden in the bushes on the other side of the stone wall. Even if anyone were to see it, which is highly unlikely, our friendly Security will do nothing. It has no jurisdiction there.”

Chapter 21: Whodunnit?

At the first light of dawn the next morning, Jason slipped out the garage door and rode his bike to David Road to retrieve the flash drive from his spy car. He rode back and had breakfast while he waited for Matt and Luke to come over. He knew the chances were less than slim that they'd see anything, but he was intensely curious. Eventually, after what felt to Jason like far too long a wait, the two boys arrived, and the three of them huddled together in Jason's room to watch the video.

Jason plugged the flash drive into his computer and brought up the video stream. He and his two friends watched the screen carefully as he fast-forwarded through the relevant hours.

"Stop there," Luke said abruptly. "Can you run it back?"

Jason ran it back and replayed the video at normal speed.

There it was. A dark-colored SUV had stopped, and a man had stepped out and walked ahead of the car toward the chain across the entrance. They couldn't identify who it was because the camera's low angle captured only the man's legs and sneakered feet. Jason stopped the video when the car's license plate came into view.

"Let me call my dad. He'll find the vehicle owner in the DMV database," Matt said, already typing a text to his dad who was on duty at the state police station. A moment later, the owner's name and address appeared on his cell phone screen: "*Theodore Silver, 257 Cherry Street, Fairview, New York.*" Jason and Luke looked at the screen.

"I know who that is," Jason gasped, staring at the name. "He owns the jewelry store in Fairview. *Mom*," he shouted. "Come here. *Right now!*"

Mrs. Brooks rushed into the room and saw the looks on the boys' faces.

“It was *Uncle Ted*,” Jason told her. “He’s the jewelry thief.”

Mrs. Brooks’ face turned white.. “Oh, my God,” she gasped, clasping her hand over her mouth.

“You’re related?” Matt asked.

“No, but we know him,” she said faintly. “He’s a friend of ours.”

“He was our neighbor when we lived in Fairview,” Jason added. “Mom bought all her jewelry from him.”

* * * *

Ted Silver was arrested the very next day. He confessed to the crimes, as the evidence against him was overwhelming. They found several of the stolen items in his jewelry store.

As “Uncle Ted” later explained to Jason’s family apologetically, “I needed more inventory for the store, but I couldn’t afford it. When I found out you were going to buy a condo upstate, I followed you there on one of your trips to look for your new home. The very first time I saw the Heritage Hills’ development, I knew it would be a gold mine. I went for the largest condo units because I figured they had expensive jewelry. I waited until dark and chose units that didn’t have any lights on.

“I must have taken ten trips, maybe more, to scope it out and choose the places I’d hit. At first, I was alternating using the three entrances to keep a low profile, but then I thought better of using them at all. I figured there’d be video surveillance at these entrances, so I got a map and looked for more secret places to enter the property. There was an opening from a nearby development called Green Briar, but that was closed off. Then I saw another at the end of David Road. There was a gap in a stone wall with a chain across it that led right into Heritage Hills. The

chain was padlocked, but I cut it open and replaced the lock when I left. From then on, I could come and go without anyone seeing me.”

Unlike the Millhouses’ recent arrest, which was made public by the FBI, information about Ted Silver’s arrest was not released to the media, sparing the residents of Heritage Hills from unnecessary concern. The state and local police, along with the Heritage Hills security force, provided information only on a need-to-know basis.

Jason, Matt, and Luke were asked to keep the news confidential. All three understood and strictly abided by this request. Only their families were informed of Ted Silver’s actions and learned the extent of the thefts. Eventually, most of the jewelry items taken from residents were quietly returned to their rightful owners. For the items Ted Silver had already sold, he paid full value in restitution. This was unsatisfactory, of course, since the jewelry was considered priceless by its owners.

Ted Silver accepted a plea deal and was sentenced to only three years in prison. His store was permanently closed, and its fine items in inventory were sold at bargain prices to the public and to other jewelers.

Chapter 22: Summer Plans

Two days after Ted Silver's arrest, the three boys arranged to meet at their hideout on the top of the West Hill to discuss what had happened. Jason and Matt met together first and walked up the steep steps and then the path leading past the two huge water tanks. When they crested the hill, they saw Luke sitting calmly on the picnic table.

"What took you guys so long?" A wide grin spread across Luke's face.

"I don't know," Matt replied. "Maybe your dad gave you a lift in your big Mercedes?"

"You have a problem with that?"

"Nope. Just sayin'. My mom drives our family minivan."

"What can I do?" Luke exclaimed, holding his arms wide, palms out, in a helpless gesture. Then he added with a wink, "Just the luck of us African Americans, I guess."

"Guys," Jason broke in. "We solved another crime!" he said excitedly. "You know what that means?"

Matt and Luke stared at him, puzzled. "No, what?" they both asked at once.

"We've proven ourselves. We're honest-to-goodness detectives. Matt, maybe your dad will let us know when another crime needs solving."

"I don't think so. He wasn't too happy about what we did. He said it was dangerous, us acting as cops."

"I understand, but..."

Luke and Matt exchanged an uneasy glance.

"Actually, Matt and I are heading for summer camp on Saturday," Luke said, seeming to choose his words carefully. "I'm sorry."

Matt cleared his throat. “Yeah,” he said. “We asked our parents to sign us up last winter sometime. I discovered this neat camp online and talked Luke into going with me.”

When Jason heard this, his mouth dropped. “You’re leaving?” he asked sadly and lowered his head. The news had come as a shock.

“It’s an eight-week sleepaway camp up in Maine. We’ll live in cabins in the woods next to a lake.”

Jason almost felt sick. His only friends at Heritage Hills would be leaving for practically the whole summer. He didn’t know what to say.

“Maybe you could join us,” Luke volunteered when he saw Jason’s sad reaction. “There might still be a place for you.”

Jason’s spirits lifted a bit. “You think so? Wait. But what about Amy? Is Karen going to camp too?”

“She is,” Matt said. “There’s a girls’ camp close by, on the other side of the lake. It’s called ‘Camp Wenonah.’ If Amy goes, they’d be in the same group and can stick together.”

“We’ll even have socials with the girls from that camp,” Luke said.

“I don’t know...It’s kind of late to apply, don’t you think?” Jason did not feel at all sure he and Amy could join their friends because the deadline to apply for a camp had surely already passed.

“Let me ask my dad,” Luke said. “He’s kind of a wheeler-dealer. If I want something bad enough, he’s usually able to make it happen.”

THE END